CROSSROADS:

Exploring how micro organizations that leverage design shape urbanism practice

by
Melissa Isidor

B.A. in Urban Studies
Brown University
Providence, Rhode Island (2017)

Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master in City Planning
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Abstract:

Crossroads is an exploration into the role micro organizations (1-10 people) that leverage design play within the greater urbanism field. At large, this research serves to build synergies between creative practitioners within or adjacent to the urbanism field, while providing insights and resources both from a philosophical and operational perspective. The research aims to think expansively about the definition of what design means, mainly conceptualizing design as a way of thinking and process. Using a case study approach, my investigation brings together the voices of six micro organizations based in the United States—including BlackSpace Urbanist Collective, JIMA Studio, Broad Community Connections, Design Studio for Social Intervention, Civic Studio, and Hector Design. Each conversation dives into the nuance of each organization's foundations, process, and vision for the future. In understanding each group's internal organizational practices, we begin to uncover the possibilities and challenges of practicing at this scale. At large, the findings lead me to believe that such organizations serve as the instigators and experimenters within the greater urbanism ecosystem.

Thesis advisor: Holly Harriel, EdD

Title: Lecturer, MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning

About Melissa (Mel) Isidor

Mel is a designer, urban planner, and mixed-media. She currently leads her own organization, Isidor Studio—a creative design practice at the intersections of art, design, and urbanism, founded in 2020. Mel's creative spirit stems from a fascination with the built environment—seeking to unpack how our urban fabric reflects people and culture. At large, her practice serves to leverage the power of design to advance communication, accessibility, and diverse expression across both physical and digital spaces. Mel holds a B.A. in Urban Studies from Brown University (with distinction as an Engaged Scholar) and is submitting this research to complete her Master of City Planning degree at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She has been invited to speak on her practice through several talks and lectures including at the New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA), Yale University, Brown University, and the American Society of Landscape Architects. Aside from her creative work, Mel finds joy in trips to the beach, sci-fi novels, and biking.

Acknowledgments

We are never alone in the journey and therefore I have much gratitude to express to the many folks who supported my research process. First and foremost, thank you to my family for instilling the value of curiosity, creativity, and education in me from an early age. Thank you to my advisory committee Holly Harriel and Darien Alexander Williams for providing genuine care and critical insights in the development of this research. Quality advising and mentorship is hard to come by and I feel grateful to have had the support in this process to push the research to new heights. Thank you to my friends who uplifted me along the way—offering encouragement, providing nourishment, or just providing a listening ear. A special thanks to my friend Dasjon Jordan who was the first person who was my first "client" on my entrepreneurial journey and continues to be an immense support in the development of Isidor Studio. Lastly, thank you to my interviewees who took the time to sit down for a chat and offered robust insights that were foundational for my research findings. There are many more who may go unnamed, though my gratitude persists.

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INTRODUCTION

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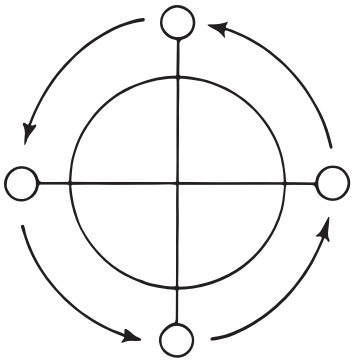

FIGURE 1
The Kongo Kosmogram

I have always been fascinated by the idea of a crossroads. It is a term that has defined my identity as a mixed-race being, percolated my spiritual growth, and has steered my academic and professional journey that currently sits at the intersection of urbanism, design, and art.

The term crossroads may be defined as a point of decision or a critical juncture, where forces meet and crucial decisions and actions must take place (Merriam-Webster, 2022). Beyond this, it is a term that holds deep roots across mythological practices as a space between worlds. One of the early known representations of the crossroads is the kongo cosmogram (pictured at the top)—a symbol hailing from the Kongo of West central Africa that embodies the persistent cycle of life and death (Stayton 1997; Luyaluka 2017). To me, this symbol emphasizes how we are constantly subject to the changing tides in life. Though when we look closer at the kongo kosmogram, we see that the center point—the crossroads—stays grounded while all forces and energy emanate out (Alexander 2021). Amidst all the peaks and valleys of our communal world, there is always a point we can look to as a central force.

In the context of developing this research, I was interested in drawing on the concept of a crossroads to better understand professional urbanism practice. What are the central points of force that shape the development of our urban communities? For me that meant looking to understand how people organize themselves in their daily practice, to understand how any initiatives, policies, or other processes take place. As well I believe the phenomenon of a crossroads helps us to understand the importance of dialogue between alternate spaces of thinking and practice—where worlds collide. In this spirit, the framework of this research aims to investigate the conversation between the disciplines of urbanism and design. More specifically, the research question guiding this study is "**what role do micro scale organizations that leverage design play within the urbanism field?**"

thesis question

1 - 10 people

What role do micro organizations that leverage design play within the urbanism field?

a standard of thinking and process

a framework of understanding the ways we live in relation to the built environment

The starting parameters of “micro” include any operational practice of 1-10 people that operates at the intersection of urbanism and design (Murray 2020). The focus on micro scale serves to center the conversation at a point of origin for any practice or model that may potentially scale up in the future. In summary, this research investigates if and how micro scale urbanism organizations with integrated design offer a model for innovative outcomes. And to cycle back, what contribution is the innovation making to the field of urbanism?

Urbanism, as the central node of this inquiry is a field that is perpetually at a crossroads. Cities are where the forces of our human world weave together both physically and socially. From a young age, I have always had a deep curiosity to question how our urban fabric came to be—exploring the intersectional complexities of cities from physical materiality to the social dynamics of space and place. This curiosity stems from a point of ongoing self-reflection and desire to understand my own positionality and connectivity to everything around me. Urbanists, as I argue, may practice through any formal discipline but are united through a commitment to understand, communicate, and shape the ongoing change of our urban environments. Ideas on ideal change and innovation are deeply debated, though central to this inquiry and unpacked further in this work.

Design is just one of many disciplines that intersects with urbanism (Schön 1983), though it is one I believe that provides significant offerings. While the relationship between urbanism and design may be conceptualized in many ways, this study serves to frame the conversation as “what each offers to the other or what each provokes from the other,” as discussed in a dialogue between Mimi Onuoha and Romi Morrison on the conflation of design and art (Berry et al. 2022). As I will unpack later, this study is deeply informed by my creative practice as a multidisciplinary designer in which I leverage design as a means of communication beyond the linguistic (as represented in its simplest form by the visual language of the kongo kosmogram). In the urban context, I believe design is both an action to re-frame thinking and creative approaches to how we envision and shape cities, as well as the greater world.

My Journey to this Moment

Positionality + Motivations

The research is informed by my own background, and experience—having launched my own urban-focused design organization Isidor Studio in 2020, which I am continuing to grow in the years to come. To mark my two years into this journey, I sought to develop a thesis and research process that would build a space of reflection and learning for myself, as well as develop my voice to contribute lessons and insights that may support current and aspiring micro practitioners. This general approach is reinforced through the works of sociologist Patricia Hill Collins whose writings posit Black feminist researchers as blending intellectual inquiry and knowledge development with personal lived experiences (Hill Collins 2006).

The writing of this thesis intends to bring my own perspective, narrative, and subjectivity into the work. This is the challenge I have presented myself and writing this thesis in the context of an academic space. Furthermore, I'd like to emphasize that this work and my writing is inherently biased, which is something I welcome. This is to reaffirm that I experience and I see the world through a particular vantage point as informed by lived experience and intersectional identities. In claiming my bias, I'm not trying to erase my vantage point but rather build a better understanding of my own vantage, as well as inform and position the reader to understand this layered context. I hope that informing the reader of my own background, motives, and positionality will help to enrich this work as well as challenge popular academic practices that aim to position the researcher as objective (hooks 1991).

This investigation is motivated by my belief that the modern landscape of micro organizations that integrate design are actively innovating practices, procedures, and values in the planning field which is largely dominated by large institutions and corporations. Reinforced by intersectional theory, my focus on studying practices operating at the intersection of planning, design, and entrepreneurship aims to support my broader motives to address the strengths of multidisciplinary thinking and practice.

Today the field of city planning is navigating its own crossroads— shifting and expanding for more diverse and inclusive models of practice. As an early-stage entrepreneur, I have learned that the experience can be both liberating and isolating, especially during Covid-19. Particularly for traditionally-educated planners and designers, we are not often equipped with the tools of effective business management—so when we do dip into entrepreneurship, the process usually becomes piecemeal and experimental, which can either lead to innovative models or unsustainable ventures. This research serves to build synergies amongst practitioners from different localities while strengthening insights, connections, and resources where our practices are ever intersected but often disparate and disjointed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

[*What Came Before*]

II.

My decision to focus on micro-scale organizations is motivated by my own personal experience as well as larger trends in the consultancy-based practices.

Personally, the impetus to develop a small practice over entering a large firm was informed by my experience working in a large interdisciplinary design practice (Sasaki), where I was deeply discouraged by the disconnect between the firm rhetoric versus the day-to-day practice. Upon the end of my contract with the firm in 2020 as well as the larger protests and dialogues in responses to ongoing police murders of Black people, I decided to conduct a study to address why how Sasaki and similar models consistently fail to support and retain Black employees. The report, titled ""The State of the Black Experience at Sasaki" was developed based on the feedback from 11 current and former Black Sasaki and was informed by a survey, series of interviews, and external research—all culminating into an analysis of current conditions, as well as suggesting a pathway for change moving forward (Isidor et al. 2020). The report was emailed to every employee in the firm in June 2020. While the effort serves a number of purposes, for me—it validates the limitations of large firm models to drive innovative and experimental missions. As stated in the report,

"The culture at Sasaki prioritizes efficiency and production over long-term skill building and design. An extreme focus on graphics and production prevents opportunities for new ways of adding value to be incorporated into the design process. Sasaki's design process is incredibly structured and leadership is unwilling to take risks to be part of the change, instead resorting to perpetuating the same structures" (Isidor et al. 2020).

Now, two years out from experience I still hold some feelings of hurt not only for myself but for the past and future Black folks who will continue to pass through the "revolving doors'' of Sasaki and many other large design firms, many of whom burn out from assimilating to the dominant design cultures as a means of survival (Isidor et al. 2020). This phenomenon is true of Sasaki as well as many other large design firms, as highlighted in the recently published *The Black Experience in Design*, an anthology of different writings from Black designers, artists, and researchers. In an excerpt from the book, Jennifer Rittner—a design educator and writer, discusses how "at design firms, the pressures of cultural fit are an explicit element of studio culture based on the presumed benefit to collaborative work in which all parties speak the same basic cultural language" (Berry et al. 2022).

As such, "corporate culture has provided the means for marginalization" (Berry et al. 2022).

key books

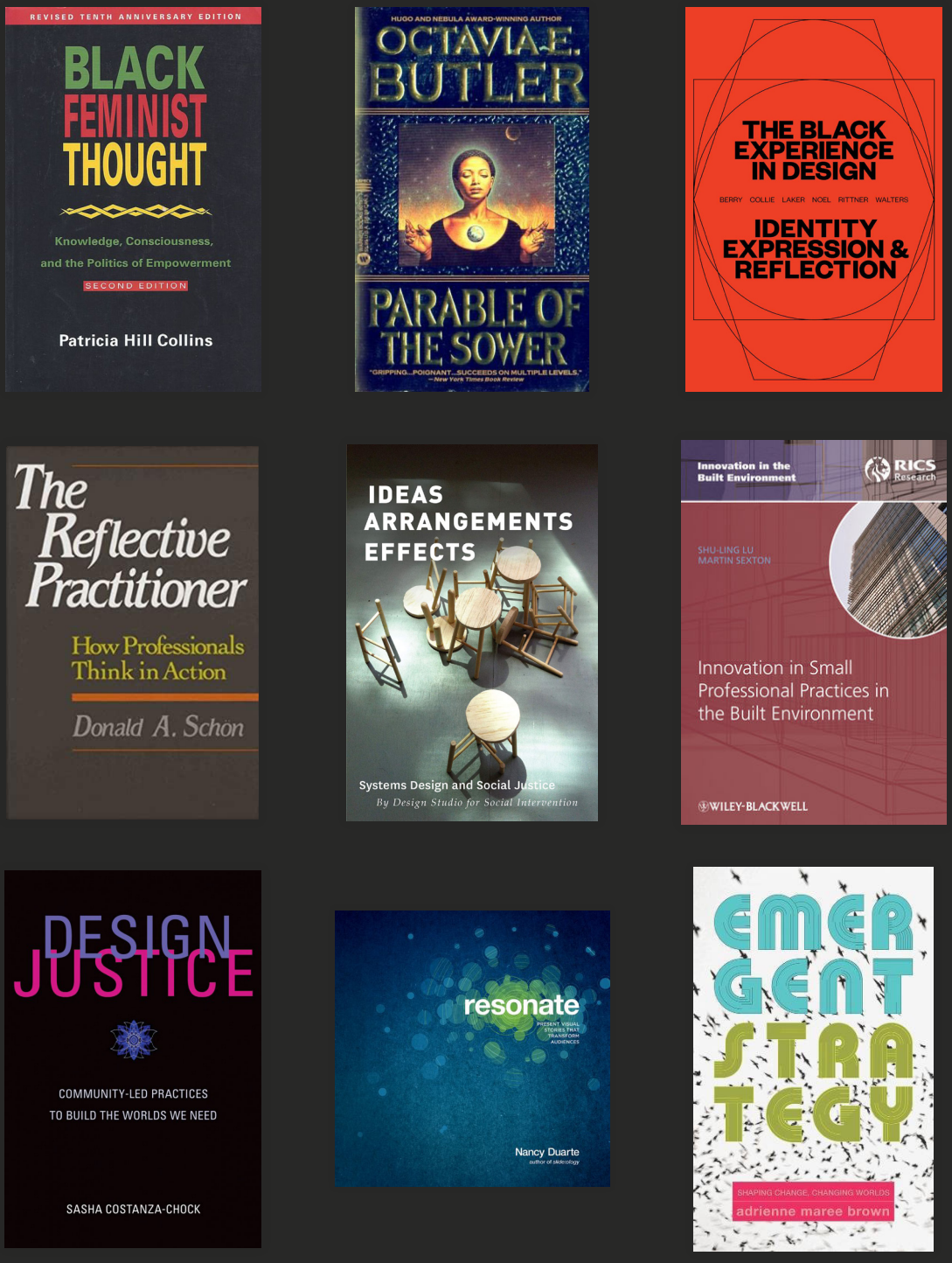

FIGURE 2 Selection of book covers from key texts that informed this research.
From left to right (Hill Collins 2022; Butler 1993; Berry et al. 2022; Schön 1983; Design Studio for Social Intervention et al. 2020; Lu and Sexton 2009; Costanza-Chock 2021; Duarte 2011; Brown 2017)

In my experience with Sasaki, the engagements that ensued with the firm's leadership following the release of the report felt only as if our collective's experiences were being questioned rather than affirmed. We did negotiate compensation for our labor that had gone into the effort (after a long contractual process), though no dollar figure could really account for the feeling that there was no place for us to grow and thrive in this design space. At the end of the day, the whole experience confirmed my decision to leave the firm and only further motivated me as I began to develop my own practice.

Another takeaway from sharing "The State of the Black Experience at Sasaki" report with the whole firm was receiving feedback that the challenges addressed were not isolated Black employees but experienced by marginalized groups across the firm (Isidor et al. 2020). Though Blackness was central to the initiative, it was important to recognize that our experiences as Black employees mirrored greater challenges beyond ourselves. Furthermore, the report sought to address the ailing business models of architecture and urban design-based consultancies at large, stating how,

"Within the corporate design industry, the proportion of design fees allocated on construction projects is incredibly low, which is a direct representation of how the profession doesn't even value its own work. The practice treats itself like a commodity with little resistance to shift this dichotomy, which only further devalues the work we all do" - Anonymous Contributor (Isidor et al. 2020).

These trends of unhealthy work cultures and lack of diversity in design are relative not only to Sasaki, but also across the broad industry, as witnessed by recent unionizing movements amongst Sharples Holden and Pasquarelli (SHoP) Architects in New York (Frearson 2022). SHoP's unionizing movement was largely women and employees of color who sought to "embark on a campaign to transform the profession," in order to combat long working hours, low compensation, and lack of diversity (Ling 2022). The unionizing effort ultimately dropped after coming up against a "powerful anti-union campaign," though had already made its mark in catalyzing a national discussion about improving working conditions in design firms (Walter-Warner 2022). Though the specific union effort stopped, employees have continued to seek other avenues to create change within their firm.

To me, feeling valued is one of the most fundamental essentials for a positive work culture (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, and Peterson 2000; Seppälä and Cameron 2015). As such, internal working cultures directly reflect all processes and outcomes of the work itself. While summer 2020 was a key crossroads for me personally, this moment was arguably a crossroads for everyone. During this time, we were in the very early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has uprooted our security and sense of normalcy

Excerpts via *"The State of the Black Experience at Sasaki"*

THE STATE OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE AT SASAKI

June 19, 2020

We, as current and former Black employees of Sasaki are thrilled that the firm is committed towards an anti-racist practice. As part of this commitment, we believe it is crucial to center the voices of Black employees to shed a light on our experiences and insights that may offer true clarity and direction to address the systematic ways that racism is designed into Sasaki's culture and business model.

In doing so, this independent report was developed based on the feedback from 11 current and former Black Sasaki employees to bring forth honesty and transparency around the challenges of the Black experience at Sasaki. Our goal is to catalyze a necessary sense of urgency to overhaul and redesign a firm that allows Black employees and other marginalized identities to grow and thrive.

The path forward must take deep critical action to address the root of the problem that is the pervasiveness of whiteness in design. At large, Black people are not disadvantaged—our beings and souls are wealthy with ideas, imaginations, and solutions. However, Blackness is only disenfranchising in a system of white supremacy. Therefore, since Black people are disenfranchised within Sasaki, this signifies that Sasaki as a whole is complicit within the white supremacist system.

We also recognize that this struggle transcends beyond just Blackness. We strongly believe that addressing the pervasiveness of white supremacy and racist practices within Sasaki and the design industry at large will not only serve Black people, but also the representation of many other marginalized groups (i.e. Indigenous peoples, Latinx, Asian, women), which will ultimately drive a profession that is truly capable of proving human potential.

We look forward to the necessary reflection, planning, and action towards a robust and permanent movement towards a true anti-racist and decolonized design practice.

Sincerely,

Melissa Isidor | Breeze Outlaw | Wendell Joseph

Diana Fernandez | Stephen Gray | Kiki Cooper

SASAKI IS A COMPLICIT ACTOR IN A SYSTEM OF WHITE DOMINANCE

Amongst current and former Black employees, there is a widespread consensus that perpetuation of racism and white supremacy is deeply ingrained throughout Sasaki's culture, design practice, and business structure.

Sasaki continuously puts the onus of addressing racism in design practice on Black people to address what is actually a white problem.

The norm of Sasaki's design culture is white dominance and capitalist gain, and those who deviate from these values are often deemed unfit or unqualified. Too often, the blame is put on Black people for not having acquired enough skills or competency to assimilate into the design culture without taking a critical look to examine how the design culture perpetuates a space that is unwelcome and unable to even receive and support Black people. To address the extreme lack of Black people in the profession, Sasaki leadership takes a blind mentality shifted to Black people as being the reason why as if Sasaki isn't part of the entire system built against Black people.

At large, there is an ongoing unwillingness and lack of awareness within the firm to truly invest in the self-reflection, learning, and action to understand urban issues that impact Black communities, and Sasaki's own contributions towards designing a built environment that is unwelcome to Black life. Black experiences are often only addressed as a trend to sustain a good image without an actual sustained movement to address the pervasiveness of racism in design practice and culture.

> "The constant request to educate Sasaki on ethical equity is exhausting. It often goes unheard if it is not aligning with their bottom-line of capitalism. I feel like the burden of addressing racism in design in a meaningful way will be on Black and brown people. And if Sasaki tries to address it themselves without proper education, they will reinvent the same system which is oppressing design."

> Language that has been brought forth to amplify marginalized narratives has been shut down to not "make the white men feel like second-class citizens."

Violence of an Apolitical Stance

While there may be a small handful of people voicing explicit anti-racist values, there is a pervasive design culture that perpetuates an anti-political and complacent stance. The ongoing aversion of politics within design projects is harmful and perpetuates exploitation and gentrification of Black and brown communities. This is particularly evident through the limited evaluation of the client's values behind project pursuits.

As designers of the built environment, our work goes far beyond an aesthetic intervention and has very real impact on people we claim to support. Choosing to remain apolitical may be a move to value your own comfort and privilege at the expense of Black and brown livelihoods.

Poor Client Ethics & Evaluation

Clients may not always have the community's best interest in mind. Sasaki has not deeply invested in practices to evaluate client politics and motives, which has led to widespread collaborations with clientele that are driving gentrification and global imperialism.

> "How do you celebrate an American award for your American firm designing development in Afghanistan—a country that has been ravaged by imperialism? Sasaki as a firm is disturbingly blind to its own complicity in global imperialism at the expense of Brown and Black people."

2

For more information, visit

isidor.studio/blackexperiencesasaki

FIGURE 3
(Isidor et al. 2020)

in a multitude of ways. While the pandemic has exacerbated a number of race and class inequalities, for many (myself included) it also offered the time and resources to rethink and restructure our approach to work. The combination of time at home, stimulus checks, paused student loan payment, and more created an environment ripe for entrepreneurial ventures. According to recent census data, there were "5.4 million applications to start companies in 2021, a 53% jump from pre-pandemic levels in 2019" (Pandey 2022). Particularly the growth of a stay-at-home economy, such as my own, enables more people to conduct all business online without any need or expectations to rent a physical office space (Parilla 2022). All to say, this research sits within the context of growing nations trends where our economy is becoming less dependent on people with full time jobs with a single company to now more fluid career and income trajectories.

Urbanism vs Planning

A key thread in this work is my alignment with the term *urbanism* over *urban planning*, which I discuss in this section. Both terms are closely related, though I feel it is important to distinguish between the two in how they apply differently in professional practice. As I will unpack in this section, I lean on the term *urbanism* a lens of interpreting the city, which can be applied through various methods (Wirth 1938), whereas urban planning is formal discipline of practice which may limits its broader applications (Pinson 2004; Schön 1983). Throughout my literature review I reference both urbanism and planning, particularly given the greater dept of materials on planning theory. While this research seeks to identify under the umbrella of urbanism, it is very much intended to participate as part of the conversation of urban planning.

There is no universally accepted definition for ***urban planning***, though the following definitions that capture a range of interpretations:

"Urban Planning" Definitions

Urban planning is the collective management of urban development, the use of purposeful deliberation to give shape to human settlements. It is the mobilization of community will and the design of strategies to create, improve, or preserve the environment in which we live. This environment is at once physical (natural and built) and cultural (social, economic, and political). (Fischler 2012)

Planning is a "conflict over production, management, and use of the urban built environment." (Foglesong 2003; Harvey 1976)

"Urban Planning" Definitions

"[All forms of planning] share a fundamental focus on the future. Planners participate in the whole process of defining a vision for the future—from gathering public feedback, to synthesizing that information into an actionable legal document (e.g., a comprehensive plan), to developing and monitoring the implementation tools (e.g., zoning codes) necessary to achieve the vision established by the plan. A broad definition of the term urban planning, therefore, can be as simple as deciding on an urban vision for the future of a community" ["What Is Urban Planning?" 2022]

While much of the defining language I came across spoke on broad visioning, I was curious how such definitions applied to how we validate the discipline. The writings of Pinson expand on this, where he describes,

"Urban planning can be considered in terms of three criteria which define the existence of a discipline. These criteria are: first, a specific set of knowledge and know-how; second a training system that allows this knowledge and know-how to be transmitted; and third, a professional organization that participates in applying this knowledge and in ensuring its recognition." (Pinson 2004)

Pinson goes on to critique planning's disciplinary identity, which I will discuss momentarily. Though I've taken away from these definitions is an understanding that urban planning is founded on assuming the power and control to create a vision for our future human settlements and subsequently carrying out the necessary processes (i.e. technical, political, and social) to make that vision come true.

Planning as I may argue, is a profession with an ongoing identity crisis due it's embodiment of professional pluralism. Professional pluralism, as best described by Schon, is the competing views of professional practice, where "competing images of the professional role, the central values of the profession, the relevant knowledge and skills" are all active (Schön 1983). This notion is also reinforced by Daniel Pinson, whose writings addressed the conflict planning's identity as a discipline and its inherent multi-disciplinary nature:

"Since its foundation, at the beginning of the 20th Century, urban planning has been claiming the assets of multidisciplinarity. It is particularly concerned with transgressing disciplinary boundaries. However, multidisciplinarity may weaken urban planning as a discipline, because it is a recent knowledge domain that has borrowed without questioning from the knowledge acquired in both the social and engineering sciences. Urban planning may forget to formulate an inventory and to build its own theoretical and practical assets. This article

argues that it is only when a dsicipline has acquired its own identity that it can implement a fertile transdisciplinarity contribution." (Pinson, 2004)

As a young student studying formal planning, I entered with assumptions of learning to understand planning through a structured disciplinary lens, but in time have come to see this expectation as a fallacy. Planning experiences an ongoing mismatch of values, approaches, and frameworks of knowledge which drives the profession to persist through an ongoing identity crisis. As someone who has struggled through my own identity on a personal level, I have come to find comfort in this position of expansion and abstraction of identity. There is no one right way to exist in planning practice, and so that gives the power back to the individual to deploy their own epistemological understandings of the world and community to decide how is best to shape change.

Furthermore, during my professional and academic journey I originally identified myself as an urban planner though over time I have come to lean more towards the term ***urbanism***. Urbanism, like urban planning, does not hold a universal definition, though has popularly been discussed through sociological approaches.

"Urbanism" Definitions

In his 1938 paper Louis Wirth defined urbanism as a "way of life," in that it served as a framework to understand the multifaceted ways in which living in a city defines the way of life for individuals in that environment (Wirth 1938).

Another definition I came across writes:
"Urbanism is the study of the characteristic ways of interaction of inhabitants of towns and cities (urban areas) with the built environment. Urbanism's emergence in the early 20th century was associated with the rise of centralized manufacturing, mixed-use neighborhoods, social organizations and networks, and what has been described as 'the convergence between political, social and economic citizenship'" ("URBANISM" 2017).

For me, I identify with the term urbanism simply because it offers a space of reflection for how to be an active and informed citizen amongst a greater community. I feel urbanism represents a structure of thinking about people and space that informs broad disciplines of practice, whereas planning often assumes a level of technical rigor and explicit action towards future urban development. In summary, the term *urban planning* feel limited in its attempt to encapsulate disciplinary bounds, whereas the term *urbanism* breaks beyond a disciplinary identity to captures a broader philosophy of thinking about people and space.

Understanding Micro Organizations

Now understanding the broadness of defining urbanism, this posed an initial challenge when trying to frame my review of existing literature and content.

In order to frame my research further, I conducted internet-based research[1] where I initially collected 25+ mission statements and/or bios of micro studios and practitioners who fit under my parameters of "micro organization." For an in-depth explanation of this process, please see the methodology section. Some of these examples are pictured on the next page:

Based on a preliminary analysis of these mission statements, the following themes emerged as the top theoretical areas to unpack though my literature review.

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1. See methodology for a description of internet-based research.

THEME 1: WAYS OF KNOWING

For micro organizations and entrepreneurs, epistemological theory centers how we come to understand our theory of practice, or rather our theory of change (Schön 1983; van Manen 1995).

First, I'd like acknowledge that my modalities of research are rooted in a deep tradition of Black feminist epistemologists. This epistemology is founded on the act of elevating one's lived experience in coming to know and express knowledge. While I'd argue this form of knowledge-building has a long legacy that cannot be placed in time, I look to Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* as a work that continues to mark a transformative moment in the growing articulation and formal academic validation of Black feminist epistemological theory. In her writing, Collins calls into question how we collectively validate knowledge and presents a framework to how Black women, as well as other subordinate groups have had to develop alternative ways of knowledge building and expression in ways that are limited by dominant practices set by White men (Hill Collins 2022).

Collins situates the challenge of validating such methodologies against the backdrop of traditional academic practice where,

"Positivist approaches aim to create scientific descriptions of reality by producing objective generalizations. Because researchers have widely differing values, experiences, and emotions, genuine science is thought to be unattainable unless all human characteristics except rationality are eliminated from the research process" (Hill Collins 2022).

Contrary to traditional academic practice, my creative studies, particularly in photography, have taught me there is no objectivity, only subjectivity of the image maker. The photographer, or in this case researcher crafts an image that is informed by my own decisions around selection, framing, and subject of the content (Mink 1987; Danieli, Mazali, and Azoulay 2021). The concept of objectivity and the removal of human characteristics in any research practice, whether technical science or design, only exists in abstraction but never in reality. At the end of the day, this research is shaped by my personal motivations and curiosities and I feel academia would greatly benefit when we build more space to unpack why we care about the work we are doing as it relates to the larger social and scientific impacts of a particular project.

This conversation has been further developed in recent writings by Jarrett Fuller and Ruha Benjamin on overcoming the dismissal of personal expression and "ornamentation" specifically in design practice (Fuller 2021; Berry et al. 2022; Loos 1908). Jarrett Fuller is a designer, writer, and educator whose interests focus on

Excerpts via analysis of different organizations' biographies and mission statements

RESOLVE is an interdisciplinary design collective that combines architecture, engineering, technology and art to address social challenges. We have delivered numerous projects, workshops, publications, and talks in the UK and across Europe, all of which look toward realising just and equitable visions of change in our built environment.
Much of our work aims to provide platforms for the production of new knowledge and ideas, whilst collaborating and organising to help build resilience in our communities. An integral part of this way of working means designing with and for young people and under-represented groups in society.
Here, 'design' encompasses both physical and systemic intervention, exploring ways of using a project's site as a resource and working with different communities as stakeholders in the short and long-term management of projects. For us, design carries more than aesthetic value; it is also a mechanism for political and socio-economic change.

Liz Ogbu A designer, urbanist, and spatial justice activist, Liz is an expert on engaging and transforming unjust urban environments. Her multidisciplinary design and innovation practice, Studio O, operates at the intersection of racial and spatial justice. She collaborates with/in communities in need to leverage design to catalyze sustained social impact.
From designing shelters for immigrant day laborers in the U.S. to a water and health social enterprise for low-income Kenyans to developing a Social Impact Protocol for housing with university researchers and LISC. Liz has a long history of working on and advocating for issues of spacial and racial justice. Her work blends community-centered research methodologies, dynamic and creative forms of engagement and prototyping, spatially just architecture and planning principles, and tools to build participatory power and community-centered systems. Her clients have included the Oakland Museum of California, Jacaranda Health, Piedmont Housing Alliance, and Pacific Gas & Electric. And her network of collaborators have been equally dynamic including the likes of HealthxDesign, envelope a+d, Ideas + Action, and the Center for Sustainable Global Enterprise (Cornell).

cave bureau We are a Nairobi based bureau of architects and researchers charting explorations into architecture and urbanism within nature. Our work addresses the anthropological and geological context of the African city as a means to confront the complexities of our contemporary rural and urban lives.
The bureau is driven to develop systems and structures that improve the human condition, without negatively impacting the natural environment and social fabric our communities. We navigate a return to the limitless curiosity of our early ancestors, conducting playful and intensive research studies into caves within and around Nairobi. These studies form part of a broader decoding of pre and post colonial conditions of the city, explored through drawing, storytelling, construction, and the curation of performative events of resistance.

Cadaster is a design practice focused on the infrastructures of architecture and territory. Our work responds to the pervasive structures that govern environments. Through design, teaching, research, and advocacy, we are currently pursuing several design trajectories, including intervening in urbanization, the rescripting of real property, preservation justice, contemporary environmentalities, and infrastructures of cooperation. Together, these frame our commitment to defining architecture's role in struggles for spatial justice.

claudia is based in Toronto, Canada and is wordsmithing and producing graphic work for architects, designers and artists to craft their stories.

DS4SI We are an artistic research and development outfit for the improvement of civil society and everyday life. The Design Studio for Social Intervention (DS4SI) is dedicated to changing how social justice is imagined, developed and deployed here in the United States.

Situated at the intersections of design thinking and practice, social justice and activism, public art and social practice and civic / popular engagement, we design and test social interventions with and on behalf of marginalized populations, controversies and ways of life.

Theaster Gates lives and works in Chicago. Gates creates work that focuses on space theory and land development, sculpture and performance. Drawing on his interest and training in urban planning and preservation, Gates redeems spaces that have been left behind. Known for his recirculation of art-world capital, Gates creates work that focuses on the possibility of the "life within things." Gates smartly upturns art values, land values, and human values. In all aspects of his work, he contends with the notion of Black space as a formal exercise – one defined by collective desire, artistic agency, and the tactics of a pragmatist.

Studio Zewde is a landscape architecture, urban design, and public art practice based in Harlem, New York City. Named a 2021 Emerging Voice by the Architectural League of New York, the studio's work is lauded for its design methodology that syncs site interpretation and narrative with a dedication to the craft of construction. The firm's employees have multi-disciplinary backgrounds in landscape architecture, architecture, city planning, urban design, sociology, statistics, community organizing, and public art. Studio Zewde is devoted to creating enduring places where people belong.

HECTOR is an urban design, planning & civic arts practice led by Jae Shin & Damon Rich. We make buildings, public spaces, plans, exhibitions & publications that use design to help things happen.
Building with roots in organized communities means connecting design choices to larger networks of accountability.

WATER BLOCK, which is an urban design and creative studio that works to advance racial and environmental justice in our built environment through design, community engagement and planning.

In practice, we lead with the question: "How do we create more access in design, and decentralize design practice?"
We explore this question by:

- acknowledging the history of spaces and places
- seeking to understand the local perception of problems to ignite community-based solutions
- centering and uplifting ancestral and local knowledge
- highlighting the value of art and culture in design practice

HereLA Creative, inquisitive, engaged.
Our work spans the fields of urban design, urban planning, and communications, and includes:

- Conceptual design of public spaces, parks, and streets
- Strategic planning for public and private clients, relating to growth and change, mobility, equity, and sustainability in the urban context

We approach urban design and urban planning from an equitable, social science perspective with an emphasis on the design process and community collaboration. This is the foundation for our final products, plans, drawings, and designs. We focus on incorporating innovative, pop-up, and interactive community conversations into our projects. Many of our engagements are focused around an arts-based approach, weaving collective art making into the urban design process.

LIMBO ACCRA is a fresh-thinking, architecture infused spatial design studio, offering a large and flexible outlet for experimentation in public art, design and architectural production. Much of our work emerges from research and interdisciplinary design projects, rooted in the experimentation with the aesthetic and cultural significance of unfinished, decayed concrete structures in West African cities.

Intelligent Mischief is a creative studio and futures design lab unleashing Black imagination to shape the future.
Our purpose is to boost invention and imagination, realign action logic and experiment with new forms of culture and civil society to create atmospheres of change.
We use collaborative, community-centered world-building to create art, experiences and entertainment that invite Black people to collectively imagine and co-create beautiful futures.
We are artists, tricksters, designers and cultural strategists building an archipelago of Black utopias, an interconnected web of liberated zones, where Black people are thriving, joyful, sovereign and free.

youarethecity is an urban research, design and planning practice. Informed by the belief that everybody has agency in designing cities and urban space, each of our projects is a collaboration bringing together institutions, individuals, public agencies and non-profit organizations to produce research, design, maps, plans, strategies, diagrams, writings, interventions, websites, events and exhibitions about urban spaces at many scales from a flower pot to a masterplan. Working with and speaking to the people that are affected by our work is at the core of our process. youarethecity is a WBE certified business in New York City and is located in Brooklyn.

Superflux Because of this, planning for possible futures must be a diverse and inclusive process, rather than a monolithic and presumptive one. Our work understands that there are always multiple histories, presents, and futures.
Based on this position, we focus on creating tools, in the form of visceral experiences, leading to pertinent strategies for understanding both the present and the future. Our aim is to show how everyone – from individuals, communities, to cities, governments and corporations can adapt to radical change, and grow and flourish in this uncertain world.
Over the years, we have developed our own, unique approach to address the complex challenges our clients and partners face. We call it High Fidelity Futures.
Our approach to addressing, investigating, and then imagining rapid change uses both theory and hands on investigation. By combining strategies of foresight and speculation with listening, observing, and doing, the outcome is truly high fidelity – not merely on a surface level, but deeply considered with nuance, granularity, experience, and insight.

ELLA is a woman and minority-owned design studio based in Los Angeles, California. We bring multiple perspectives to the table for every project. We share a sense of responsibility for what we put into the world.
Creative research plays a major role in our process.
Mutual trust between us and our clients is essential.
We prioritize marginalized voices. We come with many questions, and conversations lead us toward the truest solution. We embrace complexity and contradiction.
Logic appeals to us—so does humor and humility.
Every project is an opportunity for growth.

Low Design Office is an architecture studio that focuses on something simple: More with less. We believe that spaces shape well-being, that humans and ecologies perform best at low stress levels, and that optimizing efficiency with harmony can maximize the power of built environment. As an integrated design practice, our process bridges design and construction: We help clients define their goals and project scope, plan strategically, build effectively and live healthfully. We collaborate to craft high-impact buildings, landscapes and cities, with low carbon footprint and environmental impact, that bring life into balance for people and place.

FIGURE 4 Screenshot of digital white board on Miro, 2022 (*See bibliography for full list of organizations*).

institutional histories, alternative practices, and critical design (Fuller 2022) whereas Ruha Benjamin is a prominent sociologist of science, medicine, and technology with a focus on the relationship between innovation and social inequity ("Ruha Benjamin" 2022). I lean on both of their writings as critical thinkers who are actively contributing to the development of inclusive design dialogues. In 2021, Fuller wrote an essay titled "Graphic Designers Have Always Loved Minimalism. But At What Cost?," that brings up a thought a thoughtful critique on architect and essayist Adolf Loos's "Ornament and Crime" published in 1910, where Loos most notably claims, "The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament" (Loos 1908). Fuller addresses how Loos' use of terms to associate ornamentation as "criminal" and "barbarian" is "based on a racist cultural superiority" that seeks to discredit divergent design aesthetics and strategies that do not fit into a homogeneous and Euro-centric form (Fuller 2021; Berry et al. 2022). In response Fuller, Ruha Benjamin wrote an introductory essay in *The Black Experience in Design* addresses how this phenomenon of the removal of ornamentation transcends into foundations academia where she states,

"There is also a parallel history of early architects of scientific thinking working to remove ornamental or flowery writing from scientific texts. Any hint of the first-person subjectivity of the author was seen as a distraction, delegitimizing scientific claims for an already ambivalent public" (Berry et al. 2022).

This all relates back to urbanism practice in the sense that it requires multidisciplinary approaches to thinking, the foundation of which is an understanding of the self. Personal knowledge and experience is the core thread that draws together different modalities of thinking, as well as explains the motivations behind any work, research, or ongoing practice.

THEME 2: IMAGINATION & DESIGN

I am only one amongst many (and hopefully many more) who have been impacted greatly by Octavia Butler's writings. Butler is a visionary scientific fiction author whose legacy continues to demonstrate how the imagination and creation of alternative worlds and realities provides very real reflections and insights on our lived experiences (Brown 2014). Through her complex world-building and character development, Butler's imagined worlds actively contribute to dialogues on critical race theory, Afrofuturism, black feminism, queer theory, disability studies, and more (Anderson 2020). Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, originally published in 1993, takes place in a fictional post-apocalyptic world starting in the year 2024. The story follows the journey of a young

woman, Lauren, as she develops her notions of community, existence, and belonging amongst a society with crumbling social, infrastructural, and environmental conditions, which very much serves to mirror our own reality (Butler 1993). Butler creates a space in which we can understand and contextualize our current social world while allowing the space to imagine a new realm of possibilities, for better or worse. Commentating on her own work, wrote how science fiction "can be one of our methods for looking ahead—not what our future will be, but how we think about it and foresee it" (Streeby 2018).

As someone who thinks about cities, the expansiveness of Octavia Butler's imagination helped me understand our current social and physical systems of organization through the experience of a parallel world that was built by extrapolating the extremities of our innate human patterns (Butler 2000). The ability to imagine beyond our subjective realities is invaluable.

Moreover, any social change starts with imagination and therefore we cannot make intentional decisions if we cannot see the larger picture. As practitioners in the field, plans and actions to shape our environments are centered on the notion that our future world can look different from the one we currently exist in. This emphasis of imagination builds upon the thesis of recent DUSP graduate Lafayette Cruise, where he discusses planning as an active exercise of speculative fiction. As he argues, speculative fiction in the planning context involves "expanding empathetic imagination – what is the human quality and experience of different futures" (Cruise 2019). Cruise later suggests planning and its related fields may fall within the genre of speculative fiction, whereas I would argue speculative fiction is the genre that precedes and informs technical planning and our general conceptions of urban change.

In 2022, we can now retrospectively look at media like "The Jetsons" or *Parable of the Sower*, and see how speculative fiction are not mere abstractions beyond our reality, but rather commentaries on our lived social patterns and realities. As such, speculative fiction serves not to be an act of planning itself, but to serve as a framework to understand potential scenarios, and how then we may deploy planning (or no planning) to shift our changing world. Through this research I aim to interrogate how imaginative exercise is a growing value in the practices of micro organizations, such as New York-based Intelligent Mischief, whose mission explicitly states, "Our purpose is to boost invention and imagination, realign action logic and experiment with new forms of culture and civil society to create atmospheres of change" ("About Intelligent Mischief" 2022). It is one thing to theorize about imaginative exercises but another to leverage imaginative thinking as a tool to tangible shape one's mission, practice, and operations.

Building on this discussion, core to the exercise of translating imagination to reality is design thinking. As mentioned in the introduction, through my research I aim to be inclusive of broader applications of design adjacent to urbanism. In the urban context, I believe design is both an action to reframe thinking and creative approaches to how we envision and shape cities, as well as the greater world. As a designer myself, I employ design daily, though I never took the time to look up its definition until I began this research. According to Britannica, the basic definition of ***design*** is as follows:

DESIGN (*verb*) — to plan and make decisions about (something that is being built or created) and/or to create the plans, drawings, etc., that show how (something) will be made [Britannica Dictionary 2020].

Understanding this foundational definition confirms my inquiry and emphasis of seeing urbanism and design as interconnected. I believe design thinking serves as a powerful foundation for impact that is both imaginative and visionary, as well as grounded in the real obstacles we must navigate in our existing community structures. In this vein, arguably design is not a discipline but rather a basic act of existing amongst the world. In Victor Papanek's foundational book *Design for the Real World*, he states how "design is basic to all human activities—the placing and patterning of any act towards a desired goal constitutes a design process" (Papanek 1985). Furthermore, he emphasized how,

"Design is a conscious and intuitive effort to impose meaningful order. Design is both the underlying matrix of order and the tool that creates it" (Papanek 1985).

From Papanek's writings, the key point that stuck with me is an emphasis on how design is comes to be through conscious and intentional decision making across scales.

So, if everyone can be a designer, the question then becomes, what are different methodologies and scales of design? My research is based on the assumption that urbanism and design are concerned with making the world a better place, though wide variation comes in the imaginations and applications of what a better world looks like– by whom and for whom? Imagination and design have as much power to do good as it can perpetuate or build new harms. Costanza-Chock's *Design Justice* pulls together a comprehensive analysis of the relationship of design, power, and social justice. In essence, the power of design can be wielded in many ways, with varying impacts on our social world (Costanza-Chock 2021).

As such, the terminology ***design justice*** serves to more specifically describe a "community of practice that aims to ensure more a equitable distribution of design's benefits and burdens; meaningful participation in design decisions; and recognition of community-based, Indigenous, and diasporic design traditions, knowledge, and practices" (Costanza-Chock 2021).

Furthermore, the Design Studio for Social Intervention's (DS4SI) book *Ideas Arrangements Effects*, also makes specific reference to design and social justice where they write, "Those of us who care about social justice see ourselves as potential designers of this world" (Design Studio for Social Intervention et al. 2020). *Ideas Arrangements Effects*, offers a succinct framework for DS4SI's processes of imaginative design thinking and approaches to create interventions that shift and shape our social and physical experiences. At large, "DS4SI strives to enact the principle that design is not just about problem-solving within existing paradigm and social orders, it is about world building, about imagining and constructing new territories of life and difference" (Design Studio for Social Intervention et al. 2020). Most notably, DS4SI, positions their design practice to be proactive, rather than just reactive in prototyping our possible realities, a notion that is grounded in imaginative thinking at the start. I was fortunate to interview Lori Lobenstein, one of the co-founders of DS4SI as part of this research which is incorporated later in my findings and discussion.

THEME 3: CHANGE

Much of my motivation in studying micro organizations originated not in the tactical strategies, but rather in the psychological groundings that make someone seek an entrepreneurial path. What is the motivation to create one's own model and methodology of practice? Central to the essence of an entrepreneurial venture in urbanism, is one's motivation to drive change in the world. Though everyone's vision may differ, what we know for certain is that our world is always changing. While Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* helped us to imagine, it also helped us make sense of our constantly changing world. As the lead protagonist Lauren believes,

"The only lasting truth is change" (Butler 1993).

Building on Butler's legacy, Adrienne Maree Brown is a writer, activist and facilitator who draws deep inspiration from Butler's work, particularly in her own book *Emergent Strategy*—a concept she defines as "how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for" (Brown 2017). For Brown, the essence of Butler's message is about "living and leading in alignment with the reality of constant change" (Brown 2014).

Though, how does one understand change? First, I find it valuable to distinguish between change and progress. I'll note that understanding the full extent of both change and progress are far beyond our human ability to fully contextualize and measure. Change is always happening, but progress is not always guaranteed. In my

experience as a student at MIT, the university culture hyper-prioritizes nonstop doing without moments of pause. For me, while it has been exciting to be in the immediate surrounding of *breakthrough* technological and scientific developments, I often question how some innovations will potentially impact our social world–for better or worse. Sociologist Ruha Benjamin, whom I've previously referenced, best summarized this questioning, when she wrote,

"Too often, technological ease and speed are inversely related to social progress" (Berry et al. 2022).

Whereas technological and scientific developments often follow a linear process, progress does not. One of my favorite classic texts is Mazlich's "Ideas of Progress," where he unpacks how societal progress may be understood as an illusion. After discussing different philosophical viewpoints of progress, he comes to state that,

"Increasingly, modern man is coming to realize that it is only in the process of achieving his goals that he discovers what he wants to, and must, do. This is his only real 'progress'" (Mazlish 1963).

All we really know is our experience, though our nature guides us with the understanding that there is a purpose to how we individually and collectively choose to live and act.

Bearing this philosophical context in mind, how do notions of change and progress translate to our material world? Particularly, whether we like it or not our social reality is dominated by resources and capital. Business entrepreneurship brings reality into the lens to ground this research in our lived context and not a fantastical world. This framing is neither an argument for or against capitalism but rather to state, it is our reality. While many initiatives and efforts exist, the only ones that sustain over time are those that are backed by a model of capital and resource.

Here, the book *Innovation in Small Professional Practices in the Built Environment* by Shu-Ling Lu and Martin Sexton offers an excellent body of research to understand innovation as it relates to business practice. By definition, innovation just describes the process of change (Merriam-Webster 2022). The idea of a micro organization serves to disrupt the status quo of large operations. From an entrepreneurial sense—disrupting standard practices, frameworks, and approaches. As the book emphasizes,

"It is well recognized and recorded that small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) provide a rich source of knowledge, innovation and value-creating qualities to the economy" (Lu and Sexton 2009).

The organic nature of micro organization operations makes them more agile and flexible (Rothwell and Zegveld 1982). Thus, arguably more adept to shape shifting in alignment with external forces of change. Still, every business needs a stable foundation. Lu and Sexton's research largely focuses on the importance of a business's internal organizational model and capacity for knowledge cultivation as its most valuable resource, in which they write,

"The key source of sustainable competitive advantage is knowledge, and specifically the capacity of organizations to acquire knowledge that translates into ongoing organizational innovations" (Lu and Sexton 2009).

This holds true for businesses across scales. Knowledge comes in many forms, from what is more 'tacit knowledge' – intuitive within ourselves and our experience, to 'explicit knowledge' – that which can be expressed in formal language and documentation (Polanyi 1962).

The importance of knowledge capital highlights the importance of the human capital behind the work itself. A challenging small scale operation lies in how an entire pillar (or sometimes all) of an organization's knowledge capital is held within a single individual. And should any key individual leave, an organization's entire foundation may be uprooted. Beyond this, Lu and Sexton provide an excellent and concise summary of existing research on further limitations of small organizations (in the context of small manufacturing firms):

"First, limited staff capacity and capability restrict their ability to undertake appropriate research and development. Second, small firms have scarce time and resources to allocate to external interaction. This limits the flow and amount of information on which to have discussions. Third, small firms are often affected by the excessive influence of senior management. Often small firms are vulnerable to domination by a single owner or small team who may use inappropriate strategies and skills. Fourth, small firms can have difficulty in raising finance and maintaining adequate cash flow which can result in limited scope for capital or ongoing investment in innovation activity." (Rothwell and Zegveld 1982; Lu and Sexton 2009).

At the end of the day, existing literature reinforces that micro organizations contribute many innovative ideas and approaches to a larger system, but cannot operate in isolation (Polanyi 1962). Furthermore, beyond scale, variation within organizations exists in a multitude of ways that may steer different operations and outcomes specifically in the urbanism context (i.e. disciplinary background of leader[s], for-profit vs non-profit entities, single member vs small team).

METHODOLOGY

III.

This research effort was conducted over nine months from December 2021 to August 2022. My methodological approach centers on a balance of qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews and interpretative/qualitative research.

While I came into this research process with my own set of experiences and hypotheses, I wanted to design a methodological approach for information gathering that would support an iterative process. As such, the format of conversational interviews offered an opportunity to gain nuanced insights while providing the space to continue experimenting and following new insights as the process moved along (Burgess-limerick and Burgess-limerick 1998; Yin 2009; Bartlett and Vavrus 2016).

Furthermore, my methodology sought to position myself as both a researcher and active participant in the research, rather than a passive observer. The focus on qualitative analysis, particularly through interviews, offers a methodology where my own experiences, biases, and personality can become a transparent part of the research findings (Johnson, Avenarius, and Weatherford 2006). Given the lack of standard terminology to frame the type of organizations I sought to investigate, there are inherent limits to large data and quantitative-backed approaches to the topic. As such my approach serves not to survey the entire field, but rather offer a nuanced view and perspective on the topic and findings that may be applicable and relevant across varied perspectives (Yin 2009).

Lastly, throughout my research process I leaned on support via my formal academic advisory team as well as informal conversations with friends who helped as an outside perspective to aid the development of my ideas, analysis, and sourcing of literature. This concept is commonly known as critical research friends (Balthasar 2011).

Developing Parameters

From the start, I knew that I had to create parameters so the investigation did not spiral out without having established a strong foundation. In the traditional research sense these parameters may be known as my "unit of analysis," a critical framework to identify and bound my study in a particular context (Trochim 2022). As such, I developed the following criteria to focus my search:

Parameters

SCALE: Micro-Scale operations of 10 people or under working as full-time staff

FIELD: Work actively contributes to the field of urbanism

PRACTICE: Practice incorporates design at a range of integrations

IDENTITY: 50% or more leadership by Black, Brown, and/or women

Surveying the Landscape

Internet-based research was central particularly in the early stages of the research process. To develop some guidance for my theoretical framework and literature review, I first sought to conduct a preliminary online survey of studios and/or practitioners that fell into my criteria.

A. COLLECTING SAMPLES

Using the parameters outlined, I began by collecting the mission statement and/or bios of organizations and practitioners who fit under my parameters of "micro organization." I collected all the statements (25+) on a Miro, a digital whiteboarding application. Here, highlighted the sections of the statement that spoke most potently to each one's mission, values, and approach. *A screenshot selection of the Miro board is shown below:*

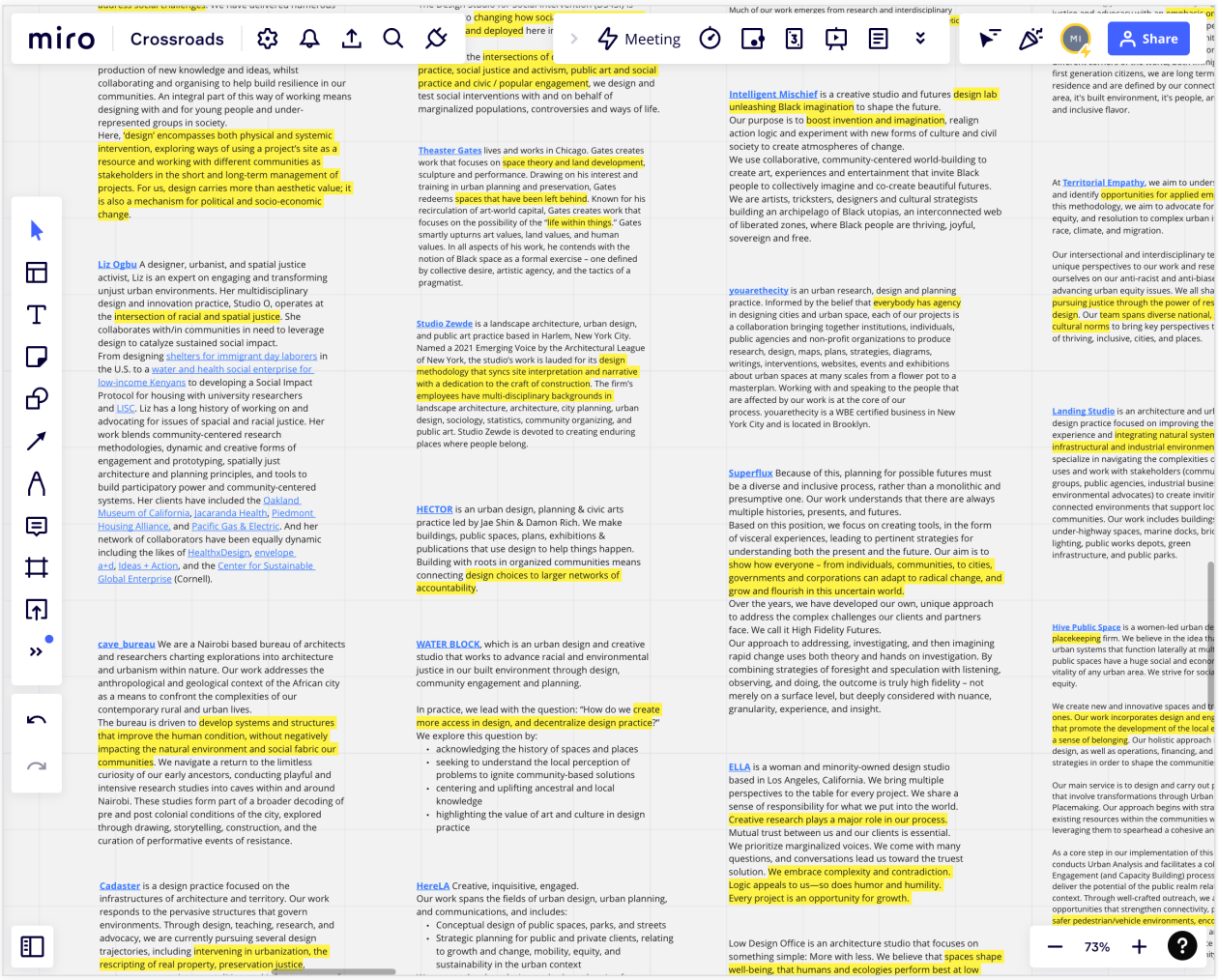


FIGURE 5 Zoomed in screenshot of organizational mission statements and bios, via Miro 2022. (*See bibliography for full list of organizations*).

B. EXTRACTING THEMATIC LANGUAGE

Organizations were surveyed based on my own knowledge of existing peers in the field, suggestions from preliminary advisory conversations, the BIPOC design studios database ("BIPOC STUDIOS Database" 2022), a design studio survey book organized by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation ("BIPOC Design Firms and Consultants" 2021), and additional online searching mainly via Google and Instagram. My intentions were never to develop a full survey of the landscape, but rather to develop a collection that represented a range of practices that varied in locality and approach. I went about this approach given my own lack of capacity and time to develop a comprehensive survey. Once I had collected a sufficient number of statements for this initial stage, I then pulled the highlights from each one into sticky notes, which were then organized around themes. In their raw form, the **early threads** include the following:

1. Intervention (in existing practices + structures)
2. Intersectionality
3. Imagination + storytelling
4. Activating underutilized space
5. Social action + equity
6. Emotion
7. Expanded definitions of diversity

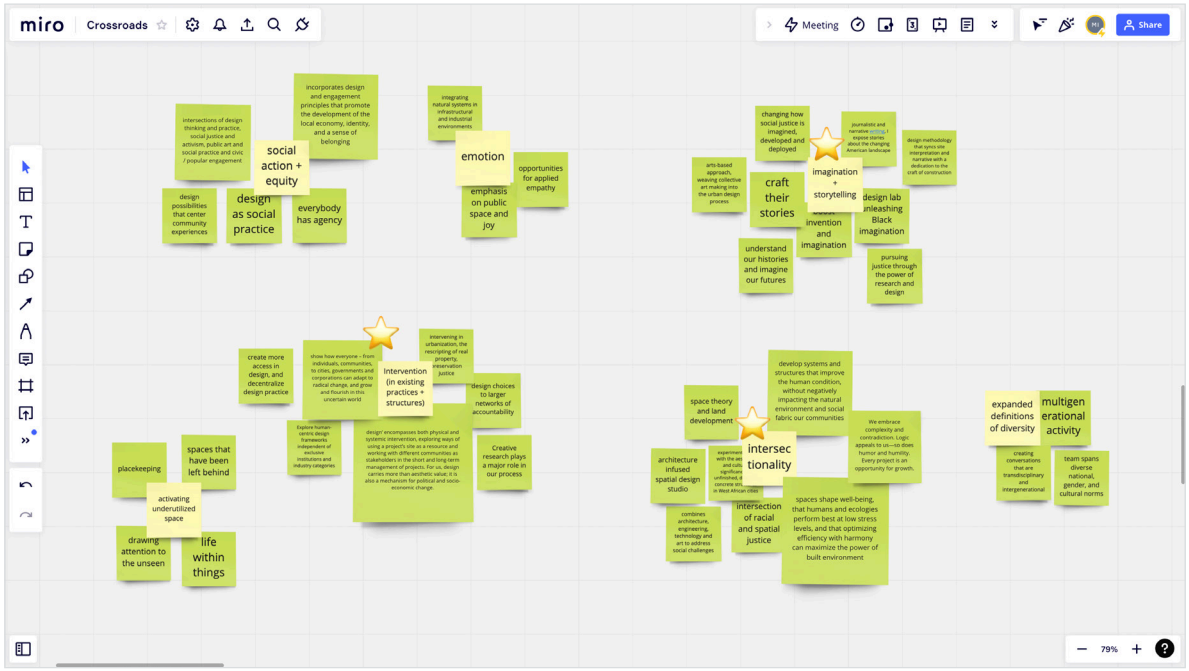


FIGURE 6 Screenshot of categorizing thematic language, via Miro 2022.

C. SYNTHESIZING KEY THEMES

The **top three most populated themes** (starred above), were as follows:

1. Imagination + Self-Determination
2. Epistemology
3. Intervention + Disruption.

The screenshot below demonstrates the three core theories as well as sub-topics and frameworks that informed my literature review and general project framework.

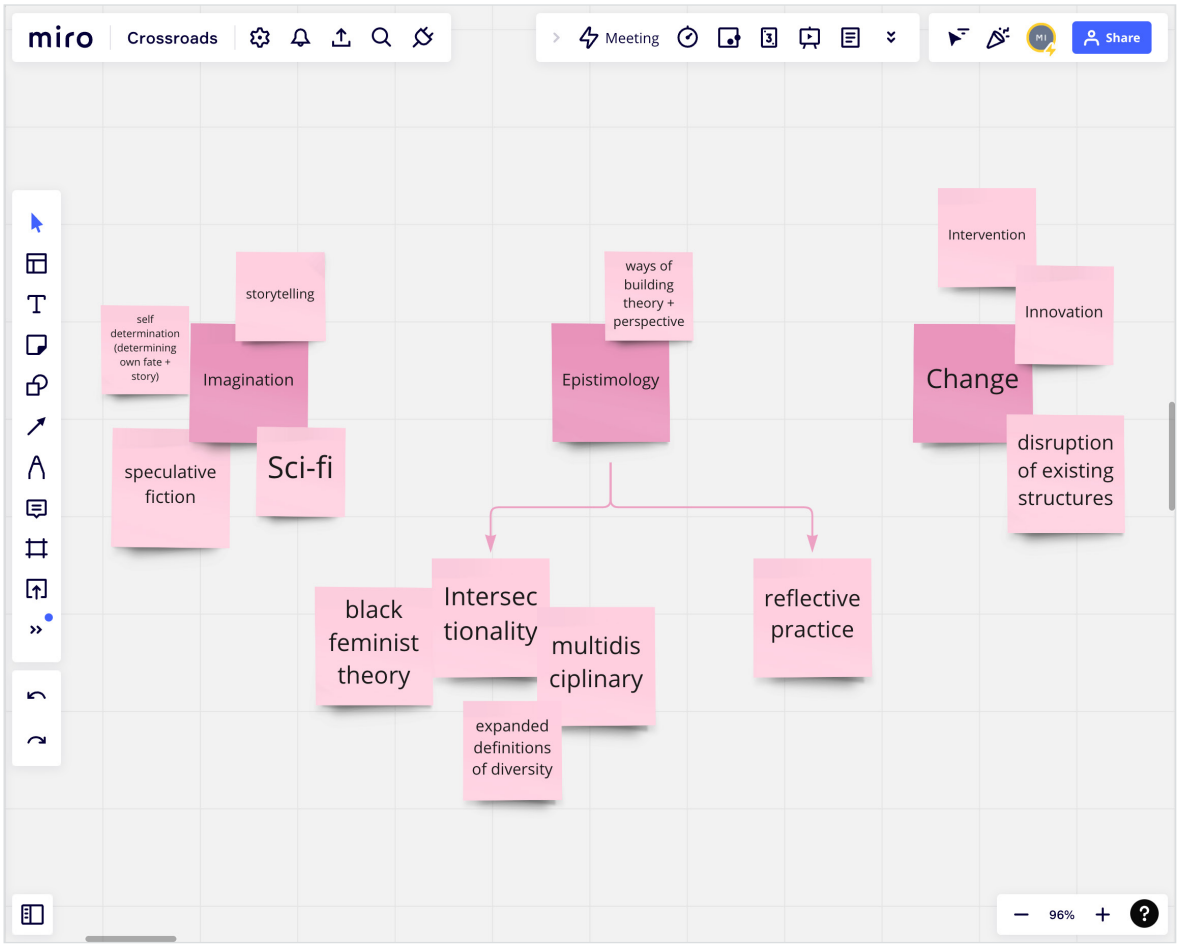


FIGURE 7 Screenshot of identified key themes, via Miro 2022.

Interview Process

ESTABLISHING ETHICAL STANDARDS

Before commencing any interview processes, I first consulted with MIT's Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects (COUHES) ["COUHES" 2022] to ensure that my processes were in line with ethical standards for research involving human participants. This process involved (1) completing an online training on human-subject research, (2) soliciting a faculty sponsor for the committee's review of my research, and (3) submitting a brief research description for approval to be exempt from the COUHES oversight process for human-subject research.

Given the loose structure of my interview process and minimal risk of harm to my research participants ("Definitions | Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects" 2022), this research qualified as exempt from committee oversight–though this early engagement offered me resources and guidance on ensuring improved transparency as I moved through the process. This whole process took me two months, though can be done in a shorter period of time.

INTERVIEW OUTREACH

Process for Outreach

In total, I contacted 13 organizations, received 9 responses, and conducted 6 interviews. My interview outreach process targeted three types of participants as listed below:

1. Existing connections
2. Recommendations from existing connections
3. Outside of my existing network (via online research)

Most interview participants included people from the first two categories who were in my immediate or extended network. Existing connections were naturally the easiest to coordinate, given that I already had established working relationships with folks who I knew would be interested and excited to have a chat about organizational practice. From there, I leveraged the snowball sampling methodology by asking early interview participants to recommend and/or connect me to additional interviewees. Through this approach, I found participants were more responsive when connected or referred by a mutual contact.

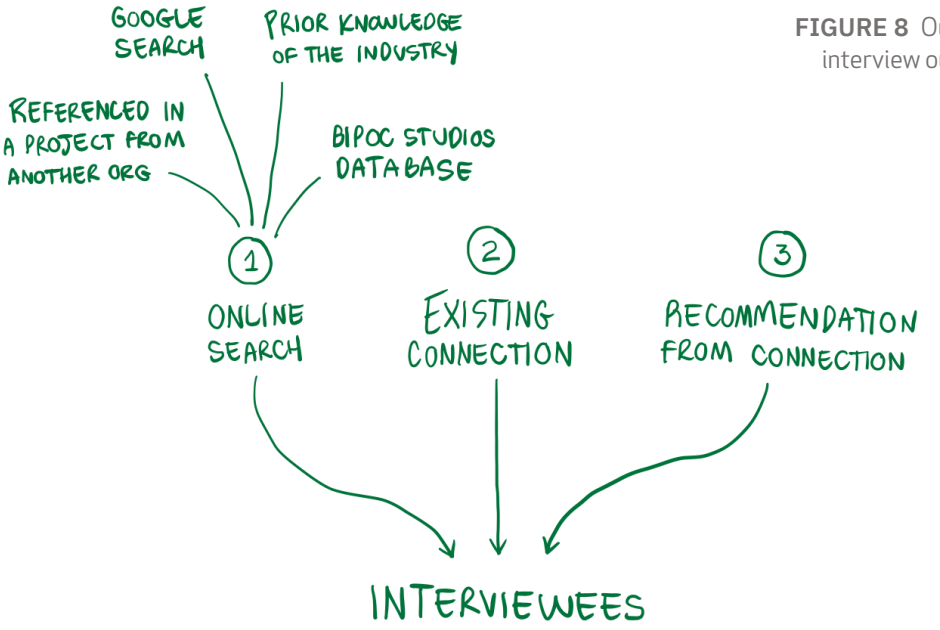


FIGURE 8 Outline of interview outreach.

Considerations for Outreach

To offset the bias of only staying within my extended network, I also ensured to reach out cold to a handful of organizations whom I had no prior connections with. While responsiveness was more challenging with this method, it helped expand the perspectives and insights shared via the interviewing processes.

In addition to the overarching research parameters discussed prior, I also considered the following factors in trying to reach a diverse pool of interview participants:

1. Locations Across the US
2. Applications of design thinking and practice
3. Models of operation (i.e. for-profit, non-profit, co-op)
4. Age of the organization (a couple of years vs established for over a decade)
5. Scale within micro scale (a single partner vs multiple partners)

The majority of outreach was conducted via email. In a few cases, when coordinating with close contacts, communication took place via text or phone, though I still followed up with an email briefly describing the research so they were fully informed of the research context and interview process.

Each email was customized to its receiver, though followed a similar structure. Given that the main purpose of my ask was for an hour of someone's time, I made sure to demonstrate that I was at least willing to spend my own time to understand some of the context around each organization's practice. The next page shows an example of a email I used to contact participants.

Sample Email

FIGURE 9 Annotated email

Hi {name},

I hope this message finds you well! My name is Mel and I'm a master's student in the city planning program at MIT, as well as an interdisciplinary designer + urbanist. I first came across your practice via {mention a mutual contact who referred me or mention an article, recording, or other prior engagement with their practice and/or content}. I am reaching out to see if you and/or partners from {organization name} would be interested in participating in an interview as part of my thesis research?

For context, the purpose of my thesis is to investigate the role that micro scale (under 10 staff) urbanism practice with integrated design plays within the greater urbanism field. In particular, what are the opportunities and challenges of practicing at this scale? How does your mission align with your operational practice?

Though this research, I am motivated to investigate different lenses of design in urbanism from what is generally conceptualized as "urban design," which may include areas of storytelling, data, graphic, systems or other forms of design. I am particularly curious to learn from your model in how {mention specific aspect of organization that connects to the research}.

The interview will follow a loose conversational format that will focus on your theory of practice + general values, and how that shapes your ongoing business practice. Interviews will be approximately 45-60 min long. They may take place over zoom, and will be recorded if consent is given. At large, I hope this research helps to build synergies between creative practitioners within or adjacent to the urbanism field, while providing insights and resources both from a philosophical and operational perspective. Research will be conducted in early summer 2022 as part of my (Mel Isidor's) Master of City Planning degree at MIT.

Let me know if you are interested and have availability before {add date here}. As well, let me know if you have any questions and thanks for your consideration!

Best,
Mel

01
- Introduce myself and affiliation
- How I am connected to them or how I found them
- Ask to participate in the interview

02
- Context and motivations for the study

03
- Interview logistics

04
- Conclusion and scheduling details

Methodology Lessons: Email Outreach

As I worked through my emailing process, I couple of other methods came up that improved my email outreach:

DEDUCTING DIRECT EMAIL ADDRESSES

Often organization's websites may only list an info email which may be checked less frequently. In such cases, where an individual's email was not directly listed, I tried to deduct it by testing a couple of standard naming conventions (i.e. first name + last name @ domain; first initial + last name @ domain; first name @ domain). Using this method, I was able to reach folk's direct inboxes on a couple of occasions whereas my message would have otherwise been missed on the info email.

STATING THE ASK IN THE FIRST PARAGRAPH

While it is important to provide thorough information, it was crucial to make my ask clear from the beginning of the email so respondents are not tasked with sifting through paragraphs of information just to contextualize the request.

INCLUDING A TIMEFRAME IN THE ASK

In my earlier emails, I did not specify when interviews needed to be conducted, though it was a frequent question that came up in responses. As such, in later emails, I included a window of availability which helped streamline scheduling.

STATING A POINT OF CONNECTION

As a organization owner myself, I occasionally get emails from out of my network and a question I'm curious to know is always how the point of connection has taken place. Therefore, through my own process, I made sure to note this point of connection in the initial paragraph. This information helps the receiver in their own practice to understand how their existing network, online lectures, writing, listings on databases, and or other methods are supporting them in growing their networks.

INTERVIEW STRUCTURE

Each interview was approximately 45-60 minutes long and took place online via zoom. The majority of interviews were 1 on 1 conversations though in a few cases it included multiple participants of the same practice in a joint conversation.

Introduction

At the beginning of each interview process, I (1) Began with introductions if we were connecting for the first time, and (2) Restate my intentions and motivations for the research.

Consent Recording and Name Use

Before the start of each discussion, I shared a consent form with each participant to confirm their agreement or non-agreement to being recorded and for their name and quotes to be used in the final submission. While recording and naming consent was not required for participation, (To-date) all interviewees consented to our conversations being recorded and their names and quotes being used. Including consent during each interview allowed for greater transparency because all questions or concerns came up regarding the consent process could be addressed live. Furthermore, it helped me keep better records of all participants basic contact information.

Discussion

Interview discussions followed a semi-structured process centered on three key themes while enabling a conversational format. As such, I wrote out a set of themes with sub-questions that I used as my guide during each interview:

Thematic Interview Questions

Role + Positionality

How do you describe your practice?
How do you describe your adjacency and role within the field of urbanism?
What role does micro-scale urbanism practice with integrated design play within the field?

Scale

What scale are you working in and why?
Does this scale and scope offer a model for innovative outcomes?

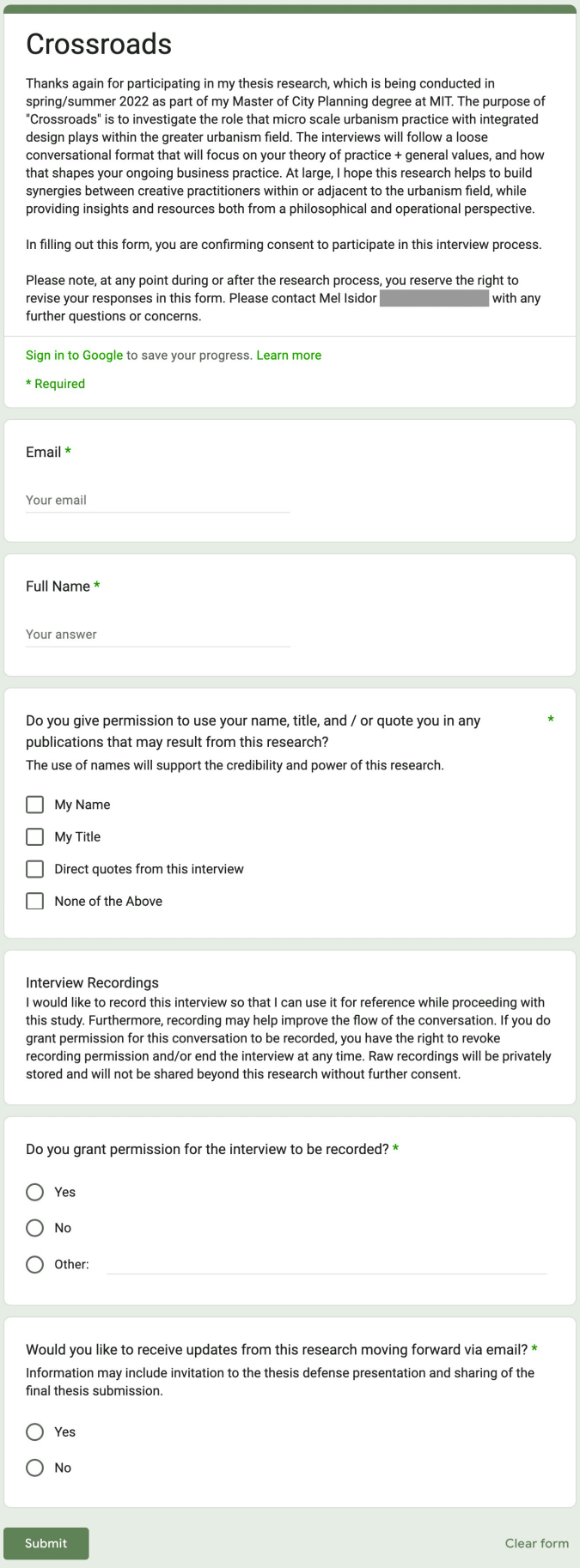
Contribution

How does your practice enable innovation?
What contribution is the innovation making to the field of urbanism?

Interview Consent Form

Adapted via MIT's Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects forms and templates ("COUHES" 2022).

FIGURE 10 Screenshot of interview consent form, via Google Forms 2022



Crossroads

Thanks again for participating in my thesis research, which is being conducted in spring/summer 2022 as part of my Master of City Planning degree at MIT. The purpose of "Crossroads" is to investigate the role that micro scale urbanism practice with integrated design plays within the greater urbanism field. The interviews will follow a loose conversational format that will focus on your theory of practice + general values, and how that shapes your ongoing business practice. At large, I hope this research helps to build synergies between creative practitioners within or adjacent to the urbanism field, while providing insights and resources both from a philosophical and operational perspective.

In filling out this form, you are confirming consent to participate in this interview process.

Please note, at any point during or after the research process, you reserve the right to revise your responses in this form. Please contact Mel Isidor [redacted] with any further questions or concerns.

Sign in to Google to save your progress. Learn more

* Required

Email *

Your email

Full Name *

Your answer

Do you give permission to use your name, title, and / or quote you in any publications that may result from this research? *

The use of names will support the credibility and power of this research.

- [ ] My Name
- [ ] My Title
- [ ] Direct quotes from this interview
- [ ] None of the Above

Interview Recordings

I would like to record this interview so that I can use it for reference while proceeding with this study. Furthermore, recording may help improve the flow of the conversation. If you do grant permission for this conversation to be recorded, you have the right to revoke recording permission and/or end the interview at any time. Raw recordings will be privately stored and will not be shared beyond this research without further consent.

Do you grant permission for the interview to be recorded? *

- ( ) Yes
- ( ) No
- ( ) Other:

Would you like to receive updates from this research moving forward via email? *

Information may include invitation to the thesis defense presentation and sharing of the final thesis submission.

- ( ) Yes
- ( ) No

Submit Clear form

While each interview hit on the general themes, no two interviews followed the exact same questions or flow of conversation. Oftentimes, I would try to address each theme as they naturally came up to maintain a fluid flow of conversation. Though each interview was recorded, I took high-level notes to note themes and insights to refer back to as I steered the conversation. Furthermore, I occasionally brought my own experiences and reflections to the discussion which helped improve the connection between myself and each interviewee.

After the first 3 interviews, I desired to build more customization into the questioning that was organization-specific. Based on my research and understanding, I'd jot down case-specific questions before each interview related to specific projects or business models that I was aware of, or relevant themes that came up in prior discussions (i.e. contributing to thought leadership + literature). I also learned to ask for more case study examples that demonstrated specific themes that came up.

Post-Chat

Immediately following each interview, I blocked off 30 minutes of time to capture my immediate reflections before other distractions of the day started convoluting my mind. Referencing notes taken during the interviews, I'd pace around in my apartment speaking my reflections aloud, while documenting via an audio transcription app on my phone called otter.ai. Interviewees were also sent the interview recordings for their own records.

Interviewing ~~Post~~ During the Covid-19 Pandemic

I feel it is important to acknowledge that this process was taking place after around 2 years into the COVID-19 pandemic, which has greatly impacted research and social engagements for better or for worse. Though the pandemic is still our immediate reality, in time these conditions may become a distant memory. One of the benefits of this time has been improved digital communications and general acceptance of virtual work, which allowed me to easily conduct recorded interviews via zoom. While there are benefits to in-person engagements, conducting interviews online allowed me to, (1) Record with high-quality audio and integrated transcription, (2) Connect easily with interviewees in distant locations, and (3) Reduce the chance of Covid-19 transmission during the entire process.

Data Analysis

Following the conclusion of my interviews, I then moved into my analysis process. As you will see in the following section, I choose to write up a thorough narrative of each interview, highlighting all the potent themes and threads that came up along the way. In order to go about this process, I started by conducting a thorough re-read of each interview transcription where I highlighted key statements, marked annotations, and scribbled notes on my immediate reflections (see sample below. I also color-coded annotations to distinguish notes that were relevant for my findings versus discussion section. I went about this process for the text transcriptions of each interview and post-interview reflection.

For my findings section, I went about writing each interview one by one, a format which would allow me to highlight the details of each conversation. To develop each narrative, I extracted my highlights and annotations and grouped them into the thematic areas that structured each interview narrative.

Once my findings were drafted, I followed a similar process for my discussion and conclusions. To organize my thoughts, collected all the color-coded notes from my interview annotations to organize in a single document. From here, I documented my rough reflections by speaking my thoughts aloud as I recorded my voice for audio transcription. This process was incredibly helpful to develop an extensive record of my thoughts in a short amount of time. Again from here the writing process flowed rather smoothly as I was tasked only with trimming and wordsmithing my noted conceptions.

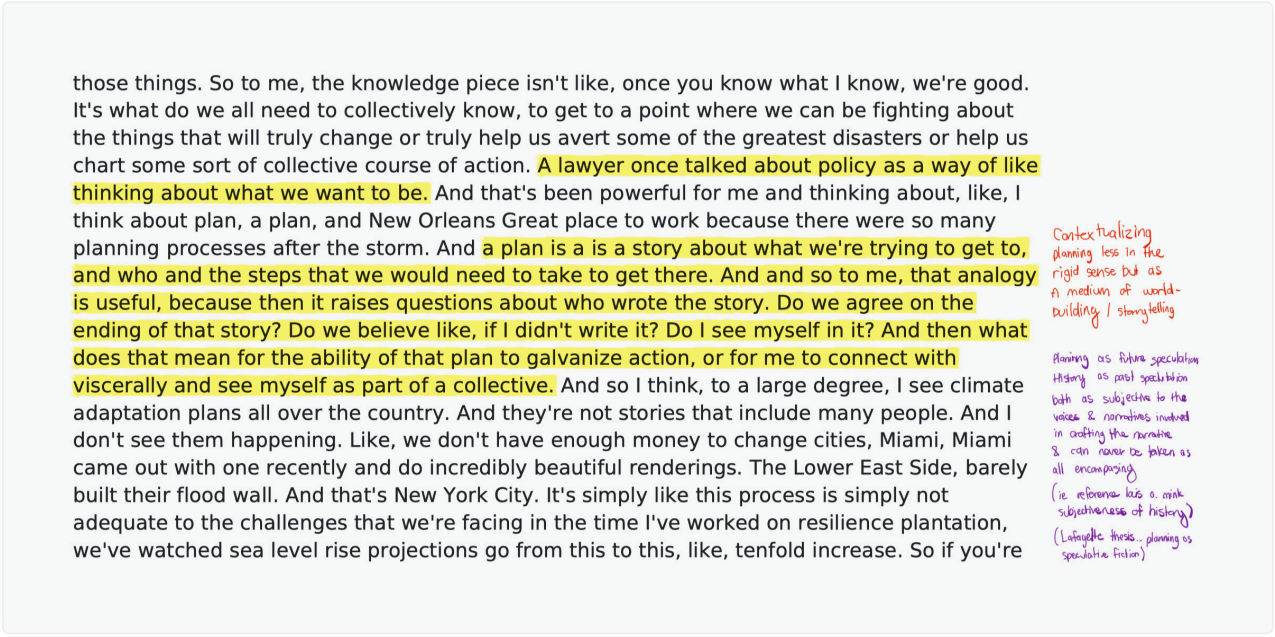


FIGURE 11 Sample of annotated transcription from otter.ai

FINDINGS

[*Stories from the Field*]

IV.

Overview of Interviews

The table below summarizes the organizations who participated in a research interview.

	BLACKSPACE URBANIST COLLECTIVE	JIMA STUDIO	BROAD COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS (BCC)
Mission	BlackSpace is an interdisciplinary collective, seeking to bridge policy, people, and place, with a mission of equity and justice. Their work strives for environments that recognize, affirm, and amplify Black agency, discourse, and thought.	JIMA Studio leverages landscape architecture and urban planning to help communities envision and build upon their futures.	BCC is a non-profit community development organization in New Orleans devoted to revitalizing Broad Street as a vibrant, equitable, and inclusive commercial corridor by promoting the health and economic, residential, and cultural development of its diverse surrounding neighborhoods.
Core Practice Areas	Neighborhood strategy projects, customized learning, published content	design services, community engagement, research and thought-leadership	Catalytic real estate development, collective impact programming, commercial revitalization, planning and advocacy, community capacity building
Founded	Informal collective began in 2015, Nonprofit was established in 2020	Founded in 2021	Founded in 2008
Location	Based in Brooklyn, NY with a network across the United States	Detroit, MI	New Orleans, LA [Broad Street Corridor]
Current Size	2 full-time, 1 part-time (+ a broad network of advisors, collaborators); currently hiring 2 new positions	1 full-time and currently hiring a second full-time staff	1 full-time and currently hiring 1 full-time and 1 part time staff
Business Structure*	Non-profit	Limited Liability Company (LLC)	Non-profit
Website	blackspace.org	jimastudio.com	broadcommunityconnections.org

***** See appendix for definitions of each business structure

DESIGN STUDIO FOR SOCIAL INTERVENTION (DS4SI)	CIVIC STUDIO	HECTOR
The Design Studio for Social Intervention is an artistic research and development outfit for the improvement of civil society and everyday life.	Civic Studio co-creates bold ideas and solutions through storytelling, art, design, and community-based planning with diverse partners across sectors and issue areas. They serve as a place for learning and mentorship, civic dialogue, creative exploration, and co-creation.	Hector is an urban design, planning & civic arts practice led by Jae Shin and Damon Rich. They work on designs for public places, neighborhood plans, and development regulations, trying to learn from traditions of popular education and community organizing to build collective understanding and action.
Social interventions, writing and thought leadership, creativity labs, civic engagement, placemaking, events and programming	Multi-disciplinary projects that support learning and dialog on critical civic issues as well as community-based planning and design practices.	urban design, planning, and civic arts
Founded in 2005/06	Founded in 2020	Founded in 2016
Boston, MA	New Orleans, LA	Newark, NJ
4 full-time staff	8-10 people	2 partners
Quasi Non-profit (Fiscally sponsored by a larger non-profit organization)	Cooperatively-owned (registered as an LLC)	Limited Liability Company (LLC)
ds4si.org	civicstudio.coop	hectordesignservice.com

TABLE 1 (Chang 2022; Davis Williams 2022; Jordan 2022; Lobenstein 2022; Osore and McLean 2022; Rich 2022)

All quotations are edited for clarity.

INTERVIEW #1:

BlackSpace Urbanist Collective

Interviewee	Emma Osore and Kenyatta McLean (co-managing directors)
Mission	BlackSpace is an interdisciplinary collective, seeking to bridge policy, people, and place, with a mission of equity and justice. Their work strives for environments that recognize, affirm, and amplify Black agency, discourse, and thought.
Core Practice Areas	Neighborhood strategy projects, customized learning, published content
Founded	Informal collective began in 2015, Nonprofit was established in 2020
Location	Based in Brooklyn, NY with a network across the United States
Current Size	2 full-time, 1 part-time (+ a broad network of advisors, collaborators); currently hiring 2 new positions
Business Structure	Non-profit
Website	blackspace.org

Top **FIGURE 12** Screenshot during zoom interview; Emma Osore (left) and Kenyatta McLean (right) [Osore and McLean 2022]

TABLE 2 (Osore and McLean 2022)

The first of my interviews was with co-directors Emma Osore and Kenyatta McLean of BlackSpace Urbanist collective, based in Brooklyn, New York with a network extending across the United States. Kenyatta is an urban planner who describes her practice as rooted in relationships– seeking to build networks to connect people to resources. Prior to BlackSpace, she worked in municipal government roles focusing on economic development and small business services. Emma's background centers on public systems thinking and design, with a motivation to lead and think across many disciplines in order to build more inclusive systems of living. Prior to BlackSpace, she held roles focusing on arts and culture initiatives as well as incubating startup initiatives from the lens of developing sustainable leadership ecosystems for people of color. Together Kenyatta and Emma's skills and interests blended a balance of creative relationship-building and technical organization. I've previously collaborated with BlackSpace on a couple of projects through my studio so the interview itself was grounded in an existing familiarity.

From the start, I took to reference my thematic questions and interview structure as showcased in the methodology section. This was my trial run to test the quality of the questions I developed, so I held the most to my original structured format compared to the interviews that followed. Still, the format was quite fluid where I didn't ask any questions verbatim from my notes but rather posed questions as they organically came up in the dialogue, taking notes throughout to ensure I had hit all my general themes around how BlackSpace understood their practice conceptually, and what that looks like from an organizational perspective (i.e. business model, project focuses, and innovative approaches).

One thing that immediately struck me was that when I conceptualized my interview processes my vision was centered on a 1-on-1 exchange, based on my own assumptions and past experience with interview processes. However, from the start of the conversation with Emma and Kenyatta, I realized that conducting a joint interview between two partners opened up the conversational format and allowed for a richness in responses to my questions due to the fact that both participants were able to listen and build upon each other's insights. Furthermore, the format allowed a layer of complexity where both Emma and Kenyatta sometimes overlapped and differed in their responses, which was both insightful to me as the interviewer, and also helpful for themselves to be in a space of dialogue and reflection on their ongoing practice through the facilitation of a third party.

While BlackSpace became a formalized organization in 2020, its origins began five years earlier in 2015 as a collective space in New York for Black folks to gather with others who were similarly invested in advancing the livelihood of black folks in the city,

across different approaches and applications. The group developed organically, rooted in coming together over brunch. As we discussed the collective's early development, a key takeaway was an emphasis was moving slowly and intentionally, against the grain of the rapid pace of development that is normalized in US business culture.

As Emma discussed, "There's something about pacing and speed, where like the speed of money and legal process and writing the emails and just responding to people who are excited about BlackSpace, like moves very fast. But our more organic process around like, talking through our legal entity took a year, developing the manifesto took a year." - Emma Osore (Osore and McLean 2022)

The development of BlackSpace's manifesto (pictured right), as mentioned, served as a foundational set of principles to guide the collective to this day, from inner organizational decisions to the design or project processes. While self-belief was strong within the collective, there were growing pains in the formative years to evolve from a more informal gathering space into an operationalized entity seeking to take on more work and capacity. Different models of formalization were explored, from an LLC, to a cooperatively owned model, to a non-profit. An LLC was not the preferred option due to a lack of startup capital required to hire the necessary technical staff, and a co-operative was explored but not settled on due to challenges around coordinating and addressing accessibility for folks with different levels of financial capabilities to contribute as well as capacity to participate. Ultimately BlackSpace settled on an non-profit model because it aligned with their collective understanding of themselves as facilitating social value, whereas they could lean on philanthropy to support the mission rather than building out a model with a primary focus on services and technical skills. In doing so, a crowd-funding campaign was carried out in 2020 that successfully led to Emma and Kenyatta's hirings as co-directors.

Now 1.5 years in, the group is continuing to hold its consciousness around its pace of growth as it looks to bring on 1-2 new full-time staff. While their full-time staff is small, the organization's impact and capacity extends to a larger collective network that includes multiple collaborators, advisors, and "cousin groups" that organize in different cities across the country, guided under the collective manifesto (Osore and McLean 2022).

In reflection on practice to date, we discussed the idea of innovation and how it shows up in their work. For Emma and Kenyatta, having come from professional roles in large government and art spaces, the ability to center Blackness in all aspects of their work has supported them on individual and collective levels. Too often, Black folks working in white spaces exert a great deal of their energy navigating and pushing against hostile systems. At its core, they defined innovation as rooted in their day-to-day relations

BLACKSPACE MANIFESTO

We are Black urban planners, architects, artists, activists, designers, and leaders working to protect and create Black spaces. Our work includes a range of activities from engagement and projects in historically Black neighborhoods to hosting cross-disciplinary convenings and events.

While what we do is very important, the way we do it is also critical. Acknowledging our triumphs, oppressions, aspirations, and challenges, we've created this manifesto to guide our growth as a group and our interactions with one another, partners, and communities.

We push ourselves, our partners, our fields, and our work closer to these ideals so we may realize a present and future where Black people, Black spaces, and Black culture matter and thrive.

CREATE CIRCLES, NOT LINES

Create less hierarchy and more dialogue, inclusion, and empowerment.

CHOOSE CRITICAL CONNECTIONS OVER CRITICAL MASS

Quality over quantity. Focus on creating critical and authentic relationships to support mutual adaptation and evolution over time.*

MOVE AT THE SPEED OF TRUST

Grow trust and move together with fluidity at whatever speed is necessary.*

BE HUMBLE LEARNERS WHO PRACTICE DEEP LISTENING

Listen deeply and approach the work with an attitude towards learning, without assumptions and predetermined solutions. Take criticism without dispute.

CELEBRATE, CATALYZE, & AMPLIFY BLACK JOY

Black joy is a radical act. Give due space to joy, laughter, humor, and gratitude.

PLAN WITH, DESIGN WITH

Walk with people as they imagine and realize their own futures. Be connectors, conveners, and collaborators—not representatives.

CENTER LIVED EXPERIENCE

Lived experience is an important expertise; center it so it can be a guide and touchstone of all work.

SEEK PEOPLE AT THE MARGINS

Acknowledge the structures that create, maintain and uphold inequity. Learn and practice new ways of intentionally making space for marginalized voices, stories, and bodies.

RECKON WITH THE PAST TO BUILD THE FUTURE

Meaningfully acknowledge the histories, injustice, innovations, and victories of spaces and places before new work begins. Reckon with the past as a means of healing, building trust, and deepening understanding of self and others.

PROTECT & STRENGTHEN CULTURE

Make visible and strengthen Black cultures and spaces to honor their sacredness and prevent their erasure. Amplify and support Black assets of all forms—from leaders, institutions, and businesses to arts, culture, and histories.

CULTIVATE WEALTH

Cultivate a wealth of time, talent, and treasure that provide the freedom to risk, fail, learn, and grow.

FOSTER PERSONAL & COMMUNAL EVOLUTION

Make opportunities to expand leadership and capacity.

PROMOTE EXCELLENCE

Amplify, elevate, and love Black vanguards and the variety of their challenging, creative, exceptional, and innovative work and spaces. Allow excellence to build influence that creates opportunities for present and future generations.

MANIFEST THE FUTURE

Black people, Black culture, and Black spaces exist in the future! Imagine and design the future into existence now, working inside and outside of social and political systems.

*This principle is derived from Adrienne Maree Brown's Emergent Strategy. *Shaping Change, Changing Worlds.*

We are grateful to the many individuals and organizations that inspired these principles.

FIGURE 13 BlackSpace Manifesto (BlackSpace Urbanist Collective 2019)

and decisions–i.e. fostering a healthy internal working environment while intentionally centering blackness across partnerships and procurement. Furthermore, they continuously leverage the manifesto to shape how they may design, pivot, or pause work, which they described as innovative in how that supports ongoing practice rooted in care and relationship-building.

On the flip side, one of their greatest challenges has been lack of technical knowledge and internal capacity, which I presumed to be a theme that would begin to run across all my interviews. Moving forward, they see themselves as an organization guiding and accelerating innovation for other Black organizations, groups, or movements. In doing so, they expressed aspirations to grow their team, though didn't set hard numbers on what it looked like. At its core, their priority was to preserve the intimacy that comes with working closely in a smaller group. As Kenyatta described,

"With only two full time and one part time staff, the lack of capacity sometimes can restrict your innovation. But are trying to balance and grow over this next year. Yet, then there may be a moment where the staff is so big, that the innovation becomes hard, because you need things to be standardized for people. So I think it's always going to get tricky but we hopefully will be able to navigate." - Kenyatta McLean (Osore and McLean 2022)

Lastly, another thread of the conversation focused on defining the role of urbanism and design in the macros sense.

Emma defined urbanist as "an umbrella term for people that seek to impact the built environment through diverse modalities and experiences" - Emma Osore (Osore and McLean 2022).

As she described, settling on the urbanism terminology felt more expansive and encompassing than defining themselves as technical planners, while still specific enough to their collective's vision. This thread of the conversation highlighted how terminology is important for accessibility to allow different participants to see themselves as shapers of the built environment, whether they may be a technical planner, a shop owner, or working in areas such as arts or education that all actively contribute to civic life.

Still, Emma emphasized how the term *urbanism* has its limits. She noted how in some cases it may be understood as a niche term and hard to explain, whereas BlackSpace also toyed with the language of *civic designers* to describe their practice. In this case, thinking about design more expansively from the level of social organization. Thus, seeing one's practice as a mission to design a future that builds improved social and physical infrastructure for the betterment of Black folks and thus our society in general.

INTERVIEW #2:

JIMA Studio

Interviewee	Ujijji Davis Williams (founder, principal)
Mission	JIMA Studio leverages landscape architecture and urban planning to help communities envision and build upon their futures.
Core Practice Areas	design services, community engagement, research and thought-leadership
Founded	Founded in 2021
Location	Detroit, MI
Current Size	1 full-time and currently hiring a second full-time staff
Business Structure	Limited Liability Company (LLC)
Website	jimastudio.com

Top **FIGURE 14** Screenshot during zoom interview (Davis Williams 2022)

TABLE 3 (Davis Williams 2022)

The second of my interviews was with Ujijji Davis Williams, founding principal of JIMA Studio which is a landscape architecture and urban planning studio based in Detroit, Michigan. The ethos of her work is rooted in the name. "Jima" comes from the Kwanzaa principle Ujima (ooh-jee-mah), which means "collective work and responsibility" (Davis Williams 2022). As Ujiji described, her practice centers on working collaboratively with others while also working toward projects that support accountability within the particular scopes of cultural placemaking[1] and environmental stewardship.

As I moved into my second interview, I wanted to be intentional about covering the same thematic area, though not dictating the flow and focus of the conversation. Building off my previous interview, I recognized that the conversation may flow in different directions depending on different people's skills and motivations, as well as how my own curiosities came through real time to dig into topics. I previously engaged with Ujijji in 2021 through a project led by BlackSpace, though this conversation was our first conversation just between ourselves. In my interview with Ujijji, I was particularly interested in connecting with someone whose path and business model had greater similarities with my own. While Ujijji is much further along in her career, we both worked in large AEC (architecture, engineering, construction) firms prior to starting our consultancies, and now lead our respective businesses with a focus on design services.

At the time of our interview, Ujijji was approaching her 1 year anniversary with JIMA, having founded the studio in July 2021 after making the jump from working for 10 years at Smith Group, a large design services consulting firm. We began by discussing how her previous working experience informed her transition.

"I had a positive experience there [Smith Group]. I learned a lot about the business of architecture, and design– including the do's, and don'ts. I became aware of things I thought it would make sense for me to emulate, and things that I would do differently. My reason for leaving, or really, for charting a path on my own was primarily based on the type of work" (Davis Williams 2022).

Through her current studio, she is finding joy in her agency to expand opportunities for collaboration–to work across a broad range of scales and with new types of partners and clients. For her, these opportunities are opening new dialogues to discuss ideas and build different methods of interdisciplinary teamwork. Ujijji felt that through JIMA Studio, she has been able to innovate and her approaches towards procurement

1. See appendix for definition of *placemaking*.

FIGURE 15 Renaissance of Hope Neighborhood Framework Plan; Detroit, MI; via jimastudio.com ("Renaissance of Hope Neighborhood Framework Plan" 2022)

FIGURE 16 Bailey Park Revisioning; Detroit, MI; via jimastudio.com ("Renaissance of Hope Neighborhood Framework Plan" 2021)

and collaboration. In doing so, she has been able to work across greater scales including projects with city officials and large design firms to community development corporations and grassroots organizers. For example, Ujijji mentioned venturing more into collaborations with regional farms, while in other parts of her practice partnering with large landscape firms where she can "shadow" and learn from their methods and processes.

While Ujijji's been working across project scales, she found that her work has become increasingly localized. This model of broad scales of design a localized focus has enabled her to build knowledge across different spaces that impact the built environment in order to bridge gaps in knowledge and approach to processes, in particular around the metro Detroit region.

Another topic that came to the forefront was how she is now able to embody her identity and values as a Black fully in her practice. While working in a larger, predominantly white firm, Ujijji found that over time she found herself at the center of a lot of diversity conversations that required extra labor to support work culture initiatives on top of her actual role as a designer. She believes deeply in ongoing advocacy for underrepresented groups in design, though pushes against (1) the tendency for such groups to have their contributions participation in the design field limited to identity politics, and (2) the tendency for underrepresented designers to be expected to contribute free labor to address harmful work environments.

"My response to that experience was to establish an ethos where DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] doesn't actually become something to plan around. It's already central to the work that is being done and it's core to the fabric of the studio" (Davis Williams 2022).

Ujijji described her work through the axis of three nodes: (1) physical design, (2) engagement, and (3) literature. While I had expected the first two, the focus on literature and pedagogy was something I had not thought to be given as much weight in one's practice. Though as we chatted, I gained further insights from Ujijji on how she viewed the importance of having that space to be able to think and talk critically about the work and contribute to larger discussions, a model she feels is unfortunately going by the wayside in modern practices. After publishing an article in 2018, she received greater reception than she had credited herself for, which really pushed her to continue to value critical thinking and leveraging her thoughts and voice as central to her evolving design work and process. From a business standpoint, research and pedagogy in many practices may go by the wayside because they can't be directly quantifiable by a project fee. Though literature and dialogue has great impacts to develop and innovate one's ongoing modalities of practice to be more innovative and impactful.

"There's not often a lot of time or moments of reevaluating the way we approach work. But the more you contribute pedagogy the more your support shifts in design approaches and lenses" (Davis Williams 2022).

Ujijji believes an ongoing practice to pause, reflect, and document has rich benefits not only for her own development but for broader contributions to the next generation of designers to be offered the insights and lessons from those in practice today.

While we chatted about the many upsides of her studio journey, it was also important to touch on the potent challenges working at a smaller scale. Firstly, the cost of basic overhead requirements can add up for a practice that is just trying to get off the ground. These may include things such as business registrations, licenses, software, and advisory services for taxes, contracts, and more. Furthermore, skimping on such services may save in the short-term, though still be costly in the long run like missing important tax breaks. As Ujijji stated,

"The learning curve is expensive" (Davis Williams 2022).

Beyond hard costs, one point Ujijji rose was how there is a fine line between experimentation and one's value and labor. She expressed how it can be very challenging from a business perspective to work on things that are experimental and iterative, when you are also trying to not devalue yourself and your time and your labor. The nature of service-based consulting work prioritizes scoping a project before it commences, which requires deeper levels of intentionality and trust between collaborators and clients to evolve and experiment in processes that may deviate from original plans. While firms across all scales experience this dilemma, a situation gone wrong hits harder at a smaller scale studio.

Looking forward as JIMA grows from 1 to 2 staff, Ujijji's been reflecting on the process of growth in order to find the balance between riding the wave of new opportunities while moving at a reasonable pace to not burnout. Furthermore, this growth process has also been a lesson to know when to seek help and support, which a skill useful both in an outside of the workplace. Her vision for JIMA is to grow to somewhere around 10 people, a number she felt expanded the studio's capacity as opportunities grow, while maintaining a nimble and collaborative atmosphere that can still foster a workplace culture of closeness and accountability.

Lastly, and most importantly, we discussed how it is important to prioritize the people behind the work. In her own case, founding JIMA was also largely motivated by Ujijji's desire to build a better work-life relationship where she set healthy boundaries and spent more time with her family, which she has done just that.

INTERVIEW #3:

Broad Community Connections

Interviewee	Dasjon Jordan (Executive Director)
Mission	BCC is a non-profit community development organization in New Orleans devoted to revitalizing Broad Street as a vibrant, equitable, and inclusive commercial corridor by promoting the health and economic, residential, and cultural development of its diverse surrounding neighborhoods.
Core Practice Areas	Catalytic real estate development, collective impact programming, commercial revitalization, planning and advocacy, community capacity building
Founded	Founded in 2008
Location	New Orleans, LA [Broad Street Corridor]
Current Size	1 full-time and currently hiring 1 full-time and 1 part time staff
Business Structure	Non-profit
Website	broadcommunityconnections.org

Top **FIGURE 17** Screenshot during zoom interview (Jordan 2022)

TABLE 4 (Jordan 2022)

The third of interview was with Dasjon Jordan, executive director at Broad Community Connections (BCC), a community development organization centered on catalyzing a vibrant, equitable, and inclusive Broad Street corridor in New Orleans, Louisiana. At the time of our interview, Dasjon was approaching his 1 year anniversary as the organization's executive director–though his involvement in the organization dates back 6 years prior when he first began as an intern in 2016.

Dasjon has been a good friend and collaborator for over five years. While this particular interview was held in similar format to all my other interviews, I also wanted to acknowledge that the conversation at large builds on ongoing conversations on our personal and shared career developments.

While the interview largely focused on Dasjon's work with BCC, I also ensured to acknowledge his larger practice which also involves his recent appointment as a city planning commissioner for the City of New Orleans, and his co-partnership in Roux collaborative, a consultancy that engages technical planning and design in a broader scope beyond the Broad Street corridor. As he described, working across these different spaces has allowed him to prioritize a hyper-local focus while incorporating opportunities to develop and learn through his practice across scales and localities.

Looking across his current practice, Dasjon emphasized how nonprofit stewardship requires a level of administrative and bureaucratic attention that is not as complex in consulting. Still, he constantly reminds himself to push against this structure to foster a dynamic organization. Furthermore, he has a board to lean on to oversee accountability. So while he is working day-to-day in a small capacity, there is a larger network of thinkers that contribute to the work.

Furthermore, Dasjon found that the non-profit structure steers towards a philanthropic funding structure that supports a model that drives more programmatic initiatives rather than just being a service-based organization. As such, there may be more ownership and longevity that comes in the non-profit work particularly when spearheading programs, initiatives, or physical developments that span over years. Still, there is still a level of flexibility and innovation required to operate within a philanthropic landscape that is often restrictive or unstable (i.e. the rush to fund Black organizations in the midst of the George Floyd protests, which has since dried up).

Comparative to other interviews, BCC was founded in 2008, prior to Dasjon's involvement. This context helped set the tone to understand how Dasjon viewed himself and his role within the organization's lineage. We discussed how there is an extra bit of personal motivation that comes in building the longevity of something that is a seed of your own. However, when you come into an existing institution, there becomes greater emphasis on how to sustain a small organization that lives outside of yourself.

"Currently I am navigating what it means to like to build an institution out of an organization that has existed for over a decade. And to create the foundation and structure that allows it to exist outside of you my image alone. [In doing so I am working towards] developing a structure that is conducive to a positive work culture so that as we hire more staff, that our internal environment reflects how we practice externally" (Jordan 2022).

As such, one of the most important factors of developing BCC's identity within the community is scaling up the team to speak knowledge and capacity. Currently, Dasjon has been going through executive coaching to support his own development as a leader as he looks to bring 1-2 new employees on in the coming months. As he reflected, "[In the small business space, they say there's a lot of work going from zero to one. But I also think there's a lot of work going from one to two" (Jordan 2022). Making this jump shifts the day-today nature of one's work to require more internal collaboration and communication rather than just staying on top of one's own project management and administration. In the midst of growing his staff, Dasjon also recognized the value collective knowledge building within a small organization, where staying small scale allows everybody to understand and touch part of the work in some capacity. Furthermore, as a leader his close proximity across all organizational functions allows home to understand and address issues that come up with swifter clarity.

While Dasjon develops his own leadership capacity, he is also emphasizing BCC as a platform for leadership development. Given the nature of the philanthropic landscape, funding for staffing is not always sustainable in the long run. As he described, "there's a short time horizon where we may have a staff person with us for no more than three years. Knowing this, I'm framing BCC as like a leadership institute, where we're preparing people to go out, have a structure and platform for addressing a problem" (Jordan 2022). In doing so, this approach may carry out the mission of BCC beyond the organization itself.

FIGURE 18 BCC collage; New Orleans, LA; via broadcommunityconnections.org ("About BCC" 2021)

Beyond our discussion on BCC's internal operation, we also dove into how the organization shows up and impacts the greater community.

Dasjon succinctly described BCC's mission as seeking to "build the power of community at different levels" (Jordan 2022).

This crosses over organizing for both residents and businesses alike, such as connecting businesses to funds to renovate their spaces, supporting long term homeowners who are being displaced, or designing imaginative public events and activations. BCC's agenda is designed to be fluid and evolving alongside the community needs, though there is a balance of being proactive versus reactive.

By default the nature of BCC's work is not fully design based, though it incorporates design as a core principle through the development of events, interventions, and especially communications. Dasjon particularly highlighted the importance of design as a critical and often overlooked component to effectively engaging and communicating with community members. We live in a society with increasing visual literacy where strong graphics can convey messages or initiatives in ways that "touch on people's nostalgic sensibilities, getting to what resonates and in doing so allowing them to see a bigger picture" (Jordan 2022).

For Dasjon, his big picture question always comes back to how we define standards for success (Jordan 2019). As he reflected, he is constantly grappling understanding measurable impact–for what and for whom? His approach blends a balance of qualitative and quantitative approaches towards organizing and advocacy crossing strategies of embedded engagement paired with data analysis and innovation. It is both necessary to contextualizes one's initiatives and the greater context to understand points of impact while also meeting reporting standards for funders in order to maintain and build ongoing investment in the work.

At the end of the day, Dasjon relishes at how the root nature of the work is how it is an immersive experience, stepping beyond the office space to not only support his community, but just be in community.

INTERVIEW #4:

Design Studio for Social Intervention (DS4SI)

Interviewee	Lori Lobenstein (Co-founder and Program Design Lead)
Mission	The Design Studio for Social Intervention is an artistic research and development outfit for the improvement of civil society and everyday life.
Core Practice Areas	Social interventions, writing and thought leadership, creativity labs, civic engagement, placemaking, events and programming
Founded	Founded in 2005/06
Location	Boston, MA
Current Size	4 full-time staff
Business Structure	Quasi Non-profit (Fiscally sponsored by a larger non-profit organization)
Website	ds4si.org

Top **FIGURE 19** Screenshot during zoom interview (Lobenstein 2022)

TABLE 5 (Lobenstein 2022)

The fourth of my interviews was with Lori Lobenstein, Co–founder and program design lead at the Design Studio for Social Intervention (DS4SI), a studio based in Boston, Massachusetts bridging design interventions, creative place making, research, civic events and engagement, and more in the effort of improving public life. Located in The Dorchester neighborhood of Boston, the studio prioritizes a localized focus, though they still worked on projects nationally and internationally. Their organizational scale has fluctuated over the years though currently they have 4 full time team members.

Lori is one of DS4SI's founders alongside Kenny Bailey and Rob Pegler who developed the studio during a mid-career fellowship at MIT's CoLab (formerly the center for reflective community practice) in 2005/06. Prior to DS4SI, Lori was actively working in girls and youth initiatives. Lori emphasized that her and Kenny's partnership as thinkers and creators dates far before the founding of the studio, nearly 30 years. As Lori described, the origins of the studio were "grounded in partnership with supportive thought leadership" to think together about design from different perspectives (Lobenstein 2022). Lori, herself, averted from labeling her own practice under a specific discipline though, upon my questioning, agreed that she would define the studio at large as urbanist given its overarching focus on improving city life, particularly public spaces through both hard and soft arrangements (Lobenstein 2022).

I have been a long fan of DS4SI's work and had attended a handful of their events and programs in the past. Additionally, I engaged with them as loosely in my previous work as a marketing coordinator facilitating parks proposal coordination. Though, this was my first time sitting down to have a chat about the grander sense of the work. I was particularly excited to dive into this discussion given DS4SI's longevity as a small organization for over 15 years. Prior to this point, all my interviews had been with new founders or new leaders within established organizations.

In reflecting on DS4SI's journey, Lori felt like the studio's core principles and goals have stayed consistent, through their practice have taken different shapes through different projects and partnerships. They've evolved alongside the broader civic landscape and political agendas across both practice and reactive approaches. She mentioned how several projects over the years could be identified as creative placemaking,[1] even before it was a buzzword in the urbanism field (Lobenstein 2022).

The studio's projects range across spearheading their own programs and initiatives, to collaborative initiatives, so service-based projects. Based on their involvement in many grant-based initiatives, I assumed they were a formal non-profit, though I learned they are not formally registered as such. Neither of the founders have ever had interest in

1. See appendix for definition of *placemaking*.

taking on the administration that comes with a formal registration so they've been practicing with the fiscal sponsorship of a larger 501c3, who they pay a 10% cut of all their profits to handle all the back-end administration, Human Resources, and other operational logistics. This setup requires a degree of trust with a fiscal sponsor though overall has worked well for DS4SI over the years since they've stayed small.

"We aren't our own nonprofit. We aren't our LLC. But we operate as a nonprofit, in terms of the ways that we can get grants and in terms of the ways that we can do contract work and grant projects" (Lobenstein 2022).

In going about this discussion, I wanted to shift a little bit from the general question list that I was working with in the beginning. My previous interviews had discussed themes around each organization's work and practice. Though moving forward, I was curious to dig more into specific projects or case examples that exemplified the themes we were discussing.

At DS4SI, intervention is in the name.

Lori defined social intervention as, "creating ways that people can engage with each other out of the sort of traditional norms that will allow people to build relationships and engagements with their people in their communities and new ways" (Lobenstein 2022).

In the larger sense, she views the practice as holding and building space for people to imagine better realities. While imagination is the root of change, we discussed how our civic and social infrastructure (i.e. just trying to survive and pay to live in a capitalist system) may suppress everyday people's capacity to imagine beyond their lived experience. As learned through years of community engagement, "There is a notion in civic engagement and civic design, that people are experts on their own experience. And so we started to realize that was shallow in a couple of ways... mainly the assumption that people just because people have experience that they have solutions, which is often not actually the case" (Lobenstein 2022).

To address this the studio approaches engagement work in a multitude of ways to build people's capacity for imagination. When asked about a specific project, Lori brought up The Grill project, interrogating social performance and our day-to-day engagements on the street. A focus on a preliminary gesture such as grilling someone on the street that catalyzes a whole other set of social violence both in youth and adult alike. What if we changed the way we look and engage each other as we walk down the street? The intention of this project was to go beyond the grill, but to foster a "different terrain for them to be thinking," where youth May then follow other social norms in our everyday lives and how they may be intervened (Lobenstein 2022).

Another project mentioned was the Public Kitchen, which helped to foster new social arrangements and ways that neighbors could engage with each other. While the public kitchen functions as a kitchen, it also opened up ways of people coming together and learning about their neighbors' skills and cooking and sharing recipes and bonding in certain ways that go beyond the primary function of a kitchen.

Across their work, they are often not alone and collaborate with a number of local partners and artists, primarily those who identify as BIPOC. Specifically for programming-based projects, DS4SI navigates their small scale by positioning themselves in a way where they can build a platform for artists and collaborators can then take the lead and steward such initiatives moving forward.

Left **FIGURE 20** The Grill intervention project; Boston, MA; via ds4si.org ("The Grill" n.d.)

Below **FIGURE 21** Public Kitchen creativity lab; Boston, MA; via ds4si.org ("Public Kitchen" n.d.)

Another segment of their work involves partnering with larger design consulting firms on city-led initiatives around civic planning and engagement, which brings its own strengths and weaknesses. The nature of this work may often navigate overarching bureaucratic structures and processes where everyone's time and emphasis is not being steered in the right direction. As a subcontractor, there are limitations to overarching influence though being at the table still has its impacts. DS4SI find their role important to push for more radical and experimental processes in formal spaces. Furthermore, the insights gained while working across large and small capacities informed a more well-rounded understanding of how to impact civic initiatives at different scales of impact.

Another challenge of working at a smaller scale was limitations on the reach of their research and through leadership. Over the years, the studio has developed research and writing to contribute their ideas and lessons to contribute to the advancement of aligned professions, most notably their book, ideas arrangements, and effects, in 2020. As Lori emphasized, "thought leadership is important in a variety of ways in terms of how it continues to shape and shift our own work and other people's work" (Lobenstein 2022).

Their small organizational scale, particularly small online presence, limited the ways in which they were able to touch broader audiences.

"There's so many ways that being little doesn't give us the capacity to really make sure that it gets in people's hands and that they can take it in the directions I want to" (Lobenstein 2022).

The timing of this interview was particularly timely as the organization is currently going through a strategic planning process to evolve their work and grow their team. As Lori mentioned, they are currently a team of 4 though aspire to grow to between 6 and 8. In their current capacity, the studio has focused on developing "temporary provocations" which help communities engage and think about something but not necessarily aiming for permanence (Lobenstein 2022). After prototyping and learning for 15 years, they hope to develop more permanent initiatives and infrastructure.

"We're looking to have more consistency so some of these productive fictions (interventions) can exist for longer periods of time, spurring multiple, simultaneous new arrangements. So, they start to play off of each other and also create more adjacent possibilities" (Lobenstein 2022).

While they will still hold to their provocative roots, they hope that they can grow their impact in new ways as they grow. In this sense, Lori envisioned how running simultaneous interventions or initiatives may build dialogue and insights within their group and the larger community to imagine and foster new realities.

INTERVIEW #5:

Civic Studio

Interviewee	Aron Chang (Co-founder and Co-owner)
Mission	Civic Studio co-creates bold ideas and solutions through storytelling, art, design, and community-based planning with diverse partners across sectors and issue areas. They serve as a place for learning and mentorship, civic dialogue, creative exploration, and co-creation.
Core Practice Areas	Multi-disciplinary projects that support learning and dialog on critical civic issues as well as community-based planning and design practices.
Founded	Founded in 2020
Location	New Orleans, LA
Current Size	8-10 people
Business Structure	Cooperatively-owned (registered as an LLC)
Website	civicstudio.coop

Top **FIGURE 22** Screenshot during zoom interview (Chang 2022)

TABLE 6 (Chang 2022)

My fifth interview was with Aron Chang, an urban designer and educator currently practicing as a co-founder and worker-owner at Civic Studio, a creative co-op based in New Orleans, Louisiana. Beyond Civic Studio, he also serves as a co-lead of the Water Leaders Institute. Overarchingly, Aron describes Civic Studio as bringing together different disciplines and interests and creative lenses through which to address systems change. Their interdisciplinary studio brings together folks from a range of backgrounds including design, planning, photography, researcher, landscape architecture, media, and more. Together, their coming together of multiple perspectives and skill sets allows the studio to move and collaborate across different spaces.

Prior to this interview, I had never met Aron (virtually or in person), though I had first become familiar with his practice through a talk at the Hindsight conference in 2019, and again in this thesis work from a personal recommendation. Going into this interview, I wanted to continue to steer the conversation alongside the potent conversations that came up rather than staying rigid in my questioning. Comparative to previous interviews where I had established relationships with folks in varying capacities, this conversation with Aron was our first engagement with each other. As such, I prioritized more time to understand Aron's background and story as it related to my research inquiry.

Aron comes from a background in liberal arts and architecture, and has been living and practicing in New Orleans since 2007 when he first came to work on post-Katrina building efforts. His early career was largely marked during the time he worked at Wagner and Ball, medium-sized design consultancy where he was primarily tasked with working on the Greater New Orleans Urban Water Plan. It was through this experience and his subsequent involvement on various resilience and climate adaptation projects that laid the foundation for his ongoing practice investigating our communal and systematic relationship to water, the environment, and infrastructure both in New Orleans and beyond.

His time spent working in an architecture office, particularly through the Urban Water Plan, deeply informed his understanding of the limitations of formal planning practices– particularly the realization that standard comprehensive plans are deeply misaligned with the contextual understanding of how different community forces shape or inhibit implementation.

For the Urban Water Plan, an internal analysis of the project team and collaborators showed that you had a greater chance of working on the team if you live in Rotterdam, Amsterdam than if you live in local neighborhoods such as the Lower Ninth Ward or Gentilly. This case highlights a larger issue of the lack of community inclusion and stewardship in city and neighborhood planning both in New Orleans and the profession

at large. Impactful planning and implementation require us to evolve who belongs in or out of decisions. To combat this, Aron's practice has incorporated a strong focus on "water literacy" – as in moving beyond technical language to communicate and relate water infrastructure, systems, and policies as they relate to our everyday lives (Chang 2022). In doing so, he believes building knowledge of our communal system supports greater community responsibility and stewardship.

Largely, we must also question what's in a plan? For Aron, he contextualized planning practice less than the rigid sense but as a medium of world building in storytelling. As he described,

"A plan is a story about what we're trying to get to, and who and the steps that we would need to take to get there. To me, that analogy is useful because then it raises questions about who wrote the story? Do we agree on the ending of that story? Do we believe it, though I didn't write it? Do I see myself in it? And then, what does that mean for the ability of that plan to galvanize action, or for me to connect with it viscerally and see myself as part of a collective?" (Chang 2022).

This notion is of greater importance to understand the deep subjectiveness of our social systems and structures. As such, it is important as an ongoing practice to reflect on one's role as contributing to the disruption versus enabling the continuation of systems. Here, he reflected differentiating planning and activism, discussing that "In planning practice, you are already affiliated with power. You are not an activist in your planning practice inherently by getting that contract, because you're safe enough at your firm to be hired on by a city to produce a plan with the city seal on it" (Chang 2022). This is not to say impactful work can't be done in this space, but really to acknowledge the limits of formal planning in that its adjacency to politics and power limits the radical possibilities of grassroots activism.

From here, I shifted the conversation to understand how Aron's background and reflections on his professional practice shaped the development of Civic Studio. While Civic Studio was founded in 2020, it was built out of an existing organization Aron co-led called Blue House. Blue House was started back in 2014 as a co-op designed to share space and resources with different expert thinkers. Over the years, the organization largely functioned as a co-working space where Aron was one of six to eight managers who would take on shifts managing the space, and then in exchange having free workspace. While their collective intentions were about sharing space with diverse practitioners and thinkers, the model struggled in a couple ways, mainly (1) it failed to generate to generate revenue for himself and his co-founders, to which co-ownership is only accessible to those who can afford to willing volunteer time without

compensation, and (2) memberships and rentals still proved to be too costly for many local residents across background to accesses and frequent the space. Naturally the co-working space shut down in 2020 during the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, which subsequently spurred a moment for reflecting on and restructuring a model that had already been on its last legs for some time.

The formation of Civic Studio sought to carry the same motivations around sharing resources and thinking, while flipping it to create a revenue generating side to focus on creative work that may be more sustainable over time, as well more as inclusive to different community members because the revenue model supports people to participate while being afforded to live and work. Aron emphasized that a focus on the formation of the people itself has been just as important, if not more important than a focus on the work they want to do. Through this experience, he reflected how,

"The co-op model has been a chance to relearn our basic instincts around business around decision making around how power is distributed, and how, and challenging ourselves to create and really rethink all the basic assumptions about who has capital, what that capital is worth, what different forms of capital are worth, and how to create capital, and how to build equity for members. Furthermore, how do we work collectively towards a model where creating multidisciplinary work pays the bills and isn't something only for the privileged with spare time and resources?" (Chang 2022).

FIGURE 23 Image via civicstudio.coop ("Civic Studio: Vision & Values" 2021)

Civic Studio is very much in its early stages, though Aron expressed excitement about the progress they have made to date. Currently, many folks are collaborating in a part-time capacity though they are starting to build a base of work on larger scales that will enable them to hopefully grow to 8-10 full time people in the next few years.

Civic Studio is founded on bringing together people from different lifestyles, training, and practices, believing in the "Beauty of the difference." One early challenge that arose from this was the commitment to the extra work required to develop a shared language. Another challenge was making co-ownership accessible. Under their cooperative model, each co-owner buys in for $750 and shares the same sweat equity responsibilities. For those who may be able to afford the upfront capital contribution, they're developed a forgivable loan fund.

A cooperative model also faces a handful of hurdles in legal registration and insurance requirements. State legislature, particularly in this case Louisiana, is not always conducive to cooperative ownership. As such Civic Studio is officially registered as a limited liability company (LLC),[1] and subsequently had to build out a layer of legal understanding within themselves beyond the formal registration. They had explored an alternative route of registering as an agriculture cooperative in states like California or Minnesota, though this route didn't show to be the most practical option. Furthermore, as a cooperative working across different projects, Aron emphasized that this has been costly to hold multiple types of insurance that are required on many contracts to mitigate potential liabilities.

Overall, Aron described Civic Studio's current moment as an ongoing space of experimentation and learning, though he embraces this state as never-ending. "The work of sustaining a co-op is ongoing. You can never learn enough about cooperative practices, collective decision making" (Chang 2022). As such, we concluded on the note that on the grander scale, all our practices exist within an ecology that is always changing, so it is impossible to assume any set standardization or stability. He closed out conversation in the words of Octavia Butler, "The only lasting truth is Change" (Butler 1993).

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1. See appendix for definition of *limited liability company (LLC)*.

INTERVIEW #6:

Hector Design

Interviewee	Damon Rich (co-founder and co-partner)
Mission	Hector is an urban design, planning & civic arts practice led by Jae Shin and Damon Rich. They work on designs for public places, neighborhood plans, and development regulations, trying to learn from traditions of popular education and community organizing to build collective understanding and action.
Core Practice Areas	urban design, planning, and civic arts
Founded	Founded in 2016
Location	Newark, NJ
Current Size	2 partners
Business Structure	Limited Liability Company (LLC)
Website	hectordesignservice.com

Top **FIGURE 24** Screenshot during zoom interview (Rich 2022)

TABLE 7 (Rich 2022)

My final interview took place with Damon Rich, who is a co-founder and co-partner alongside Jae Shin at Hector Studio, an urban design practice based in Newark, New Jersey. I came across Hector through my internet-based research,[1] where I stumbled across a recorded lecture by Damon and his studio partner Jae in 2019 at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. Of all the emails I cold emailed (folks outside my immediate network), Damon was the only person to follow though is participating in an interview so I was encouraged from the start just in his own willingness to have a zoom chat with a stranger. Though upon our beginning discussions prior to the interview, we identified the many points to which our networks and communities overlapped.

In my introductory email exchange to Hector, I had been using the terminology *micro urbanism practice*, though in our early exchanges Damon ensured to note that while Hector was a small organization, did not market themselves as micro urbanists. I appreciated this clarification, which helped me reflect on my own use of language. In many ways, this comment around organizational scale vs scale of impact served as a clear theme through our chat that ensued.

Of all the organizations I interviewed, Hector's practice was closest to working directly with city governments on what we may deem as traditional planning. In learning about their work, I was particularly excited to understand how their 2-person partnership could practice and compete with larger firms when working at a municipal scale. While on paper they are small, they hold a strong collective knowledge and capacity to steer processes and teams, which has deeply been informed by their prior work and collaborative experiences.

As Damon described, Damon and Jae have been long time collaborators, and thus came together around 2016 as "the product of us [Damon and Jae] deciding that we wanted to have like a more formal vehicle for us to collaborate across disciplines" (Rich 2022). Both of them have also navigated different spaces of design and bureaucracy, which informed their collective knowledge on civic systems. Jae comes from a background spanning art, architecture, and housing while Damon's journey has crossed architecture, municipal park planning, and nonprofit leadership as a founder of the Center for urban pedagogy in NYC. Both Jae and Damon also continue to teach and lecture alongside their current roles.

Damon emphasized his time spent across city government and non-profit development taught him valuable lessons about the opportunities and shortcomings for urban planning and design as it relates to politics, finances, administration, and more.

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1. See methodology for description of internet-based research

For the work he and Jay are doing now, Damon expressed,

"I would have been way more lost without that experience on the inside of an agency where I gained exposure to how things actually happen, and how things work their way through the system" (Rich 2022).

The name *Hector* was chosen with a particular intention. *Hector*, as identified in a lecture by Damon's partner Jae, is a verb meaning to "bully, intimidate, blow-beat, harass, torment, or threaten" (Shin and Rich 2019). To them, the profession must reconcile with its positionality and power, to which she emphasized "Urban Design, urban planning, and architecture all deal in the business of hectoring" (Shin and Rich 2019). The name in itself seeks to bring to light the messy processes that entangle how our cities, communities, and institutions come together. As such Hector seeks to address this challenge though building with roots in organized communities by connecting design choices to larger networks of accountability.

Damon highlighted how accountability starts with having a strong internal partnership, where he and Jae have built a strong clarity of their key interests and drivers. Beyond themselves, Hector has a network of collaborators they bring on at key moments for specific projects or contracts. Damon expressed curiosity about growing the team modestly, though this hasn't been their top priority, given their existing model is working well.

A key thread though their work involved maintaining a nimble and experimental mindset while working within and in proximity to civic government and adjacent institutions. As well, leaning into relationships beyond institutional arrangements. Damon sees his role as an urban planner and designer as a technical and resources ally to established community organizers.

At large, he is motivated to "disassemble technical planning expertise so that it may be more digestible by a broader public or constituency" (Rich 2022).

For the greater profession he also hopes for a stronger acknowledgment that we are constantly learning and adapting from a long legacy of tools and approaches that have been deployed to shape community design.

Despite being small internally, team building is not something Hector shies away from. Damon reflected how he felt that being a small operation had made their collaborative experiences more flexible, and thus allowing a greater depth of teamwork. Over the years, Hector has shifted from splitting their time across many projects to leading two main projects, those being, (1) The Warrendale & Cody Rouge Comprehensive Neighborhood Plan on the west side of Detroit, and (2) The Mifflin Square Park & Neighborhood Plan in South Philadelphia. In serving as the prime contractor on such

FIGURE 25 Mifflin Square Neighborhood Plan multilingual newspaper; Image via mifflinsquareplan.org ("Mifflin Square Park & Neighborhood Plan" 2022)

projects, Hector has taken on the responsibility of assembling teams, where they seek to bring together different partners and incorporate different initiatives that may not be traditionally practiced in municipal planning efforts. For example, Damon referenced developing Grow Detroit's Young Talent (GDYT), a federally funded summer youth employment program, where they partnering with the University of Orange to develop organize a Youth Urbanism Summit to galvanize young thinkers, as well as further partnering with Sit on It Detroit to teach youth woodworking and fabrication through designing benches for bus stops.

Through these projects, they are demonstrating their studio's ability to compete for municipal projects against large firms, and then hold the capacity to deliver while incorporating an experimental and intimate approach to how such projects traditionally take place. Damon emphasized how it is an, "ongoing challenge to run any kind of operation in a reflective way where you're consistently trying to learn from things and build [moving forward]" (Rich 2022).

As a small organization, they experience all the extremes of a project at a magnified scale. Damon noted that, "in my more reflective moments, I understand that each of these jobs I've had really takes a toll in some areas, and is so wonderful–a gift in others" (Rich 2022). Still, he lauds his appreciation for being able to collaborate in what he considers a less stressful working environment where he doesn't need to exhaust his daily energy navigating structured hierarchies within his own team.

SENSEMAKING

[*Discussion*]

V.

Overall, my interviews provided a number of rich discussions that sparked exciting connections between each conversation. As a micro practitioner myself, I found the exercise to be incredibly insightful to learn from other's motivations and journeys to date. There were multiple threads of the conversations that may unravel into new territories, though it is crucial to come back to my original question, "**what role do micro scale organizations that leverage design play within the urbanism field?**"

My original hypothesis was motivated by the belief that the modern landscape of micro organizations with integrated design are actively innovating practices, procedures, and values in the field. Upon general reflection from talking amongst a range of practitioners, my research has confirmed this to be true, to a certain degree. Though the value of this work is in understanding what this innovation looks like.

Starting out during my interviews, I was very interested in unpacking the terminology I was using–mainly the terms *urbanism* and *design*. These terms were both concepts that I view as unifiers across the studios and practitioners interviewed. While I had developed my own ideas through my literature review and working experience, I was curious how they landed with others. Coincidentally, my first interview was with BlackSpace Urbanist Collective, who have urbanism in their name. As shared in the findings, my Emma at BlackSpace described the use of *urbanism* as expansive enough to define multiple modalities of shaping the built environment, though never all encompassing (Osore and McLean 2022).

What I learned from this was the limits of how terminology can be inclusive for some and exclusive for others.

As I moved through the subsequent interviews, I brought up the terminology again but didn't receive as thorough feedback as I did though other lines of questioning. For example, Lori at DS4SI was in agreement to align the studio's work within the field of urbanism though wasn't committed to defining herself as an urbanist or any other specific label (Lobenstein 2022).

The same patterns emerged around my investigation of the word *design*. As I described in the introduction, this research aims to think expansively about the definition of what design means, mainly conceptualizing design as a way of thinking and process. Despite design being integrated across all organizations interviewed, only 4 out of 7 interviewees specifically identified their roles as designers. As such, early in my interviewing process I realized it was not of concern whether folks formally labeled themselves as designers, given I had already presumed each interviewee had some insights to contribute around design thinking. My interests steered towards understanding how design applied in different organizational models. Overall, I realized

that unpacking terminology was not necessarily the root of what I was investigating, and my priorities lay more in understanding the inner workings of organizations rather than how they described themselves on the outside.

Circling back to my literature review, the three key themes that structured my research were imagination, epistemology, and change. While I found that interviewee's associations with the "designer" title was not critical to my inquiry, the conversation around design as a conduit for imaginative visioning was evident across conversations. In one case, Dasjon at Broad Community Connections spoke on design as a powerful tool for community engagement in order to tap into people's nostalgic senses and to enable people to imagine a greater picture through the design of visuals of processes (Jordan 2022). At the Design Studio for Social Intervention, Lori expanded on this notion to describe how their organization's work in designing and prototyping interventions like a public kitchen supports community members to imagine new possibilities for civic infrastructure (Lobenstein 2022).

Beyond external impact, I found the theme of imagination was rooted in each organization's approach to work from an internal operational perspective. From the early stages of this research, I was intentional about seeking insights from organizations with different formal organizational models. On a practical note, each organization operates as a business and must formalize itself as such. Though at large, the variety of organizational models explored in this research were a direct reflection of how different founders brought their imaginations of work and practice to life in a real context.

A key trend was that each organization's formal model directly influenced its approach to work and general operational practices.

On one hand, nonprofits or quasi-nonprofits organizations (BlackSpace, Broad Community Connections, and DS4SI) were more heavily more heavily involved in programming-based initiatives because they're able to leverage grants, sponsors, and other pools of funding that support such types of work. Meanwhile, organizations that were for-profit (JIMA, Hector, and Civic Studio) offered more explicit design and other professional services. Service-based organizations relied less on fundraising dollars and therefore could benefit from less management and bureaucratic requirements. This is not to say that organizations operated in explicit polarities. Most interestingly, organizations that followed the most non-traditional models–those being DS4SI who are fiscally sponsored by a non-profit, Civic Studio who are an LLC functioning as cooperative, and BlackSpace who are a non-profit functioning as a collective–seemed to blur the lines the most between services and programmatic-based work (Chang 2022; Davis Williams 2022; Jordan 2022; Lobenstein 2022; Osore and McLean 2022; Rich 2022).

Understanding formal business models was important to contextualize how organizations sustain themselves over time.

Though the harms of our capitalist system are well-documented, access resources–money or otherwise–are a necessity for survival. This lesson particularly came up in my conversation with Aron at Civic Studio where he discussed how one organizational model, he had been involved in the past did not withstand time because it wasn't designed to sustain resources. Because the model was not financially sustainable, it relied on volunteer labor which then exhausted its human capital and capacity over time. As he expressed, Civic Studio's cooperative model is supporting its worker-owners to develop and re-imagine new relationships to capital (Chang 2022). While I didn't discuss financial specifics in any of the interviews, from the outside looking in, it seemed that each organization was sustaining its resources. Every organization was either comfortable in their current scale, or in the process of adding new team members.

A key lesson in this research, and life in general, is that you're only as strong as your foundation. In order for me to fully understand each organization I interviewed, I needed to understand the people behind the practice.

My decision to focus on each interviewees' background and personal development was motivated by my thematic focus on epistemological understanding as a crucial lens for analyzing and contextualizing information. As I confirmed though my interviewing process, each organization—particularly at the micro scale—was a direct reflection of the knowledge, experience, and motivations held by its leaders. Each interviewee emphasized the value of having previously worked in different contexts that helped build their foundational knowledge and network necessary to lead their own organization. In the case of Damon at Hector Design, he emphasized that if he didn't go through the journey of working in city government and nonprofits, "way more lost without that experience on the inside of [another] agency" (Rich 2022).

Beyond professional knowledge, another key force is personal identity. It is important to note that every organization I included in this research is 50% or more led by a woman or person of color. This was a very intentional context, given that I seek to elevate traditionally marginalized voices in all aspects of my work. As a Black woman, I believe this to be my natural responsibility—a tradition that has been established by many Black women writers and thinkers that came before me (Hill Collins 2022; Brown 2017; hooks 1991). In my interviews, I did not specifically question how individuals' identities informed the work though it came up naturally though several conversations. Urbanism, planning, design, and other related professions are still heavily dominated by white

male leadership–as is the case for many industries in the United States. It's oftentimes rare or non-existent for large organizations to be led, or collectively encompass diverse identities and representation. As a result, anyone who is not a white male is often subject to traditional workplaces where their identities exist on the margins of the established cultures and ethos of practice. As a result, anyone who ever enters such spaces is already tasked with the labor of compartmentalizing one's identity to be accepted within a workplace culture, which wears one's being over time.

Personally, the root of my motivation to begin my own practice was to build a space to feel freer and more expressive in my work–which was a similar case theme for others. Ujijji at JIMA Studio, who also identifies as a Black woman, also spoke on how she is able to embody her identity though all lines of her current design practice, whereas working at a large design firm slowly pigeonholed her into a position where her identity became overly centralized to her contributions which took away from her ability to grow simply as a design practitioner (Davis Williams 2022). My findings reinforced that leaders in micro organizations felt their current models of practice gave them the agency to express their identities, their missions, and also reinforce a healthy work-life balance.

Connecting back to my research themes, the last which I have yet to discuss is the topic of *change*. First, I found in my interviews that participants responded more directly to my used of the word *innovation* when trying to understand how certain processes or project contributed to urban impact over time. As such in my discussions I used the words *change* and *innovation* interchangeably, with a shared interpretation of developing new modalities of practice that shaped the urban environment in a positive way.

Furthermore, in my early conceptions of this research I was motivated to develop clear examples and cases of how micro organizations were contributing to innovation in urbanism practice. Though as my research developed, I quickly realized that this notion of innovation is a lot more difficult to specifically identify and quantify through the scope of my research angle. In cases like Broad Community Connections, Dasjon discussed processes for collecting and documenting feedback from community members involved in the organization's programs or initiatives (Jordan 2022)–though I didn't dig further into analyzing and measuring such feedback during this interview discussion or any others. As I raise in my conclusion, there are potential avenues of this research to investigate more measurable case examples of through single projects or initiatives, though this angle was not feasible to explore in this study.

Overall, the theme of *change* showed up in the nuance of how my interviewees described the ongoing journey sustaining micro organizations over time. After all, an

organization may create impact in a single project, though the real impact comes with repeatedly contributing to work in alignment with a sustained mission.

Going back to my original question, a key thread is the ways in which scale impacts organizations from internal operations to external impact. All interviews referenced in some capacity how their organizational models operated in a flexible and experimental way. This nature comes as a benefit or challenge, though it seemed to be a default requirement to learn to adapt an organization alongside a constantly changing world.

On one hand, a flexible and experimental ethos provides the breeding ground for imaginative approach to practice, where new ideas, processes, and projects may be developed.

This was best epitomized by Lori at DS4SI, who described their mission as "holding a space that embodies the world that we want in such a way that it really gives people the scaffolding and infrastructure to imagine something." Also given the micro scale, all practitioners within organizations were in the range of vision to see and understand all facets of the work and the business model itself, which may allow for more clarity in decision-making.

On the other hand, flexible and experimental conditions may lead to a number of challenges, such as fluctuations in capacity and finances.

While adaptation takes place in business across scale, it may happen more rapidly in a micro organizational environment where a single project or change in a single team member may shift dynamics more significantly in proportion to the organizational scale.

Though there may always be an experimental nature to small organizations, some stability comes over time as an organization develops its internal management as well as grows experience and relationships with collaborators and clients. As emphasized in my interview with BlackSpace, every project or initiative does now always require reinventing the wheel, and therefore adapting a prior process or approach may bring new levels of impact in a new context (Osore and McLean 2022). As knowledge and trust grows over time, this may open new insights avenues for experimental approaches of adaptation.

One thing I founds surprising was that organizational scale did not limit scale of impact to the degree as I originally assumed through my own journey.

Personally, as a young entrepreneur starting my business at age 25, my age and experience has sometimes limited my aspirations to be involved in some projects, for right now. Though, I realized though my interviews with practitioners, who on average

had over 10 more years of working experience than myself, that my own assumptions had more to do with one's depth of professional experience than organizational scale. More specifically, I was encouraged to learn how micro organizations were able to collaborate on large scale initiatives such as planning or design initiatives with municipalities. This was mentioned for organizations that to-involved themselves in service-based work, including JIMA Studio, DS4SI, and Hector Design, who have collaborated on large projects as a subcontractor to large design firms that serve as the prime contractor to municipal clients (Rich 2022; Lobenstein 2022; Davis Williams 2022). Furthermore, Hector Design, has grown to serve as the prime contractor of a couple of municipal-led neighborhood based projects in Philadelphia and Detroit, despite their studio only being two people (Rich 2022). Given that urbanism is inherently a collective action, capacity to work at larger scales can always be built through external collaborations or project-specific contractors. While I have provided these examples, it is important to note that working at the municipal scale is only amongst many ways to gauge scale of impact.

Looking back internally, all organizations emphasized that as they looked towards the future, maintaining a smaller scale was a top priority. More notably, at the start of this research I had capped the organizational size at 10 people to be labeled as micro.

All organizations I interviewed, with the exception of BlackSpace, described their desire to not grow beyond 10 people, whether such projections were just realistic based on capacity or more motivated by a desire to maintain an intimate and nimble working environment.

Even though BlackSpace envisions how they may grow beyond 10 core people in the future, they also emphasize maintaining a size that didn't get too large (Chang 2022; Davis Williams 2022; Jordan 2022; Lobenstein 2022; Osore and McLean 2022; Rich 2022).

In my interview with Dasjon at Broad Community Connections, he emphasized how working in a small context fosters a space of ongoing reflection and accountability (Jordan 2022). On the topic of reflective practice, another facet that was highlighted in a couple of organizations' models was the importance of contributing to research and thought leadership, that being the expression of ideas, research, and other reflections through writing or other forms of media. Most importantly, participating in research and thought leadership may be an avenue to step beyond an insular working space and contextualize one's practice in the greater field. As someone who is going through this very process in writing this thesis, I have already recognized the deep value in contextualizing and reflecting on my own journey of practice and look forward to how it shapes my direction moving forward.

CHALLENGES OF MICRO ORGANIZATIONS

While I have discussed the encouraging facets of micro organizations, they are not without their caveats. First, practicing in a perpetually experimental and entrepreneurial environment fuels some, but not others who function best with more organizational stability. One of the biggest challenges that micro organizations face is limitations on capacity to balance the demands of leading projects and initiatives while managing key administrative responsibilities.

Working in a small group inherently limits the organization's ability to successfully lead projects or initiatives of a certain scale that require a larger internal team.

Furthermore, juggling work and administration may often leave limited capacity for research and thought leadership efforts, despite it being highlighted as an important priority for reflection and development. Even when research is developed, micro organizations may be challenged to spread their work to larger audiences, as in the case of DS4SI who aspired to reach broader audiences with their book *Ideas Arrangements Effects*, though were limited by the extent of their network (Lobenstein 2022).

Administrative responsibilities, particularly in the nonprofit world, also take up a significant amount of time (Osore and McLean 2022; Jordan 2022). These responsibilities include tasks like bookkeeping, invoicing, contracting, scheduling, board management, and more. Even when some tasks can be outsourced, there is still a baseline capacity required to manage administrative oversight. If an organization's administration is not properly handled, it is highly unlikely to be sustainable.

Out of all the interviewees I spoke to, no one had any formal academic business training. Each organization was tasked with tackling the ongoing learning curve of business operations, which is oftentimes costly. Beyond my sample pool of organizations, I would assume the absence of business training to also be a case for many micro organizations in urbanism—though further research would be necessary to confirm or refute this claim.

One major business challenge for newer organizations is establishing effective rates according to projected project scopes and timelines. Particularly for service-based work, rates are most often set before project commencement so for newer organizations, or organizations experimenting on new processes, they run the risk of financial losses from underestimating labor required to effectively complete an agreed scope of work. This topic came up in my discussion with Dasjon at Broad Community Connections, when he touched on his own challenges of establishing financially

supportive project fees and scopes in his consulting work prior to his current position (Jordan 2022). Furthermore, Ujijji at JIMA Studio expanded on the topic of building a financially sustainable model, particularly knowing how to set different billing rates for different types of projects and clients. This approach was important to strike a balance between collaborating on larger projects that may scale one's impact while also being financially supportive, while also making the time for community-based initiatives that aren't as profitable but they contribute value to the development of one's mission and practice in other non-monetary ways (Davis Williams 2022).

Furthermore, necessary organizational and administrative costs may stack up, such as business registration fees, insurance, and computer program licenses, and subscriptions for other applications (Davis Williams 2022; Chang 2022). When asked about the challenges of administrative costs, Aron especially emphasized how insurance regulations are a hindrance to organizations like Civic Studio that are working across different disciplines in a small scale. As he explained, insurance is based on classifying professional activities, whereas, "if you're actively are trying to do a bunch of different kinds of projects, then insurance is harder—it's going to cost more because there's more kinds of liability" (Chang 2022).

These are just to name a few potent challenges of micro organizations, though I imagine there are many more that did not surface in my particular conversations.

LIMITS OF RESEARCH

In light of everything that I have discussed, there are a couple areas of this research that still feel undeveloped. First, I return back to one of my earlier statements in that all the interviewees that contributed to this research were in varied capacities connected to my existing professional network.

I would like to reiterate that this research speaks to only a fragment of micro organizations in the urbanism field, and therefore must not be interpreted to speak definitely on the entire professional landscape.

Should another researcher conduct this same process, they may find similar or perhaps contrasting insights.

The pool of interviewees that participated in my study were all based in the East and Central United States. Therefore, I feel I may be missing a broad swatch of voices from practitioners in regional contexts that are not included in this analysis. At the start of my research, I had ambitions to include perspectives from a broader landscape, though this became inhibited due to time constraints. Furthermore, my greater ambitions sought to also incorporate international perspectives, which may offer richer insights and comparisons from perspectives of practitioners operating in different social, political, and cultural contexts. Being that the United States constitutes such a multicultural and immigrant population, I firmly believe that learning beyond our national context will help inform how to design a more inclusive future. Beyond regional contexts, I may have also gained further understanding from speaking to practitioners who led their own organizations in the past, but have since dissolved the business. While estimates differ, it is commonly understood that the majority of business organizations fail (Carter 2021). As such, learning from an organization that failed to sustain itself may provide deeper insights on the shortcomings of micro organizations.

Second, the majority of my focus for this research was focused on the internal workings of organizations, and is limited to understanding how such organizations are perceived and impact those outside of themselves. I realized early in my research that I couldn't understand the impact of any work on the outside if I didn't actually understand the foundation of an organizations' internal workings. Thus, I could only cover so much in 1-hour interviews. To better contextualize organizational innovation, I believe the research may be further developed through a follow-up case-study approach to investigating specific projects over organizational models. My considerations for further research are expanded on in my conclusion.

Third, an area that I feel may be a missed opportunity was a focus on the role that technology plays in organizational models. As a young person (age 27 at the time of

this research), the prevalence of technology is something I take for granted though the more I speak with people even just ten years older, the more I realize how much technology has rapidly shifted working conditions in a short space of time. In particular, the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated remote or hybrid working conditions (Parker, Horowitz, and Minkin 2022). I believe there may have been valuable conversations in my interviews had I questioned the difference between working collaboratively in remote environments versus physical office or other spaces. Beyond collaborative impact, rent or mortgage is a micro business's highest expenditure other than wages and benefits (Brooke 2018). Raising the topic of work space costs may have provided further insights on the barriers for sustaining micro organizations.

Lastly, this research process taught me to let go of the idea of a unified vision for innovation. I am continuing to grapple with my understanding that innovation in the philosophical sense is inherently subjective. Diverse sources of knowledge thus shape diverse ideas of innovation. While each organization interviewed may define themselves as seeking to make a positive social impact, each carries its vision for what that looks like. The lesson here is positing innovation through the lens of process rather than outcomes. Therefore, practicing intentionality in relationships over time that help us understand, relate and work better with each other.

CONCLUSION

VI.

There’s no single answer that will solve all of our future problems. There’s no magic bullet. Instead there are thousands of answers at least. You can be one of them if you choose to be.

— *Octavia Butler*
(*Buter 2000*)

As I reflect on this research, my conclusions guide me to contextualize how micro organizations that leverage design contribute to a larger ecosystem. While every organization carries its own nuance, my findings lead be to believe that micro organizations serve to experiment and prototype modalities of practice while larger organizations serve to implement and scale tested models. Within the field of urbanism, I would argue that there would be a lack of innovation in the way that practice takes place without micro organizations. In this alternative reality, there may be a perpetual reinforcement of harmful patterns and systems without any space to step out of regimented patterns. I believe that medium and large organizations do possess the ability to scale innovative things to a point of larger impact, though it's challenging for such organizations to prototype those approaches. Medium and large organizations may contribute to innovation through their increased capacity and resources, though face difficulty around conceptualizing new modalities of practice and value in an established group culture. That's where micro organizations come into play as the instigators and experimenters within the ecosystem. Furthermore, design thinking contributes to this concept as an addition layer that reinforces experimentation and iteration.

At their core, micro organizations serve to create different ways of practice that haven't been traditionally standardized. They offer impactful, effective, and creative foundations for the multitude of ways in which we can engage and work within our urban environment.

This is not to say innovation is exclusive to micro organizations, but rather to emphasize that it comes more naturally for organizations at this scale. As such, instigators are essential for any type of change and development within a larger ecosystem.

Though micro practice contributes to a larger ecosystem, it cannot sustain the ecosystem on its own. We must value the contributions of critical thinkers and socially mission-driven people working across different positions of practice and social infrastructure. Intervention is necessary across all scales to create systematic change. What's most important is that we all understand our agency within our role, so that at each crossroads, decisions are well informed by and understanding of the larger picture.

RESEARCH IMPACT

While this research serves to address my overarching question, I believe its real value lies in the endless threads that folks can take from this research and apply in different contexts. At large, my mission for this research is to support micro organizations in urbanism to provide lessons and insights to better understand their positionality

and experiences, while continuing to developing new modalities of practice in the future. Beyond existing micro organizations, I also aspire for this research to be highly beneficial to people that aspire to found their own micro organizations who may be curious to learn about the opportunities and challenges that such organizations face in regards to their practices, missions, and operations. Beyond the micro scale, I believe that this research contributes to the greater urbanism field to advance dialogues around the importance of understanding organizational models in order to understand how to connect aspirational visions for our urban futures to that day-to-day work required for such visions to take shape.

As showcased across my interviews, every organization carries its own nuance and approach to how it manifests its mission and contributes to urban change. As a micro organizational practitioner myself, this process was incredibly reflective to understand my own journey and what values I prioritize moving forward. These reflections will develop over time, though in the moment my main personal reflection is to continuously prioritize the importance of work-life balance, thus to develop a model moving forward where my own self-development as a person and that of my collaborators is a foundational value.

As much as this process was reflective for me personally, it also offered a space of reflection for my interviewees—a comment specifically noted by Emma and Kenyatta at BlackSpace at the end of our discussion (Osore and McLean 2022). I hope that for all interviewees, the discussions offered an opportunity to verbalize and document their own journeys at a specific moment in time. Perhaps ten years down the line, they may each read back on their respective interview summaries and find it helpful to contextualize their own journeys over the course of time. This reflection has reminded me of the importance of how research processes may be supportive for both the researcher and participants alike.

FUTURE RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT

Looking forward, I see many avenues in which this research may develop further. One avenue may be diving further into case studies of specific processes and projects within each organization I interviewed. For each of my hour-long interviews, I was focused on understanding the basics of each organization's history and model. When specific projects came up in a discussion, I was only able to gain a glimpse of how such projects aligned with an organization's mission without derailing the entire conversation. To develop this research further, follow-up discussions with each organization may focus more on the nuance of specific projects are approached, how certain decisions are made, or certain processes are developed. This additional inquiry may provide deeper

insights in understanding as to how innovation takes place from internal practices to project output.

Beyond a deeper dive into my existing interviewees, further research may also involve speaking to perspectives adjacent to small organizations, such as community partners, clients, or other organizations they work with. For example, what is a municipal leader's perspective on working on projects with micro organizations versus larger firms? Such conversations may provide more complex and unbiased insights on project collaborations from different perspectives other than micro organizations.

A different avenue this research may take is a broader survey of interviewees. I feel that my survey of organizations that met my key parameters (micro-organization, leveraging design, and adjacent to urbanism), can be more expansive beyond those included in this research. To a degree, there was a level of safety that went into the organizations who I interviewed—specifically in that each organization had at least one leader who received training via an academic department that specifically deals with the topic of urbanism (urban planning, architecture, urban studies, landscape design), through either a formal degree or professional fellowship. To be more inclusive in my analysis, this research may greatly benefit from the perspective of micro-practitioners who are contributing to the urbanism field without any adjacency through their academic training. This may include, artists, software developers, journalists, and more. To my own credit, I did reach out to some organizations who would push the margins of my parameters, though unfortunately did not hear back or was not able to coordinate an interview.

This reflection also aligns with my own personal motivations and aspirations for this research, mainly to see it developed outside of the academic context. I do believe there were valuable merits in how this thesis process supported me to establish a foundation for developing my thoughts and self-discipline. Though at the end of the day, my ideation still had to be communicated and presented in a format that is validated by the academy. As a result, my reflections on this process lead me to believe that there are certain parts of my brain and creativity that were untapped in the way I've developed this entire body of work. Should I develop this research further, I would aspire to adapt it though different mediums (i.e. web, visual, audio) that may potentially reach different audiences. As well, I would seek a more collaborative process rather than operating in an isolated space of thought development. In light of all my conclusions, I am proud of how this research has developed and I look forward to the conversations and connections it may bring in the future.

APPENDIX

VII.

A. Definitions

Terminology

For the terms ***micro***, ***design***, and ***urbanism*** see page 9 for a description of how each word is used in the context of this research.

For an elaborated discussion on the definitions of ***urbanism*** and ***urban planning***, see subsection "Urbanism vs Planning" starting on page 18.

For a discussion on ***design***, see subsection "Imagination" starting on page 24.

Other key terms referenced in this writing:

Lived Experience

Personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people. It may also refer to knowledge of people gained from direct face-to-face interaction rather than through a technological medium ["Definition of Lived Experience" 2022].

Intersectionality

The complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups ["Definition of INTERSECTIONALITY" 2022].

Positionality

Positionality is the social and political context that creates your identity in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability status. Positionality also describes how your identity influences, and potentially biases, your understanding of and outlook on the world. ["What's Positionality?" 2022].

Placemaking

Placemaking means creating places and focuses on transforming public spaces to strengthen the connections between people and these places. Placemaking is a process centered on people and their needs, aspirations, desires, and visions, which relies strongly on community participation ["What Is Placemaking?" 2021].

Business Structures

Limited Libility Company (LLC)

An LLC, or a limited liability company, operates essentially as a corporation, sole proprietorship, and partnership all in one. An LLC affords its members with limited liability as they cannot be held personally liable for the company's debts ["LLC vs. Nonprofit: Everything You Need to Know" 2022].

Non-profit

A nonprofit organization is established to meet certain tax exemptions and serve the public interest. All assets of a nonprofit must be either reinvested into the organization, given to the public, or given to another charity. Should the nonprofit not meet the needs of the general public, its tax exemption benefit will be taken away ["LLC vs. Nonprofit: Everything You Need to Know" 2022]

Cooperative (Co-op)

Cooperatives are businesses owned by "member-owners". Co-ops are democratically controlled by their member-owners, and unlike a traditional business each member gets a voice in how the business is run. Services or goods provided by the co-op benefit and serve the member owners. Contrary to popular belief coops are not non-profits, and do aim earn profits. Earnings generated by the cooperative benefit the member-owners. ["What Are Cooperatives?" 2022]

Fiscal Sponsor

A fiscal sponsor is a nonprofit organization that provides fiduciary oversight, financial management, and other administrative services to help build the capacity of charitable organizations and projects. ("Fiscal Sponsorship for Nonprofits" 2015)

B. Organizations List

The following table includes all organizations that were identified throughout this research.

Organization Name	Website	Included in preliminary analysis?
300.000 Km/s	https://300000kms.net/	
A+A+A	https://www.aplusaplusa.com/	
BlackSpace Urbanist Collective	https://www.blackspace.org/	X
Borderless Studio	https://www.borderless-studio.com/	
Broad Community Connections	https://www.broadcommunityconnections.org/	X
Cadaster	https://cadaster.us/	X
Cave Bureau	https://www.cave.co.ke/	X
Civic Studio	https://www.civicstudio.coop/	
Claudia Carmenchan	http://claudiacarmenchan.com/	X
Creative Urban Alchemy	https://cuadesign.com/	X
CultureHouse	https://culturehouse.cc/	
Dem Journal	https://www.deemjournal.com/	X
Derive Lab	https://derivelab.org/	
Design Trust Chicago	https://www.designtrustchicago.org/	X
DS4SI	https://www.ds4si.org/	X
Ella LA	http://www.ella-la.com/	X
Grayscale Collaborative	https://www.grayscalecollaborative.com/	
Hector Design	https://hectordesignservice.com/	X
Here LA	https://www.here.la/	X
Hive Public Space	https://www.hivepublicspace.com/	X
Innes Associates Ltd.	https://www.innes-design.com/	
Intelligent Mischief	https://www.intelligentmischief.com/	X
JIMA Studio	https://www.jimastudio.com/	X
Landing Studio	http://www.landing-studio.com/	X

Organization Name	Website	Included in preliminary analysis?
Limbo Accra	https://www.limboaccra.online/	X
Living Space Project	https://livingspaceproject.com/	
Liz Ogbu	https://www.lizogbu.com/	X
Marc Normal	https://marcnorman.net/	
Migrants Bureau	https://www.migrantsbureau.com/	
NewLab	https://newlab.com/	
Philip Barash	https://www.philipbarash.com/	X
Resolve Collective	https://www.resolvecollective.com/	X
State of Place	https://www.stateofplace.co/	
Studio Side Project	https://studiosideproject.com/	X
Studio Zewde	https://studio-zewde.com/about	X
Studioful Design	https://www.studiofuldesign.com/	
Superflux	http://superflux.in/	X
Terrirorial Empathy	https://www.territorialempathy.com/	X
Territory Chicago	https://www.territorychicago.org/	
Theaster Gates	https://www.theastergates.com/	X
Third Sphere	https://thirdsphere.com/	
University of Orange	https://universityoforange.org/	
Vora	http://www.vora.cat/	
Waterblock Global	https://www.waterblockglobal.com/	X
You Are the City	http://www.youarethecity.com/	X

For additional references, see the BIPOC STUDIOS Database
(*"BIPOC STUDIOS," 2022*)

C. List of Figures

D. List of Tables

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Thank You!