Vibrant Spaces Podcast - Baltimore Ep 2

**Emily Craven:** [00:00:00] This is Vibrant Spaces. A show about placemaking, activating and connecting city spaces for the communities you serve.

**Tim Souza:** Good day everyone and welcome back to the Vibrant Spaces podcast. I am your host Tim Souza and this is my incredible co host Emily Craven. Say hello to the people, Emily. Hello people. Good job. So today I'm excited because we have been spending our time in Baltimore and we're going to get to spend some more time in Baltimore today, specifically looking at Downtown Rise and How they collaborate in this very fascinating next level way as a community, and they truly are specialists in community engagement.

**Emily Craven:** Have I told you, Tim, about the Trojan horses?

**Tim Souza:** I [00:01:00] don't think you have. Are these the ones that there was this girl and these two boys were fighting and then a lot of people died a long time ago?

**Emily Craven:** Yeah, no, you do not have a friend in horse. That's not, no, that's, that's not what I'm referring to.

Uh, although I'm sure there's plenty of place making things that you can learn from ancient Greek Trojan war dynamics. Uh, no, like you, cause that reminds me about project that I came across that was all about radical like community empowerment. It was called the Trojan horse project. It was a project out of West Palm Beach in, in Florida.

**Tim Souza:** So Achilles visited West Palm Beach and did a raid. on the city. That's what you're, that's what you're going to do.

**Emily Craven:** No I think that the idea about the Trojan horse, like holding secrets, right. I think is the idea behind that. So they wanted to radically encourage community engagement and [00:02:00] empowerment into where the city was going.

And a lot of the time that happens in like surveys and a pop up tent at a food market where we ask you questions and no, they at West Palm Beach, they were like, Nope, we have better ways of doing this, of having community engagement particularly of young people. They wanted young people's voices in the vision of West Palm Beach.

And they wanted, elderly and all that sort of thing. So what they did was they partnered with a Finnish architect to do a project where they Initially ran a whole bunch of workshops with school children where they talked about what were their visions and hopes and feelings for the future.

And they got them to design these horses and they literally took the drawings of children and fabricated these horses into 6 foot tall steel. Rollable Trojan horses. And [00:03:00] yes, so

**Tim Souza:** These things were not like tiny

**Emily Craven:** properly welded fabric. They were decorated, Tim. They had like, necklaces and please tell me one

**Tim Souza:** had wings and a unicorn horn.

**Emily Craven:** I don't think so. I don't think so. But, the idea behind that was that they put them on wheels and then they rolled. Each of these, I think it's eight, I think it was eight horses through the streets of West Palm Beach. And they, and West Palm Beach has a lot of minorities in different enclaves around the downtown area.

And so each of these horses tried to hit those enclaves on their little route.

**Tim Souza:** Oh, interesting. Down to down. So they had

**Emily Craven:** little shepherds. There were people like who were shepherding, and it didn't happen in a day, it happened like across multiple days where they were just like slowly shepherding these horses like down the street.

And then people would come across them and they'd be like what are you?

**Tim Souza:** Why do you shepherd [00:04:00] a giant child strong down the street

**Emily Craven:** yeah, exactly. Uh, and so they were given postcards and they were asked, what are your dreams? For the city and your place in the city. And so they would write them on those postcards and then they would put them in.

And so they knew at what point on the route, all of these. These dreams were dropped in at what time. And so at the end of their route, they all headed basically into downtown and they went to city hall and then they delivered the dreams of the city to the mayor.

**Tim Souza:** Nice.

**Emily Craven:** And so it seems like a PR stunt.

But the idea behind that was that they then cataloged all of those dreams. They then ran it through systems like chat GPT, and then they pulled out core thematic things that people were concerned about, interested about, wanted to think about. And so they had. Oh, like things like [00:05:00] climate change to gathering spaces to community connectedness, um, to practical things like, stormwater drainage and like all of those kind of, like it ran the gamut.

Right. Like one of the postcards. Yeah. Yeah. One of the postcards was like a kid who said that they wanted to be a part of Paw Patrol. Like, so, Obviously, when you're getting postcards from a whole bunch of different people but they took those postcards and they essentially categorize them and then the most frequently mentioned terms, they then formed eight categories.

of the groups essentially where they assigned a non profit partner who dealt in that kind of thing to then almost host like a pop up where they had this pop up village with these eight different stations and they all had the postcards from those people there. And then they they then got people to engage with what were written on the postcards.

What did they think about these things? And so you'd have grandmothers turn up with children and, they would have a family. Cook [00:06:00] style meal at these pop up events and so they would build cultural things around them. I think that they're building like a recipe book based out of all of the different communities.

And so they're using it basically as a way to guide their planning of what is important and what people want to see out of the city, the downtown association for the next 20 years.

**Tim Souza:** Wow. What a way to gather people literally in the streets for community engagement. I think of that. Yeah, and I actually kind of like that it's analog and not just like an app, right, because it forces people out of their homes into the city that they're going to comment on

**Emily Craven:** yeah, and they, but they asked a very open ending question as well.

They weren't like, What do you want to see improved? Where do you hope the city will be in 50 years? They, their question was very specifically, what are your dreams for the city? Because it's open enough to be like, how do you see yourself in the city? Where do you hope to be with the city?

Like it, it having that [00:07:00] openness. means that you get a much more robust set of answers that are definitely in a much more positive frame of mind with which to build a vision.

And I think that's awesome because I think it, what you were just sharing, Em, really is also reflected in Baltimore. And I think that's why we're staying in the city of Baltimore, and we're really taking a look at what the Downtown Rice partnership of these different organizations are doing.

**Tim Souza:** They didn't have, Trojan horses, which I think everybody needs a Trojan horse now. But I think that what they're doing is a similar process. And I think what we're going to discover out of this conversation today is the positive results of that collaboration and how you can achieve immediate term and set long term goals.

**Emily Craven:** It's a lot of effort, right? It's a lot of effort to engage community well, but in a way that they want to engage and West Palm Beach used giant [00:08:00] horses to create curiosity. And I think that something that Baltimore does well is it understands that people want to have a voice and that they have to listen to it.

And so I think that however you get the curiosity, whether it is being that listening ear in an environment where there were no listening ears or having to use something like a Trojan horse to, to get people to engage at different age groups. I think that's what excites me about the conversation with Baltimore today is seeing how another city does that.

Extreme community engagement. And we have three, like three fabulous guests today. They are so impactful

**Tim Souza:** as the Trojan horse was in history. These three are also knocking it out of the park.

**Emily Craven:** I would start a war for Faith.

**Tim Souza:** I would find

**Emily Craven:** a smelly [00:09:00] horse for Faith. She, like Faith Leach, ah so Faith Leach she was appointed by Mayor Scott to serve as the city's second but first mayor. Female chief administration officer. So her role, she manages the day to day government operations across the entire city enterprise.

But prior to this, CAO Leach served as the deputy mayor of equity, health and human services, where she provided strategic direction to a portfolio of agencies at the forefront of quality of life issues. Like, I think that's where a lot of the humanness of this policy and how it came together has come from.

So before her tenure with the city of Baltimore, Leach served as the chief of staff at J. P. Morgan Chase and Co Foundation. And in that capacity, she oversaw the foundation's commitment to invest 2 billion over five years. To strengthen workforce systems, to revitalize neighborhoods, to grow small businesses, to improve financial health of [00:10:00] vulnerable communities.

And she has spent nearly two decades addressing these kinds of key drivers of economic inequality, like that fuel the racial wealth divide. And before joining JPMorgan Chase Co FAO Leach also served as the chief of staff to the deputy mayor of a great economic opportunity under DC Mayor Muriel Bowser.

And she was, she actually stood up a first of its kind government agency focusing on revitalizing overlooked and underdeserved neighborhoods. So like Faith is ambassador with a capital A and also real life ambassador, the Smithsonian national museum of African American history and culture as well.

Say it. I would start a war for faith, but I won't start a war for faith because we are being, we are solving inequity

**Tim Souza:** first.

Love that. Well, as brilliant as faith is, I think Shalanda was incredibly [00:11:00] collaboratively oriented and honestly just as accomplished, which was really cool. And without further ado, Shalanda Stokes is the president of the downtown partnership at Baltimore and the executive director of the downtown management authority.

So she leads both of these multimillion dollar organizations. And since taking up this mantle over the downtown partnership . She has more than doubled the organization's revenues and served as a catalyst for another 50 million dollar commitment to the central business district.

A particular pride to her I know is the minority business program that fosters small growth while increasing Equitable occupancy in vacant storefronts titled boost. It's kind of like a black owned and occupied storefront tenancy initiative that supports this long term success of minority owned Baltimore based businesses in downtown storefronts.

And prior to her role at the downtown partnership, Shalonda actually spent 20 years as president and CEO of Grebo. [00:12:00] It's like a full service. marketing entertainment agency that included clients like State Farm and Kiewit Packard, Under Armour, the Smithsonian, and Coca Cola. Uh, yeah, I know, it's like it's a list.

Shalanda is the recipient of more than 85 community and professional awards, and as a respected thought leader, she serves as a critical advisor to the most elite list of fortune 100 CEOs, elected officials and other dignitaries.

**Emily Craven:** Yeah, Shillender and Faith together, like I feel

**Tim Souza:** like a boom, boom,

**Emily Craven:** like Baltimore I don't know whether it was the mayor or who it was, we saw both women and we're like, Good book.

**Tim Souza:** Yeah, exactly.

**Emily Craven:** And like that matches, I think and maybe sometimes that's where the magic comes from is like the right people at the right time, the right place. And I think that Cassie, who is our third guest today's is also one of those right people at the right time.

She's the one that, a Baltimore native. She serves as the VP [00:13:00] of just economy. And so she leads a variety of change management and stakeholder engagement initiatives with a very special focus on operalization and implementation, which you will see in this interview. Like this team is so focused on implementation.

It is crazy. They're going to do so much. such great things over the next 18 months. And Cassie leads many Baltimore city area projects, including Baltimore together, the region strategic plan for equitable economic growth, which is the downtown rise strategic action plan, the Baltimore city squeegee collective.

So in all of this work, she supports the public and private partners to ensure. This collaborative approach that I have just come to see as the Baltimore approach that it is implemented with this strong focus on results and accountability. She's Maryland educated with a BA from St. Mary's college, Maryland, and an executive MBA from the Salinger school at

loyola University of Maryland. These three women together, Dynamite, we're so excited for you to hear the [00:14:00] interview. Please enjoy.

**Emily Craven:** Thank you so much for joining us. The downtown rise strategy team. Hello. Hello there. It is an absolute delight and a pleasure to have all of you here. It is been such a fascinating conversation that we've been having so far, learning all about Baltimore and the wonderful things that you were doing there.

We're really excited to focus in on the amazing collaboration that is happening across the entire board in Baltimore. It's something that is a crazy feat. Congratulations to you. all. I wanted to start off by asking a couple of questions that we love to start the podcast off with, which is what was life like for you growing up in Baltimore communities?

What has been the biggest change that you have witnessed in the community that you grew up in? Then versus now.

**Shelonda Stokes:** So I can start. Start with that. I am, I think everything Baltimore [00:15:00] growing up was a little bit tough and not at the same time. Like we were poor, but you didn't really know that you were poor at the time because it was still about community.

I think that we had an amazing relationship with neighbors and in government and police. And so that was, you know, I grew up in the era of officer friendly. I grew up in an era where, you had neighbors who really extended and reached out. I think as time has gone on, I think in technology and other things we've pulled in to some of that.

I think that the relationships across the country have changed a little bit between the dynamics of police and other things. And I think pulling all of that together is what makes now so special. For me and us right to be in a position where my first job was cleaning downtown Baltimore at the age of 14.

And now I'm responsible for all of it is amazing. And to do it at a time [00:16:00] where we probably have the strongest collaboration I have in my lifetime. It's been great. So then it was, building. Now it's excitement.

**Emily Craven:** Faith, take it away.

**Faith Leach:** Sure. So thank you so much for the question. So I am not a Baltimore native. I'm actually pretty new to the city. So I've been in the city going on about four years. I came to Baltimore to work with Mayor Scott in the first term of Mayor Scott's administration. And even in this short amount of time that I've been here I've been able to see such incredible.

And such incredible change happened even in just the four years that I've been in, that I've been here. And that Mayor Scott has been at the helm. So when you talk about things like downtown rise, when you talk about the partnership that we have with downtown partnership and all of our stakeholders and partners that are in downtown, right?

Like that is how. You change a city, right? Like you bring that energy, you bring that [00:17:00] partnership, because no city can do it alone. It has to be a partnership between the public sector, the private sector and all of our neighbors and all of our partners working together to solve some of the intractable challenges that have been present in our city for decades, right?

And so, one concrete example that Shalonda and I worked on with so many other leaders from across city is when I came to the city, we had dozens and dozens and dozens of squeegee workers young people who would wash windshields in order to gain a little bit of cash. And it was such a, it was such an intractable, seemingly intractable issue and challenge for our city.

And so in just. Two, three years time, we've been able to diminish the number from 80, 90 plus young people that are on corners across our city. So now there's about a dozen young people and most of those young people we've been able to connect with opportunity. So when you talk about change, when you talk to talk about shifting the trajectory of our [00:18:00] city it's some of those intentional efforts like we did through the squeegee collaborative.

That's really helping us see. Some really remarkable change in a short amount of time in the city of Baltimore,

**Emily Craven:** A little bit more about that as well.

**Shelonda Stokes:** If I could add to some of what Faith it's talking about because, although she's not from here, you know, when you're from here, we align ourselves with our high schools in Baltimore.

And so I went to the best probably. But we faith has been here and has impacted us so much. I think we're gonna have to give her a high school because she wasn't from here. But the impact has been tremendous. And I think how you're engaging with the neighborhoods. It makes it feel like home.

**Faith Leach:** It definitely does.

Baltimore. I said when I was confirmed in this particular role, what I said is that I've fallen in love with Baltimore. So one thing, this is what I want everybody to know about Baltimore. Baltimore has some of the best food on the East Coast. Hands down. moved here and immediately became a foodie because [00:19:00] some of the best food that you will ever experience.

Some of the coolest neighborhoods. And just so many amazing parts of our city that make us so unique. So absolutely Baltimore is my home.

**Emily Craven:** I'm gonna throw a different question out here for you, Cassie. What place or location is the most special to you in Baltimore?

**Cassie Clemente:** Yeah, that's a great question. There's a lot, but I would say Camden Yards or M& T Bank Stadium on game day and the areas around the stadiums.

So I actually grew up in the DC area, but I moved to Baltimore 17 years ago. And the old ladies at my church like five years ago said I can now claim to be from Baltimore. So that's really a badge of honor. But at game days I would come as a kid to Camden yards with my grandfather. And now I go to as many games as I can.

And just the energy and excitement that those teams bring to the city and to downtown and folks who come in from all over for games and being like in the parking lots, tailgating, seeing all of the joy and excitement on the sidewalks and everything. [00:20:00] That's like definitely one of my favorite parts of Baltimore.

And I love that our stadiums are right in our downtown and so accessible for folks.

**Emily Craven:** That's wonderful. Did anyone else want to jump in with a particular location they wanted to shout to the roof of that?

**Shelonda Stokes:** What I'd like to say when you start talking about picking favorites being favorite

**Emily Craven:** Children,

**Shelonda Stokes:** right?

It's like picking favorite Children. Exactly. So I wouldn't do that out. My answer is like everything downtown is a favorite from the food to the museums to the exhibits. I think just the most concentrated, connected transit accessible. I just I love downtown.

**Emily Craven:** Beautiful. If you had a giant billboard anywhere in the city that could have anything on it, metaphorically speaking, what would be the message you would want to leave the city or the planet with? Well, Shalanda

**Cassie Clemente:** and her team have giant billboards all over downtown right now as part of the work at Downtown Partnerships.[00:21:00]

So she can definitely speak to some of that.

**Tim Souza:** What would you, what do you have on those billboards, Shalanda?

**Shelonda Stokes:** Oh my God, the beauty of our billboards. We brought them, this was a post COVID way that we could work to help property owners as well as create vibrancy in downtown. It's been phenomenal. So we have art and we have displays of information from government to business, to exciting placemaking activities and events that are coming here.

So I love. I'm so excited about what's on the billboards. My what I would say, if we just have billboards everywhere and all over, it's we're stronger together.

**Tim Souza:** I love

**Emily Craven:** that mantra of Baltimore from having spoken to all of you.

**Tim Souza:** Exactly. And, speaking of, getting into placemaking and all of this energy that you guys are talking about, could you give us a quick rundown?

Of, what is downtown rise? What is this mission and goal? This thing that has [00:22:00] rallied you all together? I'm gonna let whoever feels like they'd like to step up to the plate to give that quick description. But could you let us, you know, what is it? Where did rice come from? And then how are you funding it to drive that impact?

I think I'd like to get, those quick housekeeping questions about rise out of the way so we can dive into They're really cool things that you guys are doing.

**Shelonda Stokes:** Perfect. I'd like to start off before we even talk about rise, just talking about the intentionality I think that everybody has had moving towards this a few years ago, we brought in the Urban Land Institute to really help us re imagine downtown and a number of things that they said, things that you know, but it feels different sometimes when you hear it from somebody else.

One of the things they said, create place. Absolutely. And we wanted to make sure we're doing that. We needed to build up with the infrastructure. We need to invest in safety. And really, this coordinated leadership was a part of what they said. And what's exciting, Scott really took the elements of all of that and [00:23:00] looking at the various plans and stuff that people were having part of what we knew in understanding this investment, the 6.

9 billion worth of development that we have happening. He was like, wait a minute, let's figure out how we stabilize that and create opportunity for just the immediate things that we knew we needed so that you could show his face that sort of love that was happening on our city. And so it was, but it was other things that were in play.

The city is doing a 10 year plan. They were master planning. There were all of these things and what's, you know, really thoughtful about this process is it was let's take all of the plans. Let's look at things together. Let's figure out how we love immediate midterm and then long term on our city. So that's how we got there.

And then I'll pass it off for more of what it is.

**Faith Leach:** Yeah, absolutely. So, Downtown Rides is our strategic action plan for downtown. Much like cities across the country during the pandemic and [00:24:00] as we are continuing to recover from the pandemic, downtowns across this country were deeply impacted by the pandemic.

And so, what we decided to do is to bring a group of stakeholders together to really look at this moment in our city's history. To really look at This time and say, what do we want our downtown to be? And so Shalonda talked about the 6 billion worth of investment that was happening and coming into our downtown core.

We also had the announcement of the red line. So the governor Moore announced that he was bringing back the red lines. That's additional transportation that we knew would also be a part of the recovery of our downtown. And so we took this moment and we all came together and we developed what is our short term strategy for how we want to bring energy and vibrancy and life back into our downtown, celebrating art and culture and all the things that make Baltimore the coolest city in the world.

And we took that moment and we developed this strategic action plan. And then we said, you know what, we [00:25:00] need to not just look at this moment, but We need to look at the next 10 years and we need to build a downtown for the city for the next 10 years. And so we combined some of our initial efforts and we developed this 10 year strategic vision for our downtown.

And it has been. So amazing to have the downtown partnership. We also had aquarium and our sports teams in the Maryland Stadium Authority, right? So you have local government, state government, private sector, all working together in partnership to develop a strategy for how we want to reimagine our downtown for the next 10 years.

**Tim Souza:** Cassie, you when we were talking in our in our pre call, as we were getting to know a little bit more about, RISE and its vision and then as Faith just mentioned, you have, the short term, mid term, long term kind of plans. Can you dive into a little bit about what those, what those plans are and the difference between them?

Quickly, and as you do, if you could give our listeners who might be like, Oh, my goodness, this as this [00:26:00] podcast continues, I want to build something like that. Could you add in those little nuggets that someone like yourself, can help structure for people who maybe would want to build something like you guys have in Baltimore.

**Cassie Clemente:** Yeah, sure thing. So as faith mentioned, there's two primary components of downtown rise. First is the strategic action plan or the S. A. P. Which is 36 immediate term actions, most of which are very tangible. So repairing sidewalks bringing out some public art. Working on cleaning, street cleaning and, things that you can visually see easily on any given day and working towards those goals over the next six to 18 months.

alongside that through a large collaboration of key stakeholders and anchor institutions and several other people in and around downtown. There is this 10 year vision, which is currently in a phase of community engagement and stakeholder feedback. It's part of the city's 10 year master plan, which is also currently in a stage of [00:27:00] community engagement and stakeholder feedback.

Working collaboratively with the department of planning on a similar timeline to develop this 10 year master plan for downtown. And that vision is really about making downtown Baltimore most amazing neighborhood in the most amazing city on the East coast, including increasing walkability. And as Faith spoke about, bringing the red line and more transit options making all of it connected.

So you could go to a game at empty bank stadium. You can go to a show at CFG bank arena. You could take your family over to the aquarium and there's. easy and safe ways to walk between those places. There's places to stop and get something to eat. There's local businesses selling their amazing things that they sell there that are all in downtown and folks can experience that whether they live in downtown, which we hope many people will continue to want to live in downtown, or they're coming in just for the day from somewhere else in Baltimore, or they're coming in to visit Baltimore for a period of time.

That 10 year vision is really about building that walkable, connected, accessible, vibrant downtown for [00:28:00] decades to come, but we got to do the little stuff first, too. And it's not the little stuff is big stuff, right? Like having good streetscaping and safe sidewalks and all that is very important.

And we don't want to wait the 10 years for all this other 6. 9 billion of investment. We got to be doing some things now.

**Emily Craven:** And I think that the thing that really fascinated me about our previous conversations is that. As you guys said, cities across the U. S. Are doing strategic plans at the moment.

And, so what makes Baltimore special? And I think that the thing that I would really love to hear you talk more about right now, and that you mentioned a little bit in our pre calls was that Baltimore does collaboration really well. And when you looked at what are those short term and medium term goals you brought up?

A lot of, and I mean a lot of stakeholders to the table. You brought not only a lot of stakeholders to the table, you brought them frequently to the table. And you looked at what were the [00:29:00] assets that people had now and how could you uplift those? And I wanted to hear a little bit more about that process, because I think what you did went above and beyond what a lot of Um, consultants that a lot of cities will do.

Because a lot of it is that vision plan, right? They want the vision, but the actionables tend to leave a little bit to be desired. So I'd love to hear more about that.

**Shelonda Stokes:** And I think one of the. things that we learned from and faith mentioned it early. I think we built our model based on a process we went through with the squeegee collaborative and what you got in that process that people know is having everybody in the room.

Although it's a harder process and a longer process, The solutions you come out with are more impactful and they're sustainable. And so throughout the squeegee collaborative, you had the presidents of banks along with people who squeegee along with the school system, along, everybody in a room.

And when you have that. [00:30:00] Engagement, right? Part of what happens is you get a little, you get some emotion, you get a lot of things that come out. But what you get is something that everybody says. You know what? I didn't get everything I wanted, but I got something that's winnable. We took that learning and really looking at how we

implement that throughout all of the initiatives that we do. And so it absolutely made sense when you start talking about development and something that's hitting the city in such, an impactful way that you want to make sure that people who aren't usually at the table are at the table, too, and that government is working very well with private industry and that you're bringing others up along.

What's exciting about this process is we're building on things that we know are working. together.

**Emily Craven:** That's beautiful.

**Cassie Clemente:** Lot of spoke before the billboards would say we're stronger together. And it's I was like, wow, the thing I would have said is we belong to each other, which is a quote from,

**Shelonda Stokes:** I like that.

It's

**Cassie Clemente:** the same thing. Right. And I think that's [00:31:00] what works for us in Baltimore is people care about each other and they're in relationship with one another. And so we wouldn't even consider writing. a plan without talking to the hundreds of people who are deeply connected to that work or that thing any given day of the week because we know each other and there's authentic relationship and passion for the city and for downtown and so absolutely sometimes it's messier and my teammate and I did over 50 one on one conversations in addition to all of the stakeholders who were in the room for all the planning meetings and you know organizing and collecting all that input you Only makes our plan better in the long run.

**Tim Souza:** You know, that's really fascinating because I think that you are, we're going to get into talking about, here about how you have an asset based mindset. And it really sounds like you see each member of the community as an asset that you make sure that you're leveraging and connecting. I think that's really beautiful.

**Shelonda Stokes:** Absolutely. And one of the things building on what Cassie [00:32:00] said that makes it stronger, it is it's the stakeholders in the room, but I think what I really want to scream from the mountaintops, it's also people who are stakeholders but probably weren't considered previously. So even if you think you don't add voice into that, it matters in our conversations.

And I think that's a part of our secret sauce.

**Tim Souza:** Can I ask how you are identifying those voices? Because a city like Baltimore has so many voices. So how are you filtering for the ones that you know are going to be, the asset and a stakeholder in the conversation of building a vibrant downtown?

**Shelonda Stokes:** The beauty of what we're assembling now is it also has a number of nonprofit partners who literally have their pulse on the streets and engaged in such a meaningful way. They are like, it's organizations like we are us. And the peace team and others who, in some cases they were formerly in many ways of the community, however it wants to be, who are now [00:33:00] really looking at how do they help bring a group along.

It's that, it's also us making sure that in our messaging and everything, it's about empathy and it's about equity. And I think, Mayor Scott has done a really good job of making sure that if all of these components aren't included, then we don't move forward. And that's really helped, I think, us as an organization.

**Faith Leach:** Yeah, I think it's important to note that throughout this process and one of the things that we learned very early on in convening folks around big challenges is that this is about building the city and building the community that we want to see. Right. And so we want a community that's inclusive.

We want a community that is equitable. We want a community and a city that supports thriving young people, for example. And so those are all of the values that we bring to this work. And oftentimes in the process when we bring folks together, we start, before we jump into the work, we start [00:34:00] identifying our values.

And what we find is that whether it's a group of young people, a group of older adults, a group of developers, that we all value very similar things. And that helps us drive our work is understanding our shared values that we bring to this work. And we're oftentimes reminding ourselves when conversations get tough of the city that we want to build and the value that we bring to the work.

**Emily Craven:** And so in, in this podcast, I like to get. Because I think it's the details that make the difference between an impactful project and one that maybe fizzles out a little bit. And I know that RISE has only just started. It has only just been technically launched as a strategy to the public. And we've mentioned and whether this comes out of Either your rise conversations, or maybe we do return to the squeegee collective just as a demonstration of what the process is as we said, we talk about that kind of assets based thing.

[00:35:00] What is then the process to it? Like, are you going to different stakeholders? Are you like. What is it that you're doing? How is it that we can help plug in? What is the process at which you're bringing all the people to the table, particularly maybe in controversial things like the Squeegee Collective that you have?

And can you take a step by step through maybe a start and end process where even if we're talking about the Squeegee Collective here, we know that that's the process that you're going to be applying to downtown.

**Tim Souza:** And could you name some of those stakeholders like my name as you do so that we can have concrete examples of who those not like their personal names, but like the Department of Transportation or whatever, so that we can get a full picture of what that is.

**Faith Leach:** Yep, absolutely. So I'll start off and I will use the squeegee collaborative as an example. So initially when we pulled together the squeegee collaborative, it started out being about 40 different stakeholders, right? And so because this issue primarily impacted young black boys and young black men of color, we started out by identifying partners in the educational system and the [00:36:00] social and kind of the human services and social services space, we also knew that it was important to name and have young people at the table and not just any young people, but the young people who would be impacted by any policy decision that we made.

But we also knew that there were challenges with the business community and the development community. , that were also impacted by this activity in downtown, right? And so we brought all of those partners together with government, nonprofit, all of these partners. And we said that we were going to develop a citywide strategy.

It wouldn't be the mayor's strategy, but it would be a comprehensive citywide strategy. Now we started with about 40 people at the table. By the end of the process, we had over 200 people that had engaged with us at some point because we knew that we needed to be open. We needed to be flexible because throughout the process, there would be other people who would pop up and would be interested in contributing and being at the table.

And so we were very open. We were very [00:37:00] flexible and adding people to the table. And then we also made sure that we had strong facilitation so that we can manage the different perspectives and the different voices, but still allow space for different opinions and different voices to be heard. Now, I think.

The where the rubber met the road on this issue is we can't, we probably could not build the framework that we built with 200 voices in the room. And so what we ultimately did, we got a good kind of cross section of feedback from all the many different stakeholders. We then pulled together a smaller group that was representative of the larger group and that group was.

develop the plan. We took it back to the broader group, got their feedback, got their input. And the thing this is actually the secret sauce. The secret sauce, when you bring different groups like this together, is that, you know, you built a strong plan when Everybody is unhappy about some part of the plan.

You will

**Faith Leach:** never, ever, [00:38:00] ever be able to satisfy all groups. But the magic of the squeegee collaborative process and what we developed is people were okay, right? They were all open to the idea And even though it wasn't 100 percent of what they thought the strategy should be, they all saw a part of themselves in the strategy.

And I think that was the thing that really helped us build a strong foundation. And we've taken that same kind of framework, a similar framework and a similar strategy to Downtown Rise. Now, 200 people in open meetings for Downtown Rise, we still were very thoughtful about bringing together a cross section of stakeholders To develop the downtown rise action plan, as well as the 10 year vision.

We knew that this wasn't just going to be the city and downtown partnership at the table, but that we also needed to consider the development community. We also needed to consider the state, the Maryland state, the Maryland stadium [00:39:00] authority. We have these amazing sporting venues. They have to be at the table, right?

And so we essentially took these two, that's the short term plan and the 10 year vision and tried to marry them to all be under this broader downtown rise umbrella.

**Shelonda Stokes:** It's true. And it's funny as Faith was talking, one of the things I started to think about in the framing between rise, whether it's the squeegee collaborative or any of the other initiatives, most of them that I've been in Mayor Scott, Leadership has really stepped up to say this is important, and they show that they send a letter.

They invite people to the convenings. I think when people see that leadership is bought in and is really looking for a solution that helps them lean in. And so as they talked about, like the first couple of meetings, which is really funny where you have business and community and others. I remember.

I'm probably that first meeting where I was sitting at the table and it was, [00:40:00] all probably primarily business people at my table. And then it was a table that had some nonprofits who really focused on community and black and other things. And in the first meeting, they like point to the table where I'm sitting and they're like, They are part of the problem.

Well, well, you know, with all of that, but it was that kind of hardness, but we all knew what we were in there for. So as faith talked about the process, I think it starts with leadership inviting it's convening everybody who touches it, whether we like it, like each other or not. And then there is a period that she talked about where then to really get all this stuff after you have all of these voices, you need to get it down on paper from what you're hearing.

We do that in a smaller group fashion and then put it back out for comment. I think with rise, what was really great about the process in this part, too, is you had some different. things sort of cooking in other areas that she referenced the development community. When we talk about this 6. 9 billion themselves are like, okay, we're getting together.

What do we need? How do we [00:41:00] start to do this? And so, they came up with something, some ideas just as a group. And now when you start to marry that with the city's plan and other things, you get an even more expansive long term solution.

**Cassie Clemente:** Then just the final phase. The final phase that I want to add on this is the implementation, right?

So all of that is exactly how we get to the plan that we have. And then this group of people help to make sure that we implement it. And how we do that well is by having public accountability. So, for example, the squeegee collaborative work has been in implementation phase for a little bit over 18 months at this point.

And we have a website where data gets updated weekly, where maps and. Success stories and things are shared on a regular cadence. And so that is publicly available and accessible for folks at any point in time to look, are we meeting our goals? Where are we falling short? Where are the challenges, et cetera.

The same thing with rise, like the website is updated and progress tracked and made visible [00:42:00] to folks. So there is that collective accountability to make sure that. We're doing the work that we set out to do, and if we need to change a goal, we will, something within the squeegee collaborative.

Obviously, there's been, over the 18 months of implementation, lots of iterations of how we want to shift and evolve what we're doing and then get the group back together. Align on how we do that and keep moving forward.

**Shelonda Stokes:** Right. If I can can add one more thing to that. It's funny because I don't want to say secret sauce because we keep saying it, but it feels so secret in here as we kind of go through.

All of it, even on the collaborative, as an example, we meet every Friday. And so part of, to Cassie's point, while we are making sure that there's the public accountability to each other, we're making sure that we take that information and we make adjustments. So when we meet on Friday mornings, and it's not, if we is the police department, the mayor's office, the, partners like it is everybody on here on a Friday, every [00:43:00] Friday morning at 8 a.

m. And part of what we do is then we use the data that we have to adjust deployments, to adjust strategies for how we're moving, to figure out how we bring in partners who are missing. And so part of what we're doing throughout the implementation is making adjustments based on the data.

**Emily Craven:** That's amazing. / and I imagine it's a similar thing to Downtown Rise where you're

meeting

weekly, you are looking at for those 36 actions, who is going to be the lead agency, who is going to be the supporting agencies who are going to be, what are they implementing it? And what timeline I imagine is those conversations that happen every week.

**Shelonda Stokes:** It's a part of that. And I think one of the questions you guys asked earlier is like, when, where's the money coming from? What part of it is happening in the beauty of something that is comprehensive? is that it layers the money layers in their phases. So as an example, downtown partnership was successful in securing more than [00:44:00] 30 million from the state to help with capital improvements.

And so what we're able to do with rise and the timing is projects, make sure there's alignment. But because we have phase one funding for that, then that becomes a part of how we're able to implement some of those. There are with the city, there are initiatives and projects that they've prioritized. It comes out of the city's budget.

And because we have the development and other communities, all of that sort of folds into How you know how we are all working together financially and physically to make sure that it's a success.

**Tim Souza:** You mentioned communities, and I think that this is to give people scope of what the project that you guys are tackling looks like.

Can you give us a little bit of an idea of how big is like that? That right strategy that downtown strategy. But also, if I remember correctly, you have a lot of different individual neighborhoods that have different community mindsets. scattered throughout Baltimore. And I think the beautiful thing from some of our prior [00:45:00] conversations has been how you've been cognizantly aware what, the impact that these two different groups, both within the target region and those who live outside of it, how they impact each other.

Can you speak a little bit to that kind of larger collaboration that you guys approached all of this with? Because I think that's just as important to connect those neighborhoods to downtown as it is to talk about the work that you're doing. And

**Emily Craven:** if I might add as well, I think that you guys have a lot of unusual collaborations that happen where you have, the Department of transport working with parks and rec or whatever that might be where they seem unusual.

So I would love to hear about those as well.

**Shelonda Stokes:** So I'll start with a couple of things. I think that the collaboration piece and we can say unusual. I don't know. But. but making sure that the dots are connected really happens throughout this process. One of the things going to an example of the billboards.

Just so that when we talk about the billboards that we have downtown, [00:46:00] part of what we have with those billboards is A negotiation of time and space for community. And so we get 20 percent of that air time where we can showcase community projects and initiatives. And we make sure we call it downtown, uptown, around town that we're showcasing that information that comes.

from everybody so that you get to see a piece of our city all throughout all of our city throughout Baltimore. Beyond the content, though, I think part of the meeting and you start to talk about these sort of unusual, we made sure that there was also a revenue share that happens from the billboards. And so we get 5 percent from the billboard sales.

1 percent goes to operate the program and so we keep the billboards active, but the other 4 percent goes 1 percent each to the arts and entertainment districts throughout the city. And so part of what we want to make sure as we're building this is that people don't feel like it's a either or. That it's an and as we are [00:47:00] building, I don't even know how many official neighborhoods there are throughout the city.

I know it's probably 80 plus or some large number, even in downtown, there are several neighborhoods and each has its sort of uniqueness about it. What I love about how we are working through the process is, and you're bringing those neighborhoods to the table in their form. So in downtown, as an example, there's the Bromo arts and entertainment district, which is heavily arts based.

That is a district. So making sure on that side that you do things that are thoughtful for them. We also have in the downtown neighborhood, the inner Harbor and Harbor East and Harbor point, which, for some of those have a higher end feel to them. And so it's, how do we make sure we're bringing all of those things together throughout the process?

**Cassie Clemente:** Yeah, I'll just say, so Baltimore lists. It's over 260 individual neighborhoods in the city. Um, yeah, it's wild and that and just, our city footprint is over 260 individual neighborhoods. And even thinking about [00:48:00] what do we mean when we say downtown? So downtown partnership has a specific area of 106 blocks of the downtown management authority.

But when we look at downtown rise, we look at other downtown related efforts. We're also considering a one mile radius area, as well as a 20 minute walk shed from different key anchor institutions. So we're hitting within that, if we're talking about the work of downtown rise and the vision for downtown rise, you're touching on another, at least a dozen individual neighborhoods that have their own, as Shauna said, like their own vibe and their own culture.

And, the arts district on the West side of downtown, and then some more business district in the core of downtown and some neighborhoods on that. like periphery that are more residential. Thinking about what all those folks specific engagement with downtown looks like. So how do people arrive downtown?

Are they walking? Are they busing? Are they driving? Are they using a scooter? What are they kayaking? Like, what is that? What does that look like? And then what are they coming to downtown for? Are they coming [00:49:00] into work? 35 percent of jobs in Baltimore City are in downtown, even though it only represents 3.

8 percent of our city's land. So a lot of people are coming downtown to work or are they coming? Cause that's where they live or their kid goes to daycare or they're coming to a show or, what are all those things and how are the, what are the unique opportunities and challenges? based on all of those different criteria.

But we do talk. We do also engage with the entire Neighborhood Association list for the city of Baltimore. So every time there's updates, we send it out to those 260 individual leaders who lead each neighborhood association and we'll talk to anybody. So if they want to learn more, we'll go and explain to them what's happening.

And you know, every neighborhood has its own Desires and as faith in a lot of us that you don't please everyone every time, but we are good about making sure folks who want to be involved or want to be informed are invited to the table.

**Shelonda Stokes:** And I think what's significant about this process that [00:50:00] we have here.

It is Post COVID, they are realities that are happening to every city, right? We had increased vacancy in the central business district, probably in other areas too. You had, and when you don't have people on the street, you start to see things a lot more that don't look as good because now you can see it.

And so it was really figuring out how we double down on those things. But it was important for us to really do this together because what happens is you could have neighborhoods say, well, don't go here. Do this. Don't go in this part of the city. Go here. And if you have the city talking about it itself in that way or herself in that way, that's where we start to have friction.

And so what I'm feeling and believing we're coming to a place now that people recognize there's difference in the neighborhood. Okay. But there's value in all of us and us looking like this mosaic now, where you take pride in the difference. [00:51:00]

**Emily Craven:** I love that so much. And I think that the thing something that really speaks to me quite strongly is that even here in this podcast, you have the city, you have the downtown partnership, and you have Cassie with just economy who are They are private consultants, right?

And you have all of these people working well together and supporting each other. And it's not just, Oh, this is the mouthpiece of the city. This is all of these different organizations and private consulting. You are all here representing your city in one podcast, right?

Just here.

**Shelonda Stokes:** One of the things that you said that I think is really key and I'm trying to figure out how how we Really say the value of that. When you talk about the fact that it is government and nonprofit and business working on here.

It is so natural to us. Like even when you talk about the podcast, Cassie can do [00:52:00] any of the conversation. She can be there. I don't have to be there. Faith can be there. Like we're working in such synergy that I that for you to say, I don't even feel the difference. Like it feels like we are in Yeah. One organization together.

**Tim Souza:** So, and can I ask a question on that? You mentioned facilitation earlier, and I think that holding the container is so key for all of these conversations that you're having. Do you, have you brought in. Like other groups kind of like Cassie to hold that, to be the container holder so that you can be in the conversation or has is Baltimore just like really blessed to have a number of Shalanda's in the room to hold that container together while also, be participating and showing what the city needs and what downtown needs.

**Shelonda Stokes:** That is such an interesting question. I can tell you that throughout our process, we didn't bring in a whole lot of outside facilitators to help us do that. It was really us kind of leading in different sessions. Like, I remember and we'll do like lead certain [00:53:00] ones. team will. I think part of what's making us work and we say it having a just economy and Cassie and them on is somebody who can stay focused on the task where I have my day job, Faith has hers and others.

When you have partners like that, they are super drivers. So it's times that I don't want to pick up my phone. Cause like, damn, it's another thing from Cassie. But it helps move us forward. And I think that for our projects is really helping us ensure that we stay on track.

**Cassie Clemente:** Yeah. And Tim, I've done, we've do a lot of group facilitation in different spaces and places.

And I think the way that it works is, The only way it works is in relationship and in connection. And so that's where you're like very open to the critical feedback. You're very, you have to be very open to the hard questions. You have to be willing to go through, those pieces of it, as well as the stuff that is celebratory and exciting.

But it all happens through being. in [00:54:00] relationship with folks and understanding each person or entity's desire in that. And then we're all generally working towards the same goals. So how do we keep moving towards that by recognizing everyone's unique perspective actually makes all of the work better as opposed to looking at that, those unique perspectives as challenges.

It's like, how do we integrate that? Because what you have to say from your vantage point is critical for us to make sure that stakeholder or that community or that perspective is brought in as well. And the only way it works is by being able to trust one another and to be able to talk about this stuff when it's Good and talk about the stuff when it's bad.

**Emily Craven:** Yeah I love that so much. So if you were to offer advice to another city who is inspired by your efforts, how would you recommend that they get the ball rolling in that special Baltimore style?

**Faith Leach:** Yeah. Well, so this is the thing. I think the Baltimore style works for Baltimore and what cities have to [00:55:00] find is the style that works for them because Baltimore is a city of neighborhoods because downtown is kind of the economic driver of our city in the way that our neighborhoods do good or do well and that they thrive.

We also have to have a thriving downtown, right? And so The Baltimore sauce works for Baltimore. But I think the thing that is important for every city to understand whenever they're starting a process like this is you have to understand your values. You have to understand the goal that you are working towards.

And then you have to Bring that right mix of people and that mix of people is not the mix of people that are always going to agree on what the strategy should be or what the outcome should be. But that right mix of people are those people that are going to be able to push each other that are able to disagree, but who can still understand the outcome that they are trying to build, right?

They are still married to similar values or [00:56:00] to a broader vision for what they want to see for their city. And so for us in Baltimore, Again, we start everything with that collaboration, with understanding our values, with understanding kind of what the vision is that we are trying to achieve for our city, and then bringing those different voices to the table that can share their perspective.

And we are unafraid. And I think when you talk about the secret sauce that we have spilled throughout the podcast here, the secret sauce is that we are unafraid to hear dissenting opinions. Right. There is not one monolithic vision for downtown. The downtown that we are building is going to be a downtown that, that represents multiple perspectives, right?

We're going to have big business and small business and residential communities. So many different things that are gonna come together to create this really beautiful neighborhood because that's what downtown is. And this place that every baltimorean [00:57:00] can find a little bit of themselves in downtown.

And that's how we know that our plan is working and that we built a successful downtown is that it's not just for one group of people, but every baltimorean find a little bit of themselves in our downtown. So that's my that my feedback to any city that's looking to start a process like this.

**Emily Craven:** That's beautiful.

That's wonderful. And I, and I think so incredibly true is that every city is different. That's what we definitely find on the podcast. Every time we speak to anyone who is attempting to build vibrancy in downtown, every city is different. But at the same time if you are unafraid of hearing the opinions and having them thrown at you it.

Results in so much buy in from across the spectrum. So thank you everyone for just the wonderful conversation today. It has been a delight and a joy to chat to you all. I wanted to close out this conversation with out of those 30 5 [00:58:00] activities. That are being implemented across the next six to 18 months.

I'm going to ask you to choose Shalonda. Oh my God. What are the favorites that you're excited to see come to fruition? Because just as not everybody is going to be on board with the plan, there are going to be more parts of the plan that resonate with you. So,

**Shelonda Stokes:** okay.

**Emily Craven:** So

**Shelonda Stokes:** I would say my favorite part, if you're making me choose.

Would be the art and I think it's murals in the alleys and it's murals downtown. I think that art is a reflection of who we are at varying levels and that's going to be a showcase of our city.

**Emily Craven:** Cassie, putting you on the spot there.

**Cassie Clemente:** Oh, it's so hard. We spoke about this a lot and inclusive in the RISE strategic action plan is to continue the work of the squeegee collaborative and why that is so important for me and, just a personal draw towards this because How [00:59:00] we've approached that is not about the problem of squeegeeing, but rather about the problem of poverty and specifically young black boys and men without access to opportunity.

And so continuing to build up the access to opportunity and resources and support structures and everything to allow the Young men who I coach in flag football every weekend, who I also see selling water bottles outside of Camden yards to have better opportunities in the long run and more opportunities in the long run and job training and mentorship and all of those things that.

Young black boys around Baltimore have been left out of for generations. So continuing to do that work and implement the work of the squeegee collaborative is probably my, the one I would have to pick because of the systemic impact and just the way in which I see it making meaningful progress for what, for the future.

people believed was an impossible challenge.

**Faith Leach:** Faith. Yes. So mine [01:00:00] is going to be a thing that we call downtown stacked. And the cool thing about downtown stat and this stats are a model that we built in Baltimore several decades ago, and it's a management tool. But with downtown stat, we're going to bring all of the city agencies from D.

O. T. Our transportation department to our public works department to downtown partnership. Everybody is going to come into a room. We're going to develop this inventory of things that need to be fixed in downtown. And we are going to do the work, right? The hard work of repainting crosswalks and repairing broken sidewalks and doing kind of that core work that keeps our downtown running.

And that makes me excited. And it makes me excited for one reason, because it will show the immediate impact of downtown rise, right? People will be able to say, hey, I wrote this crosswalk was missing before or it was faded and now it's repainted or this sidewalk was broken and it's been [01:01:00] fixed or now we have a pedestrian countdown to cross the street.

And so it's those little things that make a huge impact when we have visitors and our residents that are really trying to explore and visit our downtown. So I'm excited about Downtown State.

**Emily Craven:** Beautiful. Well, friends, thank you kindly. And thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today. It has been a delight and a pleasure. I'm looking forward to checking in three years, five years to see how it has gone. And, um, on yourself now

**Tim Souza:** with these guys and it'll be in another 10 months, you know, just be with them in a few days and the whole city will be different.

I love it there. I think I'm going to close just on the impact. You guys have been able to do this in under two years, right? All of this effort, all of this collaboration. I want to just, celebrate you as we close out here and be like, good job. Because in the length of cities, [01:02:00] that is super fricking speedy.

Most cities take decades to do what you guys have done and only a couple of years. Great job. And again, I can't wait to check in like 10 months and see what's new in Baltimore.

**Cassie Clemente:** Come visit any time. We'd love to have you. I'm looking forward to it. Thank you everyone. Thank you. Thank you.

**Emily Craven:** See, this is why I love these ladies. Like they are also firmly in the camp of any vibrancy that is working is because you have engaged the community. If you don't engage the community, even if it's something as small as arts and culture, if you do not engage the community, like Tonya says, you get it covered in graffiti, right?

Even at every level, you should be engaging community, whether it's for something as massive as Downtown Rise or something as simple as like graffiti [01:03:00] prevention.

**Tim Souza:** Don't you fear I mean, I think that it's great. So when you say community, the first thing that pops into my brain is like Lesley Knope and Ron Swanson at Parks and Rec, you know, trying to get all of those people to give them like their community responses.

That's the terror that goes into my head. So like, it's a lot of cooks in the kitchen. It's a lot of people that you're involving in that process. And half of them are just standing up to have something to do on a Tuesday, you know, like.

**Emily Craven:** See, this is the thing though, right? I think that when you are in areas and cities that historically a lot of people have felt ignored in, right?

You need to make sure that you're listening to people, even the people who turn up , to harass the Leslie Nopes of the world. You have to, people have to feel like they are heard and that as Shalonda said, you do, and Enfei said, you do not have to integrate them. That is the path to crazy town.

They acknowledge that, but you [01:04:00] do need to listen to them. And you pull the things out that, that matter. And I think that what impresses me is that this is just not a case of people just talking the talk, right. They went out. And they measured the work that was already being done and they incorporated that work into their plans to create like greater synergies and impact between the efforts of the groups in the city.

They took, Melissa and Jared out of Kansas City and making sure that we don't have three departments that are all trying to do the same thing and wasting a bunch of budget money on it. Right? They are going in and they are being like, what are we already doing? We don't need to repeat somebody else's money because we got a bunch of money.

From the government, and , we think we can do it better. No, like they involved the whole community and said, what are our assets? What's already being done? How could that be made better? Bigger take budgets from other places to make it better. Bigger support people more.

I think that is what really impresses me about this downtown [01:05:00] rise.

**Tim Souza:** Yeah. And I think that you really have it's when you compare it to Kansas City, you're comparing it to a top down versus a bottom up mentality. And I think that you hit the nail on the head when it comes to marginalization and the city of Baltimore and the intertwined history there.

And I think that to heal and grow a city like Baltimore, you need to have a bottom up mentality. Approach and a strategy. because there is so many disparate communities with disparate histories that need to be like a basket woven together to be stronger before they can have a, as they move towards a singular purpose rather.

Um,

**Emily Craven:** yeah, there's

**Tim Souza:** a value there. So

**Emily Craven:** they, each city is getting to a similar approach in that You know, they don't want to replicate what other people are doing. And as you say, Kansas city's going top down. And, but I think that you're right in that anyone who's listening to this podcast, you need to take into account the culture of your city, the history of your city.

The interesting thing is that a lot of [01:06:00] people that we have spoken to who are being really innovative in their cities in this season have accepted that radical collaboration. But I think that Baltimore has done it. The largest, right? Like they have really taken it. And as you say that they probably needed to do that.

**Tim Souza:** I think that they took this look and like when we talk to people who are in leadership in the city, we really think of them as stewards, right? Like , these gals that we spoke to today, they are stewards of their community and I think to be the best towards that community, they assess those assets.

They went forward and they're like, what value do we already have present? How can we uplift that and things that are unique to our community to drive that impact. And, instead of just building those new initiatives that came alongside those initiatives that were already happening in the city and established.

Leveraging those grassroots healing [01:07:00] systems that are coming from the community and complimenting their efforts rather than being collaborative. And I think what this gives me is that we have different models, what that stewardship looks like. And this stewardship really looks a lot more like.

I say basket weaving, but I also think of the term of a shepherd. It's like they're getting everybody going in the same direction and coming. If

**Emily Craven:** I had a billboard for them, I would, I reckon their billboard, I know that they gave us a couple, but I think that their billboard should really be really say, don't fear the mess.

They don't fear the mess like Cassie could have been yet another consultant strategic planner who came in and they spent a bunch of money on identifying the gaps in the ecosystem or rebranding. The whole organization and wasting, 50 percent of the money on branding downtown rise like she wasn't one of those consultancies.

Like here's a plan. We've used all the money to make it. And and someone else has to implement it with no budget, right? That's not what she wants. It's not what any of [01:08:00] them want. They understand that's the trap that so many cities fall into and they want to see change and they want to take action.

They don't just want to talk, which I think is an amazing combination of private, public, and non profit in a way that I have never seen work as quite harmoniously as I think has been shown here in Baltimore.

**Tim Souza:** But I think it works because Cassie is. Really bridging those that private public nonprofit space like her job is to be that external facilitator and organizer of those different pieces.

And I think that, coming from the city of Baltimore herself and recognizing its own, historically, having been historically or its own history of having been marginalized. I mean, they couldn't have done this any other way. There's 236 different communities that In the city of Baltimore.

So I feel like you needed someone like a [01:09:00] Cassie to be that connecting point for everybody. And I would say keep everybody on track, you know, someone who's both the, what is it? The. The stick and the carrot, you know, cause you kind of get to do both.

**Emily Craven:** Yeah. And if you're going to combat the negative press, like I know Baltimore has a bad rap. They have a lot of negative press. They have a lot of negative stories. They've had a lot of podcasts, the Y, uh, serial, um, if you're going to combat that negative storytelling where the locals tell themselves that negative story, the visitors tell themselves that negative story, you have to make sure that you listen to all of the stories of the community, and then make sure that there are ways for others to hear those stories from the community to be able to combat that very prevalent media narrative, right?

Which I think it's at that point that like Story City will normally step in, right? Where you're looking at taking that community engagement, allowing people to tell their own [01:10:00] stories rather than the media being the people who tell that story. And so when you start to align the positive stories and people's experiences and associating positive stories to the physical you start to build momentum.

**Tim Souza:** As much

**Emily Craven:** as any event or parklet or whatever.

**Tim Souza:** Right. Well, and I think that too, people need to see those events and parklets as well. And it's that momentum giving, it's got to give consistency, right? It needs to be and I think it needs to be, and people need to walk out their front doors and know that the city is working on making itself stronger, better, healing from historical wrongs, providing economic opportunities for its people, et cetera.

And I think that what I really I don't

**Emily Craven:** think stories stop bullets. Don't get me wrong there, like.

**Tim Souza:** No, well, they might help stop the bullet from being fired. And I think that there's a, the value to the story piece. But I think what these guys are doing is that, [01:11:00] In a way they're, they've identified all what can be accomplished within the next 18 months.

They're not just living up in this ethereal there. Knocking off , needs on that community list.

**Emily Craven:** Yeah, the momentum is built by the consistency. They meet every week. The Screechy Collective, they meet every week. There are a bunch of the main pillars in downtown rise. So there, and they're saying what can practically be done, what can practically be done in 18 months.

We don't want to wait for this 10 year plan. Like Cassie's working on it. She's doing it, but they don't want to wait for it. So, what can be done? You know, Tanya doesn't want to wait for the cultural plan. She wants to do shit now. Right? And

**Tim Souza:** you need both. You both need a guiding principle plan. And that story, right, of that community story that you're building together.

But you also need shit to get done and people need to see both

**Emily Craven:** and I think that Baltimore is at this time in [01:12:00] history where they want to make things happen. They don't just want to talk about it and they are seeing results as a part of that. Yeah. And I just, maybe we're teasing this Just a little bit, but we will definitely be visiting Baltimore again next season.

We have a, we have a little bit of a giant heart on our sleeve for Baltimore.

**Tim Souza:** Hot on our sleeve. I love that for Baltimore. And, you know, speaking of really cool cities, next week, we're actually jumping out of Baltimore and we're going to the beautiful city of Philadelphia that you brotherly love, brotherly and sisterly love. We're going

**Emily Craven:** from systemized collaboration To building a city for, I would say people who are normally overlooked in planning, right?

**Tim Souza:** Yeah, and so we will have the Nightmare Director, or I should say the Nighttime Manager but I like to think of him as,

The Batman of Philadelphia, maybe. Raheem Manning will be joining us next week. We're super excited to chat with him about how to build a city that is reflective and safe for all people.

**Emily Craven:** Whether it's today, whether it's tonight, [01:13:00] 24 hours. 24 7. We also get to pepper in there a little bit of how they're prepping for a very crazy 2026.

They've got FIFA in Philly. They have the 250th anniversary of the signing of the declaration. And so Philadelphia is going to be a bonkers city to be in 2026. And so we also chat a little bit about that.

**Tim Souza:** So come back and join us. We really appreciate you for , coming out and hanging with us today.

=Be kind to each

other.

**Emily Craven:** And so much, Baltimore. It has been a delight to have you on this podcast. You were doing great things in the vibrancy space. And until next week, we hope you guys find yourself having a wonderful adventure.

The Vibrant Spaces Podcast is produced by Story City. You can find our entire archive on any podcasting app and on about. storycity. app where we publish transcripts and show notes. This episode was produced by Tim [01:14:00] Sousa and our staff includes Justin Kahn, Brett Ludwig, and Victoria Lominska. Our theme song is Happy Indie by Alex Guz.

Our co hosts are Tim Sousa and me, Emily Craven. As always, thank you for listening. We hope you have a great day. A glorious adventure this week.