

EPISODE 3: KISHANI DE SILVA

HOME AND HOMELESSNESS | BUILDING 'SMARTER'

Kishani

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Nina

I'm Nina Freedman. And this is WHEREING. WHEREING explores where we are. It is dedicated to those who believe in the inherent right of belonging, and all the ways we feel we belong. And connect to ourselves, to each other, and the spaces that hold the stories where all of this comes alive, where each experience of belonging is a work of art created by chance or by design. Dare I ask is belonging where you are, not what matters most? WHEREING is the spatial story. Welcome.

We speak with Kishani de Silva, who has most recently been an executive advisor with the Los Angeles County Development Authority, focused on solutions to challenges of homelessness and shortfall in affordable housing. She has worked in the architecture and design industries for over 20 years, both in the United States and in the UK, maintains her own practice 2A+D, and is a faculty member of the Woodbury University. Her work includes explorations into housing, innovation, sustainability, and the business of design. She is a former president of 50:50 x2020, an initiative of The Association of Women in Architecture and Design in Los Angeles.

Kishani, most of us have personal or ancestral migration stories. You were born in Sri Lanka. Is that right? Correct. To begin, I'm wondering how that origin home or its influences contributed to what you think of as home or belonging to a place. Can you speak to this personal migration story and a little bit of a where you have lived and thought of as home, and how you think of it now?

Kishani

Sure. So you're right. I was born in Colombo in the capital of Sri Lanka and spent my formative years there. As a teenager, however, I came on an exchange program to the US and spent a year with an American family in Illinois. It was an amazing experience. And I think it just really gave me this whole window into what's out there in terms of other cultures, and I went back and I went on with my life in Sri Lanka, but Sri Lanka was in civil war, and it was a dire time because it ended up being like a 30 year civil war. There were lots of acts of violence. I come from a mixed background in Sri Lanka. So the majority and the minority, my dad's a majority side. My mom's on the minority side and my mom's family went through a lot, and I won't get into a lot of detail, but, my grandmother's house burned down to the ground in civil rights and so on and so forth. As a ramification of that, a lot of universities had to shut down for a long period of time. So I decided to come back to the US actually, to education. So that brought me here. Then one thing led to another, started architecture school at Woodbury. And I was always thinking I would go back, but I got my first job straight out of my thesis project, that took me to a whole new career path. I would say that the US is my home. It's where I've lived most of my life now. I had done a few spells back and forth to the UK, for

work for school, et cetera for life. And, I fit very well within the UK. I don't stand out as much as I do in the US. I just blend in very nicely because there's tons of people who look like me. And I love the UK, but I guess US, especially LA, has become my home. I realize even going back and forth through the US to the UK, to Sri Lanka, how adaptable I am. And sometimes on one of these trips. I cross all three continents in one trip. And there I am in Colombo and hailing a took took, which is sort of this three wheeler type thing, and then I'm back in London a week later and hopping on the tube, and then I arrive back in LA and driving my car around. So, I realized how adaptable I can be in terms of place, and in terms of home. But if you ask me, where my home is, and that's pretty much LA.

Nina

It's quite courageous of you as a teenager to have come to Illinois on your own. And you seem to have had a wanderlust from way back.

Kishani

I just am shocked that my parents sent me. I mean, I come from sheltered home background. My parents gave us a lot of freedom but we always had to be chaperoned to other people's homes or parties or whatever, strict curfews, that sort of stuff. I'm just like shocked that my parents let me do this, but this is a very long time ago. And things were different.

Nina

Things were different then. Yes. And I know also know what you mean about being in many countries and being adaptable, because I've lived for a long time in the UK as well, and that really was my home for quite a while. Although interestingly I haven't traveled back as much over the years. And, when I went back last year, things have changed so much. I didn't know my way anymore. So it changes this, this feeling of familiarity.

Kishani

Yep, definitely.

Nina

You've had a varied career path. You've got educated as an architect. You've taken additional training in strategic thinking, business leadership. And, this is actually quite unusual for an architect, I want to ask you why you went into it because it's actually quite a flaw in architectural training, this lack of entrepreneurship training, strategic thinking, et cetera. How did you become originally interested in this integration? Did you see it as a fracture inside of the discipline of architecture?

Kishani

Not initially, to be quite frank. My career kind of evolved very organically, but if I was to look back, you're spot on, when you say that as a huge gap in all of the above. I veered off into this management role early on in my career. I realized the sort of left brain, right brain stuff. I mean, I love to write. I am good with the business side of design. I love theory of architecture. I love the conceptual aspects of design. So, it was always this balancing those two things.

Nina

You have a consulting company. Through your consulting company, you made this choice to embed yourself as a consultant into the LA County Development Authority as a Fuse fellow, and this was a very interesting transition and change, but a strategic, intentional focus. So, I'd like you to begin by telling us what Fuse is, and then its particular application into the area, in which you consulted.

Kishani

Right. If I could go back a little bit before I answer your question on Fuse, to lay the foundation of how it got me there. Before Fuse, I was actually back in the UK. I happened just to look at this website of Foster and Partners. It was a project manager position. I went for the interview and I was hired on the spot, and came back and then wrapped up things and went back for a couple of years. I had to come back to the US because my residency was in jeopardy. The US doesn't allow permanent residents to stay out of the country for very long. I had to make a choice, and I decided that this was more important for me because my family are US citizens, my parents, my sisters. So, I felt like this was home and I couldn't jeopardize that. So, I came back and that's when I started my consultancy. I was teaching at Woodbury as adjunct faculty. It was at Woodbury and I was preparing for a lecture, when I came across this course. And I decided to do it. It was a two year program at the University of Oxford for working professionals so it was all research and writing and reading. It was about major programs. During the course, I realized, and through my teaching with Woodbury, how much I had changed in terms of how I thought about architecture, and where I wanted to be in the profession. You were spot on again, when you say, I was intentional. I really wanted to work in the housing and homelessness spectrum, and in my research assignments, I based it on homelessness and housing as a major program. So major programs are large-scale. You spend billions of dollars on it. They're long-term, complex works with a lot of uncertainty, a ton of stakeholders and impacts millions of lives. And for me, homelessness and the housing crisis was a major program. So, having finished that I really felt like my place was to impact government and I looked for a way and an avenue to plug into government, and work on this specific issue. And through the Association of Women in Architecture and Design, I had met this wonderful woman, who works for the city of Los Angeles. She's the one who introduced me to Fuse and there was this one particular fellowship to look at housing and homelessness. So, I applied for just that one. Fuse is where they connect private sector folks and plug them into government, to help government with some of their most impactful projects that they grappling with. So, it could be something like housing and homelessness, or the environment, criminal justice reform systems, et cetera, so the Fuse Co has used fellows within those areas, and then they get plugged in.

Nina

Quite wonderful.

Kishani

Really? It is. It's an amazing way for private sector folks to springboard into government, to help them with some of the issues that they are really grappling with.

Nina

Tell us about the project that you spearheaded when you were embedded there.

Kishani

So the work there was to preempt this strategic partnership division to help housing and the homelessness crisis. So, I did create this business plan for them as part of my work there and under the leadership at the time, I pitched this idea of looking at new technology and methodology to fast track housing supply. I asked to get the design folks involved - something like prefabricated housing, 3d printing, and tiny homes, which LA doesn't have. And really trying to nail the cost of a unit, and trying to really truncate the timeline for delivery within 12 months, which was not happening. It was taking three, four years to get housing through the permitting process and through commissioning. And we were not leveraging the pre-fabricated modular methodology as much as we could, I felt. And so we did it. We got some seed funding from some banks. We identified a site that the agency owned. We brought a lot of the stakeholders in under the tent very early on. So, public works, fire, regional planning, got preliminary approval from the district that the site was in. We put together a panel of jurists and they selected three projects. And, one was of course 3d printing. And then with Covid, it took a backseat, and I keep gently nosing the projects along, but it took away that whole premise of trying to do something within a year. That's been challenging unfortunately, but I'm still hopeful that something could be done.

Nina

So the goals of the project, really - to build it better, faster, more economically.

Kishani

Right. So there is a framework. However, the literature says you can't do all three. You can do faster and better, better and cheaper and whatnot. So, the new framework was faster, cheaper, smarter using technology. That's the innovation that came into this because the government was regurgitating the same version of the previous, you know, without really trying to fix anything, or looking for gaps that things could be made better. So, I think that this was different.

Nina

Let's talk about price. The notion of what's expensive or cheaper is very relative, according to who you speak to the city that you're in, et cetera. Who determines what really is affordable? And that affordability is sometimes what government has to pay to build the housing, but perhaps the residents take on the expense of the housing, whether it's a purchase or a rental. How does an agency begin to think about the whole concept of affordability?

Kishani

Yeah, I mean, in this particular space, the question is constantly being asked for whom? LA has been very expensive for housing. I mean, if you just take San Francisco and the Bay Area out as outliers, LA is probably the most expensive city. Even in this current crisis, pricing keeps going up. And this was exactly what I was trying to address. Because I felt that the modularity of projects could really bring the price down. And it's not for everybody. Nobody wants to have this sort of block housing as a vernacular, but it does fit within a context in terms of helping people be sheltered, when you have a crisis going on, on the streets. So, how do we set the price? The market sets the price. It's about materials. It's about labor. It's about design fees, right? All of those factors. But I still do believe having the background from looking at this through the lens of a major program, that there are things that can be done. One of the things is cutting the time. Trying to streamline the permitting process so that you can build faster, because the minute you prolong things, a lot of stuff can go wrong. I think that's all I can say in terms of prices, that it's

just too much. And we have to figure out as a community, as designers, and architects, how to cut that time and bring that price down.

Nina

The project that you were working on, were the residents going to be paying for the housing, or was the government paying for the housing, or it short term housing?

Kishani

No, they were not going to be paying for the housing. There's this housing choice voucher system, or section eight as it's referred to within in government. So their rent would be covered. And mind you, this was a pilot project of looking at a nominal amount of units to get the technology and the process permitted, and then looking to scale the project. So we're looking at maybe four units to start it all, and see how the technology will work, get it permitted and then look to scale. I had this vision to see how people could have a pathway to home ownership, because that builds equity and that builds wealth. And that's one of the main reasons of some systemic oppressive things that have been happening. That could narrow that wealth gap and maybe prevent homelessness. So in my analysis for the agency very early on, I looked at how to bring the price down. That was a pilot project. And the second bucket was really preventing people falling into homelessness, because we always say we can't build out of it, because I think the numbers are like, we house 300 people a month, but 500 people. I'm just using those numbers very hypothetically, but it's something like that. A third more falling into homelessness. So, you're never going to catch up to that curve. You have to look at some of the more systemic issues.

Nina

It's interesting to me that the focus was on section eight and I understand that, but it impacts so many people who do not fall into section eight. I once had a friend that used to say, you can get by in this country if you're very poor or very rich.

Kishani

Right. Exactly. It's the middle-class, you're absolutely right. And this is why I was looking into that home ownership model. Where even young people, Gen Z's can start. They don't want a lot. They just want a small footprint, you know, the micro units, but build wealth that way, you know? And then maybe you build equity and then you can buy a one or two bedroom along the way to start a family or whatever. But just to get people into building wealth was really part of their long view on this project.

Nina

Right. So many young people don't seem to have that opportunity anymore.

Kishani

The same with their family.

Nina

Yes, exactly. The residents as well. There are so many different types of potential residents, right. And in thinking about affordability and how they live together in a complex. How does one design, how does one decide? Is it a generic design? You have so many different kinds of populations that you're looking at, even within that section eight demographic.

Kishani

Other States have this too. A model of housing called permanent supportive housing, where folks are measured in terms of what they refer to as acuity levels. So you can have a high acuity level or a low acuity level, which is a scale. And if you score high, you need more support, more help. So it could be mental health, it could be addictions and you then are on track to be housed permanently with supportive housing on the premises. Whether that clinicians or case managers or whoever. They get their services in the housing complex. We found that somebody might have an incident, they get the help at a hospital and then they have nowhere to go. So, they end up back on the street. They're not taking their meds and it's just sort of, the cyclicity. So that felt that we needed to create this specific type of housing called permanent supportive housing, called PSH, to house people who are on that scale, but at a high acuity level. So that's one model. The temporary shelters are basically a pitstop where you're supposed to then be housed permanently based on your needs. So somebody has a life incident or a domestic violence, and they enter a shelter. And then they're supposed to then go into temporary housing with the potential for being housed permanently, but there's a shortage of units. We don't have enough units to house everything. So this was, again, going back to my project, how do we build quicker and more affordably to try and get more supply online, faster. So you get the shelter, you get the temporary housing and you get this sort of permanent supportive housing, and then permanent housing for others. That's four different types of housing that are more generic that are tailored to individuals.

Nina

In working on this project, I imagine that you met with various groups, are there any stories that stand out for you?

Kishani

I was working with a group that belong to United Way. Working with residents called 'everyone in' and it's called stories from the front lines. They have these organizations or meetings and forums. It's this caravan that goes from town to town. And, there's talk to people who have had lived experience, and now a house come and talk about their stories because we have a lot of NIMBYs in LA, so 'not in my backyard' type projects. A lot of the communities do not want affordable housing in their communities. So, this was one way the United Way and I was engaging with them to engage with the residents both who at a community level, so that, that there wouldn't be pushed back on the project. And, I did speak to two community groups to get their buy-in to build the project in their area. And all the research that comes with that, in terms of the actual residents. So thinking in terms of human centric, design, thinking of design thinking principles and the design had to provide outdoor space. It had to provide for community. So even on the 3d printing one, it was a pod of four with this center garden that people could commune with each other. Because one of the biggest things that I feel is missing for folks is that safety net of community when something happens in their lives, that net is not there, so we wanted to build that community in these projects where they could start their own extended families, so to speak.

Nina

From this experience one of the things that I'm really interested in is the intangibles of home. That's so difficult to define and so subjective. And there are many, many words for it. As designers, we use words like shelter. And then shelter feels very different than home. And there may be other words, people that define home in a completely different way, who prefer to live on the street. How do we begin to think

about these in, your view? In a way we rely quite a bit on data and information and surveys and financial information and all of that. But then aside from that, there are these intangibles. And I think this idea of this pod that you were just getting at, as you were talking about that, I really felt that. I saw a small grouping in this communal space in between that if somebody gets sick, you know, the feeling like someone is there. Always, for you. But there are many, many ways to think about those intangibles of home. What have you learned yourself from going through this? How would you define it or could you?

Kishani

Yes said no, because it's such an individual thing and what that means. Home, definitely home is not shelter and vice versa. I think a home is community basically. And even if you are a single person, I think one has to have those networks of community, whether it's your friends, your work colleagues, faith-based organizations other advocacy groups. You have to build that safety net for when you have a life incident happen, whether it's a health issue or a job loss or, something, right? You have to have communities that have help you through that tough spot. And if you don't, that's when your resiliency drops, and that's when you have the potential to fall into homelessness. So, what is a home for me? It's about people more than anything else. And, you can say it's about artifact. It's about things that you personalize and you put in your little space to create home. But if you're really thinking about an intangible, then it's that feeling of belonging to somebody, to some thing, to some place. And, I find having done all the research, that a lot of people don't have that belonging, for example I heard the story that this gentleman used to be downtown. And they somehow got him housed. But being LA, that LA is so vast, that his housing was somewhere really far away, he wouldn't stay there because his buddies were in downtown Los Angeles. So, he gave it up. And that shows how much that belonging means to somebody. The problem is so multifaceted, and so very complex and layered at so many levels. These are some of those intangible where that sense of belonging to someone, you know, I think is really important.

Nina

And we definitely need to think about that and include it, as you've done.

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