Buildings + Beyond Podcast Transcript

Episode: Designing for Equity in the Built Environment with Victoria Lanteigne

00;00;05;07 – 00;00;07;11
Kelly
Welcome to Buildings and Beyond.

00;00;08;04 – 00;00;12;02
Robb
The podcast that explores how we can create a more sustainable built environment.

00;00;12;22 – 00;00;16;01
Kelly
By focusing on efficiency, accessibility, and health.

00;00;16;19 – 00;00;41;12
Alex
I'm Alex Mirabile, co-producer, and your host for this episode. We talk a lot about sustainability on this podcast. Usually in relation to construction practices, building materials or energy efficiency technologies, where the focus is typically on quantitative results. But what about the qualitative characteristics of building performance? How do we ensure the health, comfort, and well-being of all occupants, especially those with varying needs?

00;00;42;09 – 00;00;56;24
Alex
This may seem difficult considering there's no one size fits all solution to building design, but our guest for this episode is here to explain that the answer is not necessarily a universal approach, but an all-inclusive one. By focusing on a more equitable and human centered approach to design.

00;00;57;16 – 00;01;07;15
Victoria
Through my research, the question that I'm really trying to answer is how do we operationalize or how do we achieve equity in the design of the built environment?

00;01;08;24 – 00;01;41;00
Alex
Victoria Lanteigne has over 15 years of experience leading the advancement of equity and inclusion in buildings. She began her career working in the nonprofit sector for a civil rights organization, then joined Steven Winter Associates as a consultant, collaborating with architects, developers, and other practitioners to improve the accessibility of buildings. In 2018, Victoria left SWA to pursue a Ph.D. in design at North Carolina State University, where she conducted extensive research aimed at improving our understanding of how design impacts the physical mental and emotional health of building occupants.

00;01;41;16 – 00;01;59;21
Alex
This year, as Victoria nears the end of her PhD program, she rejoins SWA as a principal, leading a new research initiative centered around equity, inclusion, and health. I start our conversation by asking Victoria why and how she's adopted an equity lens in her work.

00;02;03;02 – 00;02;34;00
Victoria
I think when we look back and reframe the work that both I myself have been doing, but also the work of our colleagues at SWA, a lot of our efforts are very much set to impact equity, whether we're looking at creating more sustainable communities and buildings, thinking about creating environments that are more accessible to people with disabilities, and having healthier spaces for everyone.

00;02;34;18 – 00;03;17;07
Victoria
And so, you know, certainly it was a very natural progression to explore the ways that my own portfolio can support equity. And then, of course, as we all know, the recent years, looking at our social and political climate, equity has really risen to the agenda across disciplines, including architecture. And, you know, based on my experience working with practitioners, it became very apparent to me that many design teams wanted to embed equity within the built environment, but there really was a lack of understanding around how to actually do that.

00;03;17;08 – 00;03;43;14
Victoria
So in other words, what does equity look like when it's manifested in physical form in the built environment? And so through a lot of the work that I've done through my doctoral program is really researching the tools, the available tools that are out there for practitioners around equity. And we certainly do have a number of resources that are really helpful.

00;03;43;14 – 00;04;15;17
Victoria
We can think about the LEED social equity pilot credits which were introduced, I believe in 2018. There are some very robust frameworks like the Design Justice Principles and The SEED Evaluator and even for some of you who may be following, the International WELL Building Institute recently introduced the WELL Equity Rating. And so these resources really do work to address very important and fundamental aspects around equity in the built environment.

00;04;16;22 – 00;05;03;04
Victoria
However, I do believe that we're still missing knowledge around those actual design strategies. So what does it look like when equity is translated into design? And that final outcome, that final product. So that's really what my research, my doctoral research is focused on uncovering. How does design translate into the built environment? And I think it's a really natural fit with my background in universal and inclusive design, because really what those two disciplines are very focused on is the actual design, the design strategies, as well as programing that create more inclusive environments.

00;05;03;05 – 00;05;14;27
Victoria
And so to me, those initiatives all really kind of intersect and merge together. And that's really the pathway that led me to reposition my work as equity focused.

00;05;16;02 – 00;05;35;29
Alex
Very interesting and very intriguing. I love hearing the progression that your work has taken and

the influential factors behind it. Speaking of which, you mentioned your research, which I'm sure was very influential. Can you tell us more about the experience of pursuing your PhD and why you felt it was important to focus on design as a vehicle for promoting equity in the built environment?

00;05;36;12 – 00;05;42;12
Alex
I mean, it's truly unique topic. It must have been a challenging endeavor, but hopefully a very rewarding one all at the same time.

00;05;42;28 – 00;06;07;21
Victoria
It has been a long journey, but it's been really rewarding and so interesting to really wake up every day and throw yourself into something that you're really passionate about and you just want to learn more every single day. So I feel really lucky that I chose a topic that continues to engage me and inspire me.

00;06;07;22 – 00;06;35;20
Victoria
So my research is very much centered around equity. And, to your point, something that you said is really important, which is a lot of people are looking at equity in the built environment. And that's right. You know, we see resources today that often center around stakeholder and community engagement processes, looking at fair operations and management policies being set.

00;06;36;25 – 00;07;09;27
Victoria
Things like DEI programs, even looking at fair labor and wage standards for teams and contractors that you might partner with throughout the design process. So all of these are incredibly important and certainly very much part of the process when we're looking at equity in the built environment. My research really aims to tap into what I think is a little less explored, which is the actual design strategies that come out of these very equity centered processes.

00;07;10;11 – 00;07;44;17
Victoria
So through my research, the question that I'm really trying to answer is how do we operationalize or how do we achieve equity in the design of the built environment? And so to answer that question, I have adopted a qualitative case study approach that aims to explore the design process and outcomes of four projects that were all developed through a highly community engaged approach that each adopted an equity lens within that process.

00;07;45;09 – 00;07;47;24
Victoria
And so would you like me to share those projects?

00;07;47;25 – 00;07;48;19
Alex
Absolutely.

00;07;49;02 – 00;08;24;17
Victoria
Okay. So the four projects are, the first is the Memorial at Harvey Milk Plaza, which is located in San Francisco. This is a memorial that is very much centered on LGBTQ plus inclusion, and it is not yet built, but it is in process. So it's in kind of the design stage right now as we speak. The Women's Building in New York City is another project that was unfortunately never fully realized.

00;08;24;25 – 00;09;03;05
Victoria
However, the concept design was developed several years ago, and there is much to learn around how gender equity and designing really putting women at the forefront of design. There is a lot to be learned from this project as well. The third project is the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, located in Seattle, Washington. And the fourth is Norman-Sims Elementary School, which is an elementary school built in East Austin, Texas, that serves predominantly Black and Latinx students.

00;09;03;21 – 00;09;36;07
Victoria
And again, each of these projects were really co-designed. It's almost a disservice to say that they were just community engaged designs. They were really equal power sharing, equal approaches to the design of these projects. And so through my research, the methods that I'm using for data collection center on interviews with both practitioners or architecture practitioners, as well as key members of the community that were part of this design process.

00;09;37;07 – 00;10;04;27
Victoria
And so really what I'm hoping to do is pull out, you know, what were these goals that are that arose, that had arisen from the process? You know, were there shared commonalities? What was important to the community when these projects really adopted an equity ones? And then the second part of that, more importantly, is how were these goals achieved in the design of the built environment?

00;10;05;16 – 00;10;13;16
Alex
Hmm. You mentioned some things that you hope will come out of this, but have you noticed any key themes throughout your research as a result of the equity centered approach to design?

00;10;14;18 – 00;10;49;05
Victoria
Yes, absolutely. I'm noticing key themes and I'm really happy that I am. So it's really quite interesting because in case study research, oftentimes you really want to pick projects that are similar in nature. You know, perhaps they're all a K-through-12 school or they'll all be a memorial project or they'll all be a commercial space. And I kind of went my own path here and chose projects that were all of a different typology.

00;10;49;05 – 00;11;20;28
Victoria
And I did that really concertedly, because I wanted to understand if the actual project type impacted our approach to equity. You know, can equity really I guess, what's the word I'm

looking for? Transcend project typology, right, when we think about this. So I was really happy to see that and I am happy to see that many themes are emerging, particularly around goals.

00;11;21;14 – 00;12;01;14
Victoria
You know, from each of these processes, the community has cited things like wanting to feel safety, feelings of being safe, representation, visibility. The community really wanted to see themselves in these projects. Having autonomy when you're in that space and using the space. And then these really interesting aspects of maintaining history and legacy, storytelling, celebration. And so these were goals that I'm finding are common across almost all of these projects, which is really interesting.

00;12;01;28 – 00;12;05;04
Alex
Even though they're different typologies, the goals are still the same.

00;12;05;05 – 00;12;08;04
Victoria
Yeah, even though they're different typologies, the goals are the same.

00;12;08;11 – 00;12;09;19
Alex
That's really fascinating.

00;12;09;22 – 00;12;10;28
Victoria
Mm hmm. Yeah.

00;12;12;02 – 00;12;22;27
Alex
Okay. In addition to reoccurring themes, are you seeing any specific design strategies? If so, can you share some examples? I'm sure some of our listeners out there, many of whom are designers, will appreciate hearing those.

00;12;23;15 – 00;12;53;00
Victoria
Yeah, I am seeing specific design strategies. And it's interesting because initially when I embarked on this case study research, I had anticipated seeing common goals like the goals that I just shared. But I assumed that the strategies for achieving those goals would be different, you know, predominantly because we're looking at different communities, different, you know, needs are reflected.

00;12;53;00 – 00;13;21;14
Victoria
And so I was anticipating that those design strategies would vary, but goals might be shared. But interestingly, I'm actually seeing some themes around design strategies as well. And as an example, you know, I mentioned that this idea of representation was shared across all four communities. In all four projects, the community members wanted to see themselves reflected in this project.

00;13;22;03 – 00;14;07;10
Victoria
And while the projects have various ways that they've achieved that, there was a central design strategy which included having an art exhibit, either rotating or permanent art exhibit, that reflected whatever was appropriate for that community involved. So whether that was telling about a history and legacy, whether that was showing multiple members of the community, like for example, with the Harvey Milk, the Memorial at Harvey Milk Plaza, it was really important to have representation from, you know, not simply gay white men, but we're looking at the history and culture of lesbians.

00;14;07;10 – 00;14;32;05
Victoria
The trans community, people of color that identify as LGBTQ plus. So it was really important to have that intersectional lens represented and the team talked each individually how important a rotating art installation was in making sure that those pieces were represented. And that was something that I saw across each of the projects.

00;14;32;06 – 00;14;32;23
Alex
That's great.

00;14;33;28 – 00;15;08;04
Victoria
Another aspect of design strategy that was shared was this idea of historic preservation. So keeping components of an existing project, and I should have mentioned that upfront, that each of these projects are a renovation project. So it's taking a structure or a space or a part of a community and re-envisioning it into, in most cases, a completely different use.

00;15;08;17 – 00;15;43;00
Victoria
And so preserving part of that, not just the structural aspect of the building, but the culture and the feel and the importance of that building was really critical to the success of the space in its new iteration. And as an example, The Women's Building, which was worked on by Deborah Berke Partners in collaboration with the NoVo Foundation and a consortium of community members.

00;15;43;23 – 00;16;18;02
Victoria
You know, this is a space that looked at transforming a former women's correctional facility, which was prior to that, a YMCA. And so this is a building that has a lot of history. And so in the design process, the, you know, advisors were saying, we want to keep aspects of this project. We don't want to lose it all because you know, it's important to carry on that legacy.

00;16;18;15 – 00;16;50;26
Victoria
And so the team talked a lot about preserving a cell that was part of that space within the women's correctional facility and keeping that not necessarily front and center to the new building, but within a space that people could go and visit if they wanted to re-experience or relive or learn about that part of the building.

00;16;51;14 – 00;16;52;27
Alex
I imagine. Sorry, I didn't mean to cut you off.

00;16;52;29 – 00;16;53;22
Victoria
No.

00;16;54;10 – 00;17;08;05
Alex
I imagine a really important component to equity is identity. And a really important component to identity is history. And although this is certainly a bold example of historic preservation, it truly demonstrates the impact that the design of a space can have on equity.

00;17;08;12 – 00;17;39;02
Victoria
Absolutely. And it's really powerful. I'm just relaying the great work of the team second hand, but it's really remarkable to hear them talk about this importance. And so that aspect of historic preservation, not only structural aspects, but, you know, artwork or cultural pieces that made their way to the new form of that building was something that was common throughout.

00;17;39;02 – 00;18;11;06
Victoria
So again, you know, we're seeing these, it's not necessarily the same exact, you know, it's not always going to be preserving X piece of the building. But these concepts of historic preservation and why we're embarking on historic preservation, is a shared commonality. And so I think ultimately what this tells me is that there are components that we can pull out as thematic that run across these types of projects.

00;18;11;14 – 00;18;34;27
Victoria
And then there will be divergences that are, you know, that are different and unique, and that's the way that it should be. And so it's a combination of, you know, what can we what can we pull out that is high level as a roadmap, as a framework for what teams should be thinking about. But then being very concerted and intentional about ways that we achieve that through design.

00;18;36;03 – 00;18;51;24
Alex
And while we're on the topic of historic preservation and reoccurring themes, we're also seeing a big push for building restoration for environmental reasons. Now that we have a better understanding of embodied carbon and the impact that the buildings lifecycle can have on our climate, it's really cool to see these solutions overlap.

00;18;52;08 – 00;19;14;28
Victoria
Yeah, I love that. I think that's absolutely true and it's sustainable from an environmental perspective, and it's also sustainable from this history and legacy aspect, depending on, you know, depending on the project, of course. But yeah, it's really interesting the way that those two concepts can intersect.

00;19;15;15 – 00;19;30;24
Alex
Absolutely. I want to quickly cover two components that I thought were important to discuss. The first is health equity. As a researcher and designer, what indicators are you looking at when it comes to health equity in the built environment?

00;19;31;06 – 00;19;54;26
Victoria
Yeah, absolutely. So, you know, I've been really interested in healthy building for a long time. I was an early adopter of WELL Building. I think I was one of the first members of the first cohort of Well APs back in 2017. So I was very eagerly on the WELL bandwagon and I've stayed in close contact with folks at WELL ever since.

00;19;56;05 – 00;20;23;14
Victoria
And I think healthy building is just so interesting because it really intersects with so many other initiatives around building performance, sustainability, inclusion. And I see health pop up in my work all the time, particularly when it comes to mental health. Feelings of reducing anxiety. You know, these are all also parts of feeling like you belong in a space, feeling like you are welcome in a space.

00;20;23;14 – 00;20;32;22
Victoria
And so there's a lot of overlap between health indicators and what are arising as equity and indicators and the built environment.

00;20;33;06 – 00;20;34;09
Alex
That makes so much sense.

00;20;34;29 – 00;20;59;02
Victoria
Yeah. And I mean, I think that's traditionally historically how building performance initiatives have been. You know, we see aspects of universal and inclusive design in LEED and WELL Building and in fact, myself and a couple of our colleagues at SWA were instrumental in writing those standards that are featured in LEED and WELL around it, universal and inclusive design.

00;20;59;02 – 00;21;24;00
Victoria
So, you know, we've done a lot of work in the past to connect these initiatives around building performance. And I think that's really important and I think it will continue. For me, and again, there are lots of ways that we can talk about health and buildings. I never will be an indoor air quality expert. I will never be able to do a daylighting simulation study.

00;21;24;00 – 00;21;44;12
Victoria
That's just not my area of expertise. I leave that to our other brilliant colleagues at SWA who do that. But you know, for me, I'm really interested in the outcomes. So how do healthy buildings impact the physical, mental, and emotional health of building occupants?

00;21;44;20 – 00;21;45;05
Alex
Yeah.

00;21;45;15 – 00;22;18;00
Victoria
And I'm very fortunate that I have an opportunity to begin to explore that. I support a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Research Grant that's currently being conducted at North Carolina State University. And we're exploring the design of a school, an elementary school that is actually interestingly, it's a hybrid elementary school and YMCA community center. It is very cool.

00;22;18;00 – 00;22;58;22
Victoria
And it's also another great example of a community engaged project. It was designed through a highly participatory approach. And so for the last two years, we've been looking at, you know, how the design really impacted not only the physical, mental and emotional health of the students and faculty, but also the greater community as well. And so looking at, you know, what does it mean when you have investment in a community that may otherwise be overlooked or untapped in a traditional design process and how is the community benefiting from it?

00;22;58;22 – 00;23;12;10
Victoria
What are the ways in which it might be encouraging physical, healthy behaviors, mental health. And so we're really just kind of digging into that and analyzing those findings right now.

00;23;13;08 – 00;23;25;12
Alex
What an amazing study. I'm not sure who thought of combining those two things, but I really wish when I was in grade school, it included a hybrid YMCA component. Who knows? Maybe we'll see that more in the future.

00;23;25;23 – 00;24;04;18
Victoria
Yeah, it's really cool. And it's actually it's a model. I think that's around. This isn't the only hybrid location. And even though the students love it, I have to say the staff and the faculty love it as well, because, you know, there are these elements of active design within the building that really give teachers an opportunity to maybe walk an indoor track at lunch or, you know, this kind of level of indoor outdoor access that might not be available in traditional schools.

00;24;05;00 – 00;24;26;02
Victoria
So, you know, when we think about schools, yes, it is, of course, a place where children go to learn, but it's also the office environment for all of the staff and faculty. So it's been really interesting to see, you know, everybody loves the school, but I think the teachers really, really love the school, which is great.

00;24;26;02 – 00;24;39;03
Alex
That is too cool. I mean, how can you blame them? Well, we'll definitely have to link to that in

the show notes, as well as some of the other studies you've mentioned. I think we're going to have a lot of material in this episode's show notes, that's for sure.

00;24;39;08 – 00;24;52;16
Victoria
Yeah. And if anybody's interested, I did share on SWA's web site under our research and publications a publication on that study that just offers some preliminary findings.

00;24;52;16 – 00;25;18;21
Alex
So awesome. I am definitely looking forward to checking that out. All right. I want to ask you about one other component related to equity in the built environment. And I know this one is near and dear to your heart. When you were last with SWA, we were focused on the term universal design. Today, after a brief intermission to pursue your PhD, you rejoined SWA and here we are focusing on a new term known as inclusive design.

00;25;19;18 – 00;25;23;09
Alex
Can you explain how these terms differ and why their evolution is so important?

00;25;23;21 – 00;25;59;12
Victoria
Yeah, absolutely. It's a great question. Thank you for asking it. So I'll start by saying that there really is no industry standard on the differences between these two disciplines. Many will use these terms interchangeably. I have always been of the camp that they are two very different initiatives. For starters, universal design really emerged in the United States in the mid-1980s.

00;25;59;12 – 00;26;29;10
Victoria
It was coined by a gentleman named Ron Mace and then further built out at North Carolina State University through the development of principles and guidelines, and also under a program called the Center for Universal Design. So there are these very set frameworks that exist around universal design, whereas inclusive design emerged predominantly in the in the UK, in Europe and in the, I believe the mid-90s as well.

00;26;29;10 – 00;26;59;26
Victoria
So a little bit later than universal design, but essentially the two disciplines are really similar in their origin in the sense that they were both disability centered and really thinking around the idea of creating environments that were, of course, inclusive and usable by people with disabilities, but also that were, in addition, just better and more usable environments for all people.

00;27;01;01 – 00;27;35;05
Victoria
And so there's a lot of similarity in the origins of each of these disciplines. However, I think over time, you know, as just kind of adoption goes in this field, inclusive design has really taken off not only in the architecture discipline, but across disciplines. We've seen both Microsoft and Google adopt tenets of inclusive design in their work and creating and doing like software and technology development.

00;27;35;18 – 00;28;23;04
Victoria
Yeah, it's really great. It's super interesting. And you know, we're also seeing inclusive design begin to expand in applications beyond disability inclusion. So looking at inclusive environments across gender, LGBTQ plus identity, race, culture, religion, and these were certainly aspects of things that we were looking at back when SWA was leading a universal design effort. We have always positioned universal design as a pathway to creating inclusive environments, both for people with disabilities, but then also other personal identities as well.

00;28;24;08 – 00;29;09;24
Victoria
However, when we're thinking about really repositioning this work as equity work and we look at universal design, you know, this is a movement that is rooted in a theory of universalism, not surprisingly. But what this is really saying is that there is one design that can work for all or the majority of people. And this kind of approach is almost counter to an equity lens when instead of creating for the masses, we want to really focus on elevating those voices and needs that are marginalized and underrepresented.

00;29;09;24 – 00;29;19;29
Alex
Yeah, the term universalism doesn't sound too inclusive to me now that you frame it like that. It's an important distinction for sure. So I'm glad you were able to define the two.

00;29;19;29 – 00;29;44;26
Victoria
Yeah. And this is not to say, you know, I still write a lot about universal design. I still, I've got a lot of respect for the thought leaders and proponents of universal design. I think it's really important and I think that there are projects where universal design is a pathway and a great pathway. And so it's certainly not a one or the other.

00;29;44;26 – 00;29;55;03
Victoria
But we've at SWA have adopted inclusive design as a pathway forward only to align and support our equity driven mission.

00;29;55;28 – 00;30;18;12
Alex
Got it. That's definitely helpful explanation. So when you refer to inclusive design as not necessarily disability centered, you're suggesting that we need to account for all things such as gender, culture, religion, etc., all aspects of individual identities. That's what designing with an equity centered approach is all about. Does that sound about right?

00;30;19;15 – 00;30;57;16
Victoria
I think that's a great way to sum it up. Absolutely. You know, I think it's really interesting because when we talk about design strategies that are focused on equity and you'll even see this in a lot of resources that exist today, we have a lot of strategies that are emerging around disability focused design. Looking at neurodivergent design is really becoming, is really becoming popular as it should be.

00;30;57;19 – 00;31;29;00
Victoria
We're looking at mental health, you know, anxiety reduction, things to alleviate depression, access to nature, natural light, all of these strategies that have been proven to impact mental, mental wellness, these are incredibly important and absolutely should be part of every project and should be considered. But again, we're missing these design strategies that focus on, you know, what does it mean to design an LGBTQ plus safe space.

00;31;29;05 – 00;31;29;14
Alex
Right.

00;31;29;21 – 00;32;17;03
Victoria
And through my research, you know, looking at a project like the Memorial at Harvey Milk, we are seeing actual design strategies that support LGBTQ plus safe spaces. Right? So it exists and those should be pulled out and may or may not be appropriate for every project, but certainly a framework of some sort can be helpful to practitioners. And I don't know that I mentioned this, but ultimately that is the goal of my research, to develop a framework that can be used both if a team is embarking on a community engaged process, it can serve to support that community engagement piece.

00;32;17;18 – 00;32;45;28
Victoria
But then also when we realistically look at our industry, the majority of projects today are built without any type of community engagement, whether that's because there's a lack of budget, there is a lack of interest, or maybe even there is a lack of understanding from architects that, you know, to no fault of their own, may not be trained to conduct robust stakeholder engagement.

00;32;46;05 – 00;32;46;12
Alex
Sure.

00;32;46;27 – 00;33;21;04
Victoria
So there are a lot of projects today that are not tapping into those community voices. And, you know, is that to say that none of these projects should embed tenets of equity? I certainly don't believe so. And so a framework is a helpful tool as to address that gap right now until we have a better solution to involving the community and end users in a more consistent and meaningful way.

00;33;22;06 – 00;33;40;10
Alex
I couldn't agree more. And not only has inclusive design been an important component to your research, it's also becoming a more prominent service offered by the accessibility team here at Steven Winter Associates. Can you explain what that offering means exactly and why it has the potential to have such a substantial impact on the built environment?

00;33;41;05 – 00;34;21;16
Victoria
Sure. So we are in the process of rethinking our approach to inclusive design. And really we're putting equity at the center of all of those efforts. And much like we've been talking about so far, we know that in order to really support equity goals, we need to tap into the community that we're designing for. And so our new set of inclusive design services really focuses on being driven by research and really tapping into the needs of the community and the individuals who will be using these projects ultimately.

00;34;21;16 – 00;34;53;14
Victoria
And so previously our services were really focused on plan review, you know, reviewing documents where we could comment on ways that the project could enhance levels of accessibility or where we could address gender, age, culture, religion, etc. And that's still part of our process. But we're also acknowledging that it's really important for us to be involved at the onset.

00;34;53;14 – 00;35;24;03
Victoria
So having, you know, a community engagement workshop where we're explaining what inclusive design is, how we achieve it, and really working hand in hand, not only with the design team but also with the community to help pull out those key goals that can be established really early on in the project. We've come up with some really creative ways to also tap into community thoughts and needs.

00;35;24;03 – 00;35;52;07
Victoria
So one of those is by doing a really wide reaching survey where we're asking folks, what are your needs, what are your hopes for this project? What isn't working right now? What could be working better? And so we're even able to get input outside of a smaller working group to even as far as the entire community, depending on the needs and wants of the client.

00;35;52;07 – 00;36;26;13
Victoria
And so really by framing the importance of tapping into the community upfront, we're basing our recommendations that really are reflecting what the community tells us is important for that space. And so it's a really different approach than we were able to do in the past, not because we didn't want to, but I think because we were just in the early stages of developing, you know, our own expertise and our own approach.

00;36;26;22 – 00;36;41;03
Victoria
So certainly it's a complete reshape and we're really excited about it and we're definitely looking forward to keeping everyone posted on those projects as they complete.

00;36;42;00 – 00;37;00;11
Alex
So now that we've discussed some of the key components that make up an equity centered approach to design, I'm curious, how does it feel that your research and development on this

topic is finally materializing shortly after rejoining SWA? And is it a coincidence? It seems very fitting for a variety of reasons. I'd love to hear your thoughts on it.

00;37;00;26 – 00;37;42;02
Victoria
I love that. I don't know if it's a coincidence. I think it is a very concerted decision to rejoin SWA. You know, I mean as you know, the firm is a wonderful place to work and also has really an unparalleled reputation leading building performance initiatives across the country. And, you know, when we think about, I really thought about where would be the right home for my research and for these initiatives that are really just burgeoning and emerging at this time.

00;37;42;24 – 00;38;18;25
Victoria
And I think that the work that SWA has been doing over the last 50 years is, you know, we just celebrated our 50 year anniversary. But, you know, I think that the work that the firm has been doing has demonstrated tenets of equity. And so I'm really excited to both support the work that the firm is doing and then also perhaps bring in a new lens to exploring equity in the built environment and how that relates to building performance.

00;38;18;25 – 00;38;31;09
Victoria
So to me, I think it's a natural fit. I'm really thrilled to be back and I'm also really excited. My first stint was in the DC office and now I am in the New York office, which is really exciting.

00;38;31;27 – 00;38;44;28
Alex
It is really exciting and it seems like the perfect fit. I have one final question for you, and it's one that we like to ask all of our guests when we have you back on the podcast in five years, what will we be talking about then?

00;38;45;19 – 00;39;12;14
Victoria
You know, I think in five years I hope that we're not talking about how we achieve equity in the built environment. I hope we're talking about how we know it's important to embed equity in the built environment. You know, a lot of times we need in this in this discipline, we need the business case. We need to show why it's important to include sustainability.

00;39;12;14 – 00;39;42;18
Victoria
We need to show why it's important to have healthy buildings. And that's just part of the reality. And certainly right now, I think, you know, anecdotally, we know it's important to embed equity in the built environment, but we can't really point concretely to why. And so this is really the next chapter for me is how do we measure the impact of equity in the built environment?

00;39;43;11 – 00;40;27;20
Victoria
And, you know, certainly, and you said it really well, SWA has a deep bench of expertise in measuring quantitative aspects of building performance, energy usage, functionality, you know, these, these really brilliant studies that are showing how buildings are better for the planet and for communities. And I really hope that my research will help to support and build on those types

of studies, and particularly when we're thinking about equity and, you know, inclusive design, the functionality may not necessarily be an indicator of success.

00;40;27;28 – 00;41;19;25
Victoria
It might be how a person feels a sense of belonging, or feels a sense of pride, or someone showing up to their work space and feeling like I can be productive here. So it's a lot of these kind of, you know, very value laden indicators of how buildings make people better and how they make communities better. That I think when coupled with the quantitative aspect that we are already capturing, is just going to be a clear pathway of, you know, this is why together these concepts of sustainability, health equity, inclusive design, accessibility, how when these integrate, that's really what building performance is about.

00;41;19;25 – 00;41;37;26
Victoria
And so I hope in five years we're creating a new paradigm for design that's really centered on integrating these concepts of building performance, and that we're measuring how this is done and why it's important and yeah, I think we'll be unstoppable.

00;41;39;14 – 00;42;05;17
Alex
I couldn't agree more. Thanks, Victoria. Thanks for listening. As you could probably tell, we are thrilled to have Victoria back on the team. Her knowledge of equity in the built environment is unmatched and thanks to her research, the impact of her work will likely span far beyond our firm. For more info, check out the show notes at swinter.com slash podcast. Buildings + Beyond is brought to you by Steven Winter Associates.

00;42;06;02 – 00;42;27;18
Alex
Our goal is to improve the built environment. If you're on a similar mission, consider checking out our careers page. We currently have around 19 openings across our Connecticut, New York, D.C. and Boston offices. We even have an open position in Florida, if you're interested. If you have ideas for episodes, suggestions for guests, or general feedback about the show, we would love to hear it.

00;42;28;02 – 00;42;44;06
Alex
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