Kristin Gecan:
Welcome to *With Intent*, a podcast from IIT Institute of Design about how design permeates our world, whether we call it design or not. I'm Kristin Gecan. This episode, I talked to Richard Wallace, an organizer in Chicago for more than a decade. Richard is focused on supporting black informal workers. People like George Floyd, who for whatever reason are boxed out of the formal economy, actually, there is a reason, Richard explains the reasons we have an informal economy in the first place, the historic rivalry between Hispanic and black informal workers, his confidence in democracy and why the informal economy is tied to issues of equity and race.

Richard Wallace:

**The informal economy essentially is about 40% of the US workforce, almost 70% of the global workforce.** When you talk about workers across the world, the majority of those are informal workers. It is a diversified set of economic activities and enterprises that many folks engage in, in order to make a means to subsistence. It looks like the bucket boys, looks like street performances. It looks like hiphop. The origins of hiphop is informality. The origins of jazz is informality, the origins of the lottery is informality. What we used to call number running back in the day is what they call the lottery today. If you look at ride sharing, it was an informal practice, an informal occupation.

If you look at childcare specifically in our communities today, there's still tons of childcare that goes unrecognized, if you have children, you have to work. Someone take care of your children. And not everybody has the capacity to spend $1,400 a month for childcare. It's ultimately like our folks are answering questions that are pressed upon them or there's a demand upon them. And they create solutions to it. And many of those are just informal occupations looks like selling socks. It looks like bootlegging alcohol. If you looked at bootlegging alcohol during prohibition, there was a multitude of Black and Brown and white bootleggers that were all working together. And the second that it becomes legalized formalized by the state, there's a lack of inclusion of Black workers in that industry. And Black owners in the manufacturing. Like you could find a lot of Black brands or labels, which is just a label. I think a lot of people get that confused. They're like, oh, well this is rock. It's like, yeah, that's rock, that's a label, but they don't manufacture the actual liquor. Those recipes aren't forgotten. They don't have access in this moment. And it goes to like street performances and there's a ton of occupations that exist out there. It also looks like a lot of people work and they do demo. So they'll go and they'll demolition a house and they'll get paid in cash. There's just a host of black of informal occupations. There's the candy lady. I grew up in a community where there was a candy lady that lived on the block and you would go there and you would buy your frozen like Kool-Aid cups. I don't know if you know what that is in. It's like styrofoam, you rip it off and you eat it all the way down the bottom and get your candy and whatnot, just straight from our house.

That is informality. Recently, we released a report and it showed pretty uniquely that among the informal workers that were surveyed, most of them had multiple occupations, multiple informal occupations. So the person who was selling socks, sold CDs on the side, also did childcare on the side, also hair braided and so it was like, I think in our original strategic plan, we were thinking about building out these informal worker associations by trade. And then when we got into it, we learned that like, no, it's almost impossible because they would all be the same people because these jobs are kind of like, it's a system of occupations and they wear different hats in different moments.

Kristin Gecan:
They'd have like 10 different union meetings to go to and...
Richard Wallace:
Yeah, unique. It's unique in that way. Like they would all be in different. So what we have to just house everybody is in.

Kristin Gecan:
Okay. And so another thing that black informal workers or any informal workers seem to share as a sense of entrepreneurialism. Like meeting the moment and finding what they can do to meet that moment. And I think you framed this in the past as a deep creativity of being able to kind of make ends meet or whatever the end goal is. So one of the things that you've said is the depth of creativity required to thrive within an alternative labor system. So can you just talk about that depth of creativity that you mentioned, and is there a way that, what you mentioned just now with like the potential unions might be able to...

Richard Wallace:
To organize yeah.

Kristin Gecan:
What would they be able to do, in order to, yeah.

Richard Wallace:
Yeah. I mean, I think it's a con I mean, creativity generally is at its best when conditions are dire. Like you ever looked inside of your refrigerator. And it was, right before, like a week, a couple days before payday, you hadn't gone grocery shopping or whatever, and you just make a meal up. And it's like, oh, this is one of the best meals I ever had. For a lot of folks this is the constant condition. Where you open the refrigerator up and there isn't much in it and you have to figure out something and it's sometimes pairing with things which you would never have paired before. So there's innovation. And there's a lot of things that go into to it. But creativity, like I said, it comes from pression and it also comes from scarcity.

If there's one car and there's 20 people living in a few buildings and chances are they're going to share that car. And then you get ride sharing. If someone has a particular skill, whether it be hair braiding or there's some folks that just go and help people set up their computers and whatnot. And help them navigate, setting up a Gmail account. That's another creative, but it's also answering a need. When you think about Eric Garner, he was selling loose cigarettes two for a dollar. Let's take a look at the average per capita income and the areas. So if you look at West Garfield park, average per capita income is $12,000 a year. Common sense says they don't have $15 to pay, to buy a pack of cigarettes I'm not endorsing cigarettes smoking. But it does make sense that you would buy two for a dollar there.

Same thing as it relates to like towels and socks. And there's a demand for lower price commodities. And there aren't avenues for them. A lot of the brick and mortars that existed in our communities are shut down. People have to travel hours in order to get fresh produce. And getting on the train, train to the bus, bust to the train, et cetera, to get fresh produce, and then to tow it back, bus, train bus, when you see people that are selling fresh fruit or food in the community, it's really it's addressing that need. So that's when I say the creativity, it's kind of rooted in the needs and then know how could unions in the long run.

I organized in labor for a number of years. One of the challenges for me was just the history of labor. If you think about the Wagner act, you think about the national labor relationships act and the exclusion of agricultural workers during the time, like those blow close to Black workers, historically created conditions where informality became the need or became the answer.
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language was one of the first barriers that existed between them. And they were able to translate the stories from the Latino temp workers. And they would tell the Black workers the stories about yeah, we were chosen first, but did you know I only got $6 an hour because I'm undocumented. Did you know that my sister, this person was sexually assaulted and there was no recourse. There was no one for us to go to. Did you know that the transportation, the drivers would take us to the currency exchanges the cash to checks and take 20% of everyone's profit across the bus.

And the Black workers were like, I wish they would. I wish they would do that. Da, da, da. And then we would lean into the conversation about citizenship. And so through those conversations, Black workers were able to realize, oh, oh, they don't select me because of my citizenship. My citizenship demands through the national labor that they give me minimum wage at the least. My citizenship ensures that if something happens to me or I'm attacked, I can call the police or I can call whoever, I can call security. I can call whatever in order to get some kind of reprimand. But for the Latino workers, the undocumented workers in specific, there was nothing in nowhere that they could turn. And so, yes, it was an okay to get on the bus, but it was also an agreement to a deeper level of exploitation.

And so we're able to have these conversations, one about discrimination, because they would see the background check signs in the window or whatever, whatever. And the other one was about exploitation and it kind of landed, I think my mentor at the time, my boss, he was my boss then, Leon would say he was Latino brother and he would say, they don't love us. They just hit us both differently. And that would just would open up the door for new conversations. And then what created, what happened was a very integrated workforce. And they were willing to fight for each other to get on the bus. Like I'm not going to get on this bus to go to this factory unless some Black folks get on with me because I know that they're going to stick up for me if X happens.

And they're going to ensure that if this bus pulls over at the current exchange, ain't nobody cash a checks. It was like it created some balance. And so that was like my entry into the labor work. And then from there I was the deputy direct of the worker center for racial justice. And that was kind of like, Scott worker's collaborative was extremely focused, fine tuned. It was a niche. The worker center for racial justice was just the whole world of what is Black. It also is right around the moment where Mike Brown is killed in Ferguson, Missouri and Laquan McDonald is murdered here in Chicago and Raquel Boyd is also killed. And so it was just kind of like this direct connection between the forced discrimination of Black workers within the temp labor sector, which is honestly like the last house on the block.

If you really, really, really need to get a job, this is where you go. But it's often the only opportunity that you have, but seeing that and seeing all of those folks that were lined up to get work every day, they're up there at six o'clock in the morning, it literally beat any myth or notion that people have about Black people not being interested in labor should go visit a staffing agency at five or six in the morning, you have Black folks lined up at six and these staffing agencies are nowhere near their communities. They literally have lifted up staffing agencies out of Black communities and moved them to like Berwyn, Cicero, et cetera, et cetera, like corridors of them. And so Black folks are getting up early in the morning, getting on buses to get to these staffing agencies, sitting there for three or four hours just to be told no, that experience then paired to this reality of police, state violence when it came to Laquan McDonald and the 16 shots and the lack of mental health and services, et cetera, cetera, for Black communities, except it just kind of broadened my vision to be like, okay, this system of discrimination is a microcosm of a larger system of discrimination.

And anti-Black racism. And so through that work, I kind of got a broader sense of understanding of exactly how systems are working. It trickled down, they create the possibilities for staffing
agencies to do what they do. I ended up becoming the Illinois campaign director for a place called Jobs among America. And we did inclusive procurement work, which is, sounds very wonky, like very like, ah, inclusive procurement. But essentially we need to know that it is how our government, local government spends money. And so through procurement, this procurement in specific was coming out of the CTA and it was about rail car development. So it was a billion dollar plus procurement. And what inclusive procurement is essentially, how do you create an MOU. What is another way to put it a community benefit agreement in the negotiation process. It is so that when you bid on this contract in order... It's a lot easier to get them to fill out a community benefits agreement in order to get to the money.

It's really hard to get them to commit to community benefits agreement. After they get the money through that CTA contract, it was a CRC side thing is the company that wanted out of China. There was an agreement to develop a rail car facility in Chicago. This is where the rail car movement within a black community was born. And so I was really proud of that moment. It ended up producing about 300 or so jobs. I'm excited. We're talking with IBW and SMART two powerful unions in Chicago, developing pre-app apprenticeship programs to ensure that young Black folks can get access to these living wage, life changing jobs. And I came back to my desk and I quickly Googled the unemployment statistics in Chicago and realized, I did all the numbers, broke it down.

I was like, so there's nearly 80,000 unemployed, Black people in the city of Chicago. This is 300 jobs total. Now of those 300 jobs there, certain percentage are going to be Black minority folks, but it was going to be a lot, a lot of folks, right. But 300 is the max. And so at the end of the day, I was like, no, this is something to celebrate, but there's so much more work to do. There's so much more work to do because I correlate through my own experience, the unemployment statistics are directly correlated to the Intercommunity violence statistics. If you look at young African American men ages 17 to 24, they have the highest rate of joblessness. They have the highest rate, but being perpetrated as a homicides and highest rate of being victims of homicides.

You plug that, take that statistic, sit it right there. And then go look at the unemployment statistic for that same exact demographic. And it will match. **So for me, access to employment was more than just creating a living wage and being able to acquire subsistence, it's life saving.** And so I was just like, for the other 80,000 or 79,000, 970, whatever the number was going to play, or 900. Yeah. Whatever for those folks, what do we do? And so that's really where I got to equity and transformation. It was that, okay, we got 300 in the door. They're still the rest of them. Who's organizing the rest of them. Labor's got labor. And those are the people who currently have occupations or car carry members who are on the roles to get the next job. But who's got the folks that are not employed, have historically been unemployed and who are the greatest victims at the greatest risk to gun violence in the city of Chicago, who's organizing those folks? Because the solutions to their problems are not going to come from some ivory tower, they're going to come from them. And so really the goal of organizing is to really mature the voice of the most marginalized in a way that like influences democracy. And so that's how we got to equity and transformation, like all of these folks, and it was also like, yo, if we got 80,000 unemployed black folks, then it would look like people literally starving out on the streets, which is, we do have that. But when you add informality to the picture, what you're able to see is that, oh, we've created a process of survival, absent of formal labor economy.

Because historically it hasn't come to save us. A lot of our folks realize it's not going to come to save us. So it's really like I'm on my own in order to make ends meet. So you get a lot of this entrepreneurial spirit, you get a lot of business development, you get a lot of I can buy this for $20 and sell it for 40. You get a lot of that business minded folks or whatever, you get a lot of
that in the community. But I think it even goes a little bit deeper when you start to look at what existed in those communities before credentialism literally shut black businesses down.

Kristin Gecan:
So there's a lot of themes here that you're tying together that make a lot of sense in terms of how you've kind of demonstrated the correlations between unemployment and safety. Equity and Transformation is the name of your organization. Why isn't it something like Safety and Employment, or something like that? Other than obviously that wouldn't give you the desired acronym, but is there a reason that, I mean, one way to look at it is that Equity and Transformation is positive sounding. I just wonder what kind of thought went into positioning it in that direction and why you sort of trump it those particular words.

Richard Wallace:
Yeah. So equity is the inverse of inequity, right? And inequity is unfairness. Equity is a fairness, essentially everybody's starting to race with equal footing. And so equity is the goal, but in order to get to equity, certain things have to happen. My position currently right now in 2021, my mind is like reparations has to happen. You can't get to equity without addressing slavery, without addressing redlining, without addressing the war on drugs and the impact that's had on Black communities. It's like, we'll do everything except do what we know needs to be done. Let's get creative, we'll create a workforce development, we'll put billions of dollars in the workforce development program. Everyone gets paid except the people that are actually the participants. Like they're not the trainers and not the facilitators, whatever. And so it's like equity essentially means fairness, fairness in my mind as it relates to how we get the Black community to where it needs to be or to equity is actually, it's about acknowledging past harms.

It's about committing to repair that, it's about a guarantee of non repetition, guaranteeing that this will not happen again. The war on drugs was bad. We literally have billionaires walking around who are the biggest dope dealers in the world right now, selling cannabis every day, it's completely legal. But then even with the new kind of legalization, there's still increased arrests of Black people. There has to be repair. So if you hurt me and you commit to repair, you're going to be there, you want to return me to my original state. And then the last piece is compensation, which I think is only thing that's usually lifted up in the eyes of folks, Black people reparations, that means we got to cut the check or people talk about the 40 acres in the mule, but the UN made a whole nother argument as it relates to reparations.

And it's not just compensation. The other pieces are to ensure that this will never happen again. That's how we landed on equity. That's what equity means to me. And transformation is essentially once we get to equity, we will transform. One of my comrades, Mary Hooks works at song in Atlanta. And Mary Hooks told me, we are transform through the work. When you ask people, what does safety mean to you? And the majority of the folks that were in our community were like, the ability to walk to the store without being in fear of either the police or inter community violence occurring. But in order for that to be transformed, there needs to be some form of equity.

Kristin Gecan:
So at EAT you work on a number of initiatives. Can you tell me what you're focused on right now? And maybe a summary of the types of projects or initiatives that you're... But maybe start with what you're focused on right now.

Richard Wallace:
We passed two policies. We’re a part of coalitions that passed two policies. One was HP 1438, which was cannabis legalization. The other one was recently HP 3653, which is the breathe act / the safety act / pretrial fairness / prison gerrymandering. It was a lot. And so right now we’re focused on doing political education around what was actually included in HP 3653, because although I think the policy makers academics the lawmakers, whatever they know what was included, the community doesn't as well as it relates to end money bond or as it relates to early release mechanisms for their family members who are currently incarcerated, et cetera. So it's really about doing political education within community around that. The other piece is we also do research. And so the continuation of that survival economies report is we’re exploring guaranteed income targeted guaranteed income.

And there’s a very big difference between universal basic income and then targeted guaranteed income. And so we’re exploring a targeted guaranteed income pilot project that we’re launching. It's called Chicago Futures Fund on the west side of Chicago in west Garfield Park, where we did our study. And it's a continuation of that research. The participants are young African Americans from west Garfield Park who were previously convicted of a crime. So the study's going to be looking at recidivism rates, income volatility, psychological wellness, they'll receive $500 a month on for 18 months. And we’re really going to be telling a really robust story about how this increased income impacts their life. And I think that in some ways it's like not a big deal. It's like, oh, that's only $6,000 a year. Doesn't make a big dent if you live in Lincoln Park.

But when you live in west Garfield Park where the average capital income, like I said, is around $12,000, it's almost half. We believe it'll have an impact on recidivism. And so that's that piece. And then in addition, we are in the early stages of kicking off a campaign for reparations for the war on drugs.

The reality is there's an economic hole. There's a hole in our communities, a financial hole in our communities that has to be filled before we can even start the race. And we keep just thinking, oh, we can just create a policy. It was a good policy, but you didn't repair the community first. You didn’t repair the applicants first. So those are our campaign. And so we're focusing on reparations for the war on drugs and what that would look like ultimately for me is like a direct cash payment to victims of the war on drugs in Illinois, we saw recently that young Black folks are on the increase as it relates to tickets and fines as it relates to cannabis, simply because they don't have the canister that you hold the cannabis in inside of your vehicle.

And so I know a lot of white folks that smoke weed in Chicago and none of them have that canister either. So why are we getting increased arrests? Because there's increased surveillance in our communities. A lot of folks also don't know the law. And that's in the white community as well, but they don't have to worry because they don't have to use it necessarily. But we have to know what our rights are. So we're also going to be doing kind like a know your rights component.

Kristin Gecan:
Tell me about how you see design coming into your work or not, and your relationship to design.

Richard Wallace:
Design is everything, the computer that we’re on right now is designed. Like you knew that if I came on here, you said, use your headphones. Make sure that you press record and when you hit record, you expect it to work. Because it was designed that way. The absence of equity essentially for me is because of a design. And so we really have to begin to reimagine what this design looks like. And we're trying to reshape this economy into one that actually answers to the demands of the people in need, opposed to the demands of the
people that are in power. What does it mean to not have wages or not have access to wages in a wage based economy, an economy that was designed for you to have wages. You go to the grocery store, you can't be like, yo here's some hope take this and let me get these eggs. And no, it doesn't work like that. You legit have to have cash. So what does that mean? Within the design for people to not have cash.

Kristin Gecan:
You also talk about the importance of democracy and people having agency in their democracy. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about any work that EAT might do in that area or how that might relate to design or how design might be able to aid that situation?

Richard Wallace:
I think democracy is one of the most unique components of our design and one of the most empowering components of our design specifically in the state of Illinois. In the state of Illinois, no matter if you're formerly incarcerated or not, you can vote. And the way that we kind of articulate democracy at EAT is that if a decision is made that impacts your life. This is when we're talking to somebody, you have a right to play a role in how that decision is made. So that could look like voting, that could be joining the student or the teacher. What do you call it? The parent conference.

Kristin Gecan:
PTO?

Richard Wallace:
Yeah. PTO. There we go. Yeah. Yeah. But you can engage to democratically in your area. And you can speak to your elected officials and you can create change. And that's a very powerful tool.

Which is why in places like Florida, where they're restricting voters' rights and they're scaling back accessibility to voting, et cetera, et cetera. There's a reason why they're doing it, because they know this is a powerful tool, because a host of things have happened in the city of Chicago that were not great during the pandemic. And so we want to make sure that folks are held accountable and we can hold people accountable through our vote. And so that's really like how we assess democracy at Equity and Transformation and we believe deeply in the power of democracy, but that really just come through the building of local power, doing a lot of political education like yo, do you know who your alder person is? Do you know who your state representative is? Have you ever spoken to him?

Have you ever been to Springfield? And I'll say one little short story, we brought brother named Solomon. You don't mind if I mention his name, his first time to Springfield, this was before pandemic, the glory days. And he had never been to Springfield before and he's up and down the hallways he's talking to all the different state reps. And he had no idea that they were that accessible. Because he had never been there during the lobby days, et cetera, et cetera, when the halls are just packed. And so it just sparked him, like he came back to his community and was just like, I got a selfie where I got a picture with this legislator and I met this one and he was just telling stories about it. And then other people were interested in going. And so that's really about like creating momentum so that people can kind of join in this process towards creating or re imagining the society that they want to live in. And then getting into the rooms with the decision makers and informing them that this is the world that they want to live in. And these are the policies, this is the way that they want the policies to be shaped, to create that.
Kristin Gecan:
So I have a question that I've been asking each time I do one of these. And how would you define design? I know we talked about design a couple questions ago a little bit, but do you have, what would be your definition for that word?

Richard Wallace:
I think it's like in my most non studied way, it's a utility to make things easier for people. We design a wheelchair, we design the wheel, we design whatever, but ultimately it's in order to make a life easier for people, for animals, I guess as well, for the environment, et cetera. But it's a utility at best to just make things easier.

Kristin Gecan:
And so with that definition, how do you see EAT using design?

Richard Wallace:
Well, I think that we've designed a program to make it easier for Black and informal workers to have their voices heard in our democracy. Really it's all we do. There's a lot of brilliant language on our website, but that's essentially what we do.

Kristin Gecan:
Thanks to Richard for sharing how he uses design as a tool for transforming our current situation into a more desirable and equitable one. Richard is founder of EAT Equity and Transformation and a 2021 Latham fellow at the Institute of Design for more about our Latham fellows visit our website and YouTube channel. You can find show notes and a full transcript of this conversation on the IIT Institute of Design website, id.iit.edu. Please subscribe, rate and review With Intent on your favorite service. This is a new show and we'd love your support. Our theme music comes from ID alum Adithya Ravi. Until next time.