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 week, I talk to Jon Veal. Jon Veal, with friend, Jordan Campbell is the co-founder of alt_, an organization that focuses on the power of community. The alt_ market is the organization's flagship program. With passion, faith, and a few friends, Jon and Jordan created their first market in a matter of hours in June 2020 in the Austin neighborhood of Chicago, the neighborhood they both call home. alt_ transformed an abandoned space into a communal free market, encouraging community members to give, take, and take care of one another. Now markets like the one first created in Austin exist across communities on Chicago's west and south sides. Jon and I talk about his commitment to Austin in the west side of Chicago, and how serving his community and making art come together. He starts us out by considering the importance of providing alternative spaces and alternative narratives to the ones we've come to know and accept.

Jon Veal:

Stories are not typically told by Black people for Black people. They're usually narratives that are put on Black people from another source, typically, the white guy. And what comes to mind for me is DuBois, how he talked about the double-consciousness of both just being an American and being Black, and how these kind of dichotomies kind of intersect. And when Donald Trump is talking about the crime happening in Chicago, we know what he's talking about. Nobody's being stupid with it. We know exactly who he's alluding to. We know he's alluding to race. When I went to New York and they were talking about, oh man, you from Chi-Raq, I'm like, yo, that's crazy that that narrative kind of stuck, of Chi-Raq, the war zone, Gotham City.

I was with a young man the other day, just on the corner. And he was just talking about how this is Gotham, and what is Gotham known for? Gotham known is for it's atrocious crime rate in which they needed a vigilante to come and clean up the streets, because the police were actually corrupt. That's the narrative that we're fighting against, right? We're fighting against the fact that people will say, if there's a story about Black spaces, it's typically about violence. They use these different words, like super predators. Any time a Black man is arrested, they immediately go to his jail record. But when someone else is arrested from another different color, predominantly white color, it's not really about their jail record. It's like, oh, this is what a shame. And they've got this family member and they've been doing this and doing that. It's like, well, this person has family too. And so, I think what we are trying to do is humanize. Let's just humanize, at the end of the day, the west side has families. If you pull nothing else from what I've said, west side has families.

Kristin Gecan:
Can you tell me a little bit about what you're focused on right now?

Jon Veal:
Sure. But before I do, you've got to tell me, do you consider yourself a designer?

Kristin Gecan:
No.

Jon Veal:
Why or why not?

Kristin Gecan:
I think there's a lot of different ways that people think about what design is, and who is a designer and who can call themselves that. I have never been trained as a designer. It's not the sort of lens through which I look at the world, to be honest, although I'm becoming very familiar with it. I think of myself as a writer and a reader.

Jon Veal:
I love that. I'm a walking [inaudible 00:03:38] sometimes, because as much as I would say that I wouldn't consider myself a designer, there's this artist who I really look up to and he is a choreographer and a dancer. He's also a paraplegic. And so, the way in which I understand dance is from the canon of ballet, it's from the canon of hip hop and step, and all these different things, breakdancing. And for him, to re-contextualize dance meant for him to move across a floor, the politics of space, all very choreographed in a very specific way. I met him when I was in my young 20s. So, like 22, 23, and it kind of opened me up to the possibilities of contextualization. You understand this one thing to be this thing, but it also is not smoothed into this box over here.

And I think that's how I kind of like to look at projects is like, I like to look at things with two birds and one stone. So, right now, what alt_ has really been known for is the alt_ market. There's four markets in the city of Chicago. Currently we had a outside evaluator come and evaluate the positivity and the negative effects of the markets. And so far, the markets have fed 400 families a month, and they've also reduced crime by 19%. This is kind of acting as environmental justice, right?

Kristin Gecan:
So, we're talking about the spaces that you work in and how, as you said, everyone deserves to live in a beautiful, safe space. You've also said that abandoned spaces indicate that there's something wrong with the system. So, I wanted to talk a little bit about systems, and how you started to see the underlying system, and how you recognized it. And if you could describe a little bit what might still be invisible to some people, but what you see as the systems underlying these issues.

Jon Veal:
I can't remember saying the system's broken. I probably said that, but also at the same time, in the same breath, the system's working fine. The system is exactly how it should be, this is by design. One out of three Black men is in jail. That's not an accident, that's by design. What we have been doing is called activism, but it's not activist in nature. It's just being a regular human being, is being able to call out the inadequacy of the system and say that, Hey, this over here, this is a problem, and this can be felt. I just got to give context, I think, of the west side of
Chicago. Austin is the largest geographical area of Chicago. It's the second largest in terms of population in the city of Chicago. And yet, you go to the neighboring community of Oak Park and there's not a blade of grass that's out of place.

Oak Park, you have tributes to Frank Lloyd Wright. You have tributes to Ernest Hemingway. And there's a bench and there's a garbage can on every corner. But you go to Austin, literally across the street, maybe two or three houses down, and there's no garbage bin. There's no bench. It's just, there's trash everywhere. And people kind of just have to fend for themselves here. And it's like, well, wait a minute, we're part of the same place. We share the same space, but because the population changes, we have less, that's a discrepancy of the city. That's by design.

Kristin Gecan:
At ID, we talk a lot about focusing. Starting with problems rather than starting with solutions so that we... You don't want to shoehorn a solution into a space that doesn't fit. So, you want to really focus on what is the problem you're trying to solve and then, go in that direction and find a solution once you really understand the problem. I wonder how you think about this sort of working with the community in order to make sure that you are creating something that works for and with the community, that you're not just lobbing something into that space that isn't going to be beneficial.

Jon Veal:
Yeah. There's just really great book, it's called, *When Helping Hurts*, and I've been reading it a lot. I love that level of care that people take in consideration, that they take in, before you introduce something new to people. For us, we approach things from a needs-based analysis perspective. And so, understanding the needs is crucial. And so, we don't assume the needs. We kind of just... We live in this community, we walk around and we see, we ask questions, we ask neighbors and we see what's up. We also look at city data. We look at police reports, we look at infrastructure reports. We have conversations with community members and organizations, other institutions that have been doing the work for a very long time, 30, 40+ years. But to be real, even realer than that, sometimes there's nothing wrong with this lobby and stuff.

I think that designing for others, you have to be an auteur. And I don't say this in every circle, but I'll say this here, in this circle. This is the way I lead. I have learned early on, when I left high school, I ran a clothing line for about two years. And what I learned about my employees is that, if I gave them too many options, they would have a little bit of fear with choosing anything. And so, I was like, all right, cool. I have to kind of take choice away from the equation a little bit, not too much. And so, this isn't regularly said, but if there's a hundred colors, I'll choose three colors that really, really work. And I'll do the research on those colors. I'll ask a small group of people about those colors.

And then, from those hundred colors, I'll show my team these three colors and say, okay, what do you guys think about these three? Can you choose one from here. And I think that's kind of how we look at community projects. It's like, all right, we have this skillset and we can do this. Because if I bring in a group of people, a group of neighbors and I say, Hey guys, we want to do this, and what do you guys think? There might be a hundred ideas that come out of that meeting. The meeting might be two hours and there might not be a lot of progress in there.

But if I come with a vision and say, Hey guys, here's what's going on. And here's a couple ways...
to solve it. Here’s the three that we can do with our budget and our skillset, this is number one, two and three. Which do you all think? And from there the projects might evolve and might change. Neighbors might say they, they need more of this than that. And they might say, well, maybe this isn’t a problem at all. Maybe you should go back to the drawing board. I say, all right, cool, that works as well. But I like to go in with a plan. I like to go in with what I’m called to do, if that makes sense.

Kristin Gecan:

Yeah. So, tell me a little bit more about that. You had mentioned that faith comes into your practice, a fair amount. And so, when you say... that's what makes me think of your reference to, 'what I'm called to do' makes me think of that. So, can you tell me a little bit about the role of faith in your practice and in alt_?

Jon Veal:

Faith pours into everything that we do, everything. We're trying to be intentional, every screw matters. Because when you're building a structure, the last thing you need is for things to be kind of unsettled, or maybe that the math is wrong and it's uneven, and you don't want these things to come down or hurt anybody. So, you have to take your time, right. But at the same time in my faith, Jesus was never too busy to come and stop and talk to people. When I think about his life, he was based in service, he would serve and give, and he would teach people. He wouldn't judge people, he'd stay with them. And a lot of people judged him like, Hey man, you're hanging out with the tax collector, or Hey, you're hanging out with that guy over there, he drinks a lot, "you drink a lot."

And he was being judged because he was hanging out with the people that needed him most. And so, I think the same with alt_ as what we ultimately are, is an arts ministry. We're not preaching, we're not really trying to convert anybody. We just believe this is what we're called to do with the skills that we have. Even with my first show, five, six years ago, Black Rivers, Steal Away. I created the 10 commandments. There are two black slate tablets that come off of the roof of St. Lawrence Church, on the South Side of Chicago. Now, St. Lawrence was a church that couldn't be saved. The company I was working at the time, we tried to save the building, we couldn't save the building, but we bought the roof and I was able to get two pieces of slate from the roof.

So, me and my friends, we laser cut in the new rules, the rules that your grandma, your mom, your auntie would tell you growing up. Like, don't start now, and won't be none. Rules you would need to live in the hood. And so, we built an arc for that recently, two years ago, out of found wood from the west and south sides. And so, just going around to empty lots, going around behind liquor stores and finding wood and then, measuring it out and making it super clean. Yeah. But there's something really sacred to me about that church. The community could no longer support this church. And the hope of this community went with this church. As the church became more and more vacant, the hope in the space became more and more vacant to the point in which it collapsed, and to the point in which it could not be saved. But we were able to save the roof. We were able to save the foundations.

And from that foundation, we were able to create a little bit of law that we carry in. So, when I have a show at a fancy space, they see the remains of something that was sacred.

Kristin Gecan:
Yeah.

Jon Veal:
I think that touch on a certain way. But then, living by that sacredness too, it's not just the object that's important, the work is important. The way that we serve is like, we're not just serving people then walking away. It's like you want to give as much dignity, as much pride. These are my friends, these are my family, let's have a conversation, how you doing? What have you be and up to? What's your plans for this summer? How's COVID been treating you, man. It's been a little rough for me, personally. And that takes a lot of, like, vulnerability. So I think that's the number one lesson that most people have kind of come to know when it comes to kind of community building, is that it takes a lot of humility, and that our practice takes 10 years to build trust, and one day to lose that trust.

Kristin Gecan:
Yeah. Well, and then, the other thing that you're remarking upon is, the difference between your art practice and alt_. Obviously, there's plenty of similarities too, but from a design perspective, sounds to me like the difference between creating an object or a product, and creating an experience. The experience that you're describing, the collaboration part of it is very important.

Jon Veal:
It's central to it. I think that I want to spend time on that. When it comes collaboration, the reason why it's fluid is because it started with my art practice. It started with me not being able to create a boat and make a successful oil painting at the same time. It's like I have to choose one, I have to be committed to one. And so, I have to bring in Jordan Campbell, like, Hey Jordan, I actually need you to build something that you've never built before, or Hey, Starlada, I can dance, but I can't dance and stay as intense as I want to. So, I kind of need you to dance, and be with me in this process. And my relationship with Starlada, my relationship with Jordan Campbell, my relationship with Monica Benson and Chris Calderon, my relationship changed the nature of the show because they would add things. They would say this doesn't work, but this works. And because they themselves are experts in their own fields. And so, it became more of a conversation that we were having. My practice was really modeled after method acting in a sense of, how can we as a group immerse ourselves into something for as long as possible. And then, it became kind of more structural. Like, all right, let's do an artist retreat. And so, it started in my apartment, we called it Haven, and then, we did it for two or three iterations along with the exhibitions. And then, the exhibitions felt a little bit... One year they felt satisfying, the next year they felt like shackles. They felt like I'm kind of doing more harm than good because I'm looking around and we're all talking about trauma. We're all trying to kind of express this and understand this in similar ways, but I'm not interested in understanding trauma anymore.

It's like, how do we move past that? We need Black industry, we need institutional power. And so, when I think about powers and when I think about capital, the ones that I stay on in my head is, there's economic capital, cultural capital, institutional capital, and then there's human capital, right? And so, most people trade their human capital for economic capital. They trade hours of their life, their labor, they trade that for liquid, for cash, for... And then, they might get land, which is cool, which is economic capital. But I started seeing there's other ways that people were able to build power. This institutional capital was really important. This social capital is really important. Social capital is just everybody
you know, how can you leverage that? That's Instagram at the end of the day, that's social media.

Institutional capital was the places that we don't have voice. Or if you have voice, you don't have equity, meaning the MCA might give you a show, but you don't have a say as to what the exhibitions might look like or who these things can serve. And so, for us alt_ ultimately was like, man, people on the west side are brilliant. There's so many talented, amazing artists. There's so many amazing people, and they need a platform. We need to be that platform. We need to see the change that we want to be.

Kristin Gecan:
So, we talked about this importance of the belief that everyone deserves to live in beautiful spaces. You've also said as part of that, something should remain here after us. So, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about, what you're trying to build with alt_ outside of what you're actually building, but what you're trying to build, maybe from more of a legacy point of view.

Jon Veal:
That's a tricky one. I think when I talk about legacy, there's a temptation to kind of indulge with an ego of personal legacy.

Kristin Gecan:
Right.

Jon Veal:
What keeps me grounded when I think about personal legacy is, I think about John Johnson. I spent a lot of time with John Johnson's collection, the Ebony and Jet collection. And it's just funny to me, because it's like, man, John Johnson was killing it G, he was the first Black owner of real estate on the Michigan Mile. The Ebony building, where every room is [inaudible 00:19:17] the carpets, the wallpaper, real artists like the Jackson, Stevie Wonder, Al Green, everybody coming and visit him, Muhammad Ali, he's got this amazing archive, and there's not beauty supply or a barber shop that I know of, that wouldn't have an Ebony around in that store somewhere.

It might be in the basement, but they got it somewhere. And that's how much it meant, not just to Chicagoans, but to people of this world, people of this nation, specifically, Americans, and how we as Black and Brown folks thought about ourselves and even how other people thought of us too. And within one generation, we have forgotten John Johnson's name. If I ask a kid on the street today, if I even ask one of my peers, someone who's in their mid-twenties, late-twenties, 'Hey man, you know who John Johnson is?' A lot of people might not know.

Kristin Gecan:
No. I think you're totally right. Yeah.

Jon Veal:
That's the question for Google. I think that's a shame, but I also think that keeps me grounded in a sense of, the things that we're able to push, we might not be able to make permanent change because permanence in our world is not sustainable really. But what we are able to do is push the needle forward just a little bit for someone else to be able to take up the
baton. That keeps me grounded, and that keeps me encouraged when it comes to personal legacy, is just doing the best that we know how to do, and the next director of alt_ will be able to do things. And so, to ensure that, I'd like to share that we did a couple things to ensure legacy, just like a university when they're getting started, they do a couple legal things as well.

The first thing we did was, start with a strong board. Our board is amazing, we have Norman Teague, Joi Freeman, Chris Paisley. The reason it's so diverse, Norman Teague is a designer. He's well known in Chicago. He's over here working on the Obama Foundation library. You have Joy Freeman, Joy Freeman is financial guru for us, but she used to head the marketing and coordination of players throughout the nation, and YMCA. And so, she's got amazing connections. And then, you have Chris Paisley who works with the Surge Institute, the Surge Institute is for the teachers. They work within pedagogy and that's important for us, because for us, what we need is, we need help we with the narrative. So, understanding relationships with the press, understanding relationships with community narrative, right?

So, when you think Austin, instead of thinking, Texas, you'll think the west side of Chicago. So, that means we need disruptive art that is able to be sustainable, and at the same time penetrate people's hearts. So, storytelling. We need someone who's helping us with storytelling. We need someone with education. And then, with Norm, he's always super helpful for us in a sense of disciplinary standards, like design implies function. So, it has to function right. If we introduce a garbage bin, people need to know its a garbage bin and not just a piece of wood. And he helps us a lot with those kind of conversations. And then, me and Jordan are the artists, right. We're going to continue to be the artists and to be vanguards, whatever. The second thing that we did was super important, is that we gave ourselves lifelong board member seats.

The reason that's important is because a lot of people can get voted out of their own companies, once they introduce board members that they don't know. We wanted to prevent that from happening. We've seen that even happen. Like how Black artists are just screwed. Prince spent the whole career talking about that. From our understanding of Black music, we understand how we have to protect ourselves, even from friends sometimes. Then the other part of that is succession rights, is that we get to choose our successors. Jordan has a successor. I have a successor, and our successors will be able to have those lifelong seats. So, that's really important in terms of building Black equity, because that means that it's not just the voice that me and Jordan have, but whoever we choose is going to be able to have long term voice within their block, within their space as well.

Kristin Gecan:
You mentioned recently activism, and you also said, you don't consider yourself an activist. You again, consider yourself an artist. But you're an artist, from what I can tell, that's practicing design, that's practicing public service. So, maybe you could just talk a little bit about why you lead with that identifier of artist, and then you're using these other disciplines or tools to practice your art, I suppose. I don't know how you think about it.

Jon Veal:
Yeah. I think that, by trade, the thing I love to do is draw. I'm also a great painter as well, specifically with acrylics, but I can get down with oils or watercolors, it doesn't matter. I'm a very good draftsman, and I'm an even better writer. I write every day. I'm very similar to you in that regard, that, words carry a certain amount of energy. I can dabble between ink drawing and a sculpture the same way that alt_ can dabble within urban planning, architecture, design, and community service projects. It's the same thing. We think that the capacity of artists

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is big enough. I think that when we think ‘artists,’ we're not thinking big enough, we're thinking small, that an artist puts stuff in galleries and walks away. I'm like, whoa, the people that I look up to didn't do that.

David Hammonds was an incredible artist, but he was out there in the dead of winter, rolling up snowballs and selling them back to people, calling it blizzard ball, calling that a piece. I'm like, that's amazing. When Ai Weiwei takes a vase and drops it, this mid-century vase, and understanding the trash that’s happening both literally and figuratively, I think he's working with something else.

And so, what an artist does is, an artist plays with ideas. And I also, so this is very unique to me, when I think about an artist and our role, for me, an artist is a very talented liar. That's what we do. We lie. When you look at Ivan go painting about labor, talking about people and minds, and our hands and the den lines of the fields. He paints a flower. He's not really painting a flower. It's not a real flower. You walk in there and it's just some marks that's on a canvas. It's trying to represent something else. It's trying to talk about beauty. It's trying to talk about people. And I think, for us, when I use activism as a medium, when I use gathering as a medium, we're not talking about the form, but we're trying to use it to talk about something else.

Kristin Gecan:
Bringing all these kind of these different definitions and terms back together, at the end of the day, what unites them? What brings it together for you? Do you say to yourself, if you ask yourself, why am I do this? Why am I making this? Is there a common answer for everything that you're working on?

Jon Veal:
Recently I was discouraged. I was on the phone with another artist/designer who I really look up to and admire. And this person had said, man, you guys were like rock stars back in the day, you're like a year ago. And it kind of hurt my feelings, because even though it wasn't intentional to hurt my feelings, because even though it wasn't intentional to hurt my feelings, it felt like a very, oh, you guys haven't done anything in a while. I'm like, well, wait a minute, man, we create every day. We're out in the street every day, we're talking to our neighbors every day. It kind of hurt my feelings because not every space is public. A lot of spaces are private, but it also brought me back to my root, that we don't create for public. That was kind of the problem with the exhibitions.

They become very exploitative, self-exploitative in a sense of, you feel like you're selling your story, you feel like a salesman. I don't like feeling like a salesman. There's a reason I don't do sales. Anyway, it brings me back to my root, which is my faith. Both things seen and unseen. All that matters is that it brings honor and glory to him. Ultimately for me. There's a lot of things that we do that were unpopular at the time, but they served the people later. For instance, when we first came out of the market, it was like 3000 people liked the photo, over a hundred comments were like, where's this at? And me and Jordan had to have a moment where we talked about it as partners, and we just decided, no, we're not going to share it publicly where it is.

This is just for the block, and those who live on the block will know about it. That was unpopular man. And I think we were scared. We were going to get canceled. It's like, yo, we can get... We live in a fragile world right now. But we're not going to be people pleasers either. We know who this work is for. And I think the people on the block have really appreciated that, they felt protected, they felt loved. That's why it was such a hard conversation for us, because it comes from a place of love, loving our neighbors, just like we wouldn't want someone to do that on our
block. To us personally, that would feel exploitative. And so, for us, the through line with both the company, our faith in the personal realm, arts, all of that kind of stuff, is the same.

Kristin Gecan:
Yeah. I mean, it's clear to you and you can go to work and create every day because you have a clear focus, a clear purpose, a clear mission, and it might have very different faces, as you said before, it's polyvalent. But at the end of the day, you're after the same thing.

Jon Veal:
So, recently we were hired by 360 Nation. Well, not recently, they really hired us a year ago. The weather was starting to get kind of cold. It was getting chilly, September. And so, we decided to wait until the summer to kind of build this pergola. And we designed it together and we talked about it, and the functionality of it. The reason why is this, there's this empty lot in Lawndale, and they've kind of taken over this empty lot, gangster-style. It's like, yo man, we going to put some raised beds up in this joint. We going to get some tires and paint them and make an area for the kids. And so, there's been a lot of activation right here on the block. Kind of just this statement of, man, we're not going to go through the bureaucracy of the city and wait a hundred years, we're not going to pay. So X and X amount of money it's on our block.

Our kids already kind of hang out here. Let's just take care of the things that are on our block. Let's just take care of the things that we believe in, and in an effort to get people to stay, because a lot of people have been moving out the neighborhood. And we need those cultural amenities. Those things that kind of should be there. For us, when we heard about it and we came, visited the space, we were so inspired. It was like, man, this is such a great idea. It's so good to see people plant themselves where they are and put down their personal stamp. Like this is who I am, this block is my family, and I'm going to fight for my family. And so, for us, it was, yeah, what do you guys need?

The need was, if it's raining, if it's bad weather, if it's snowing, people go inside, because they're exposed. And so, for us, the solution was, all right, well, what about, what if we created some overhead, a little shelter for people like a pergola. And then, the idea started flowing, they were like, Ooh, then we could bring in our smoker, we could start having barbecues, blah, blah, blah and all these great ideas. And that's what kind of makes a space special, right? And I think for us, it's like, all right, man, I understand, I spent a lot of time working in different capacities with nonprofits, and I spent a lot of time with urban planners. So, I understand that the reason why the South Side feels really taken care of right now, and where I don't... We didn't plant our flag over there, is because number one, my family is from the west side of Chicago.

My grandma, my aunties, my uncle, they all live on the west side. And so, I want to be where my family is at the end of the day. Number two is, the South Side's really taken care of, there's a million nonprofits [inaudible 00:31:42], there's so many people doing really, really great work. We don't need to kind of reinvent that wheel. We're trying to move that wheel forward. And so, understanding that the South Side has the library that's coming through. It's got this big Ole university that keeps taking over buildings. The number one gentrifier, low-key, it's got this beautiful lake, got the big beach, all these different museums. We're not needed in that capacity over there. On the west side, what have you got? Factories that moved away 10, 15 years ago, church on every block, you've got a lot of liquor stores and you've got family.

And so, for us, all right, cool, we need to be where the family are. We need to be where people are. Just as we're creating the space for these other nonprofits so that they can be able to
gather and meet in a safe environment, we’re also creating a safe environment where we are. And that's kind of the goal. The goal is to create a repository. The goal is to create a safe space. The goal is to create a healing space, a space in which we can come together as a people, we can share one another's stories through painting, through photography, through poetry, that we can heal one another using... Talking about food and platforms. And this is a food apartheid. And so, what we're doing is we're leveling that playing field, like, all right, there's 5,000 abandoned buildings in Austin, how can these abandoned spaces serve the people of the space? How can we make public space a little bit more public? We think about that a lot.

Kristin Gecan:
How do you define design?

Jon Veal:
**Design for me is when intentionality meets form, meets service—**that little circle of an intentionality, form, and service. And so, you might intend for something, right. And then, it turned into this certain form, and then it intends to serve people, but sometimes it doesn’t. Sometimes it doesn't work. Sometimes you design a basketball Ram that's square, when it really should have been a circle, and people complain about it. People are going to let know, Hey, this don't work. And so, then you have to go back to your intentionality and then it takes another form. So, it's this growing conversation. It's this growing circle, because time is not linear, time is cyclical. We all are formed by our patterns.

Kristin Gecan:
Thank you to Jon Veal, a 2021 Latham fellow at ID, for joining me today. You can learn more about Jon and Alt_ on the IIT Institute of Design website, id.iit.edu/podcast. Please subscribe, rate, and review with intent on your favorite service. This is a new show and your support really helps. Our theme music comes from ID alum Adithya Ravi. Until next time.