

Episode 1 - Advocacy Platforms

Transcript

[00:00:00]

Selena: Hi everyone, this is Selena. I am your host for this podcast called *Designing Activism*. I just wanted to preface this inaugural episode and talk a little bit about what my whole platform is for the podcast, in general. So the purpose of the podcast is to kind of – um, support my initiative as a 2019 advocate in the AIAS Advocate program. My topic is, a little bit different – it’s not really related directly to design, but its related mostly to the idea of advocacy in general. So, my topic revolves around the idea of “empty activism”, – which is something I kind of made up, but it’s something that I’ve noticed throughout my years as an AIAS member, and as an observer of those who are – uh, great and perhaps not so great advocates.

Selena: So, the idea of empty activism, like the term, is something I completely made up, but it is the act of advocating for something without clear purpose and actions, whether that be intentionally or unintentionally. So, once again, that’s the act of advocating for something without clear purr—[sic] – purpose and actions [laughs].

Selena: So, the reason why I bring the topic to the attention of the organization and to the listeners of this podcast is not necessarily to, kind of induce a crisis or make anyone reconsider what they have advocated for, but it’s kind of to encourage efficient advocacy – um, following these three ideas that I’ve also sort of made up.

Selena: One, which is picking your battles, um, so picking the ones that, kind of can create the most change, um, as it most relates to you. Making sure you consider all parts of the battle and considering feasibility. So pick the right one, essentially.

Selena: The next is choosing your channels. So, there are so many channels that you can go through these days and – uh being in AIAS, you know, you may already be taking the right step forward in this area, but you have to remember that you can’t just complain to anyone, you have to start speaking to the right people.

Selena: And lastly, is to measure your goals. Like any good advocacy initi- [sic] initiative, it is really important to consider the real-life impacts of your thoughts and ideas and what you may be complaining about. You should always be able to reflect on what you’re advocating for and consider: what did I actually do? Like what, what’s different now? And if you can’t do that, you probably haven’t advocated successfully. So, I’m not necessarily criticizing advocacy or activism in general, I’m just trying to bring attention to the idea that not every advocate can be an efficient one. So, um, that’s my spiel, and continuing on with the episode. Thank you guys!

[sound cut]

[00:03:01]

Selena: Also, one last side note, that I also forgot to mention, A-I-A-S stands for The American Institute of Architecture Students so, all right, now for the episode.

[sound cut]

[00:03:14]

Selena: Hi everyone, welcome to the inaugural episode of a podcast called *Designing Activism*. My name is Selena Zhen and I am from Carnegie Mellon University, um and I am here hosting this podcast as an advocacy initiative for my 2019s [sic] – 2019 Advocate Program. So I'm going to introduce my guests, who are Tim Hawke, Chitika Vasudeva and Ethan Moore. Do you guys just want to say something super quick?

Tim: Sure yeah. Thank you for having me. I'm Tim Hawke, I am an architect in Columbus Ohio, and I am currently serving as the liaison on the AIAS board to the AIA, and within the AIA I serve as the National Governance Advocacy Committee Chair.

Selena: Exciting.

Chitika: Yep, yeah, I am Chitika, I am chapter president at AIAS Carnegie Mellon, and um – in terms of advocacy I have served on the 2017-2018 National AIAS Advocacy Task Force, and this past year co-chaired the 2018-2019 AIAS National Resiliency Task Force.

Ethan: I'm Ethan, I'm a vice-president at Kent State University. Um, I recently started and have chaired, for the past two years now, our local advocacy task force at our chapter. And I just wrote an article on that for the national website, which can be a supplemental resource, if you're looking to expand your advocacy efforts.

Selena: Cool. So like I was saying before, I kind of brought you guys here specifically because I want to talk about different avenues in advocacy, particularly I guess within education, because that's what most of you guys are related to – so Chitika, do you want to talk about your path and how you kind of got into this, because its... relatively new.

Chitika: Sure. Yeah. I mean, I first heard about the National committees at Grassroots 2017, um, and in fact, this year's committees have just gone out [unintelligible 00:05:23], so that's a little plug. But I really just gravitated towards the National Advocacy Task Force because of, you know, "Advocacy" in the title, and over time started to learn what a good resource a National Committee was, to start to learn what it means to be an advocate, and what kind of platforms are available to do that. Um, I think the advantage of that was that AIAS National has a lot of presence and influence and resources, and it kind of is rewarding to become a part of an organization that has an established advocacy platform because it not only gives you a leg up but you also learn a lot from people that are around you. So that's kind of how I have come to where I am now, where I am working with other fellow advocates I've come to define what it means to me and why its important.

Selena: Yeah, definitely. And I think that you can kind of see that in your path, like what you've started to do within our own chapter as well and locally within our Pittsburgh area.

Tim: Yeah, to me it seems like it's a really great opportunity for students to stand out and diversify their engagement beyond just studio courses or structures or drawing. And, the reality is, I recognized when I was an emerging professional and a student, that things weren't really the way I wanted them to be, you know?

All: Mhm

Tim: Like I wanted to have people around me to provide a voice, and I think starting when you're a student, to have thoughts and consider things and discuss like you're talking is really important. And I know, Ethan, you've – you feel like – I mean you're – you're saying you've gotten a lot of benefit out of it at Kent.

Ethan: Yeah we've gotten some really tremendous benefit out of it at Kent. From a fundraising standpoint, people are very willing to partner with us on advocacy-related events and really any event, because we have an advocacy committee and we're dedicated to advocating. We started the committee because we felt like there was more we could do, and there was more we could be participating in. Um, and that our voice could be maybe heard a little bit louder than what we have been doing.

Chitika: Yeah. I think it's interesting to think about how we are all on committees, but in different ways and those committees themselves are really different, I mean-

Selena: And also different scales-

Chitika: -yes. Yeah absolutely-

Selena: -extremely different scales.

Chitika: -I mean, I would, I would [sic] kind of compare our experience and I think that would be really cool because we are all both working as students, Ethan and I, but he's at Kent which is at the Chapter scale and I have to interact with members – AIAS members – from all over the country. Which like, really changes how-

Tim: Mhm

Chitika: -you know, we – what we learn and what we talk about. Because sometimes I find myself explaining so much about what happens at CMU and what my background is and all of us have to do a lot of background sharing to come to an understanding about each other. And you [Ethan] probably don't have to do that as much. But you know, there's also the trade-up of you learn different things so I don't know if you wanted to-

Tim: But he – Ethan is saying that he is diversifying his discussions through dialogue with professionals as well, which I think is really important. One of the things we talked about earlier today was diversifying the discussion to talk to allied professionals. So-

All: [agreeing]

Tim: Students who are in design disciplines that are not necessarily architecture. I think there's are a lot of similarities and you can learn from those discussions and bring things back. So the National perspective's is really strong, I think that there's the perspective that you get from interfacing with professionals, and I think there's also that perspective you get from talking to other students, who are in similar majors.

Selena: Yeah, definitely, and I mean, coming here, just talking to other advocacy people here – and especially after giving the story slam – a lot of people have surprisingly come up to a lot of the advocates and been very supportive of the same ideas. So it's reassuring to know that these ideas aren't, you know, completely falling on deaf ears, in a lot of ways.

Tim: You know, one of the things I've found is I feel like my advocacy efforts are impacting my design-

All: [agreeing]

Tim: -in a good way. So they're giving me tools to help have empathy for client situations or recognized through interface with other leaders across the country, that there are different ways to approach a problem. So I've become much more aware of the relevance of resilient design, on my practice, in Columbus, where a few years ago, I probably would have never really considered that to be important, and now I recognize that there are issues with the buildings where there's no ventilation, there are issues with limited access to water or back-up electrical systems that are necessary. I would have never known that without participating in an advocacy, uh, dialogue.

Selena: Yeah. And now that you are kind of are aware of the situation, you are putting it to use, through practice at least, so that's sort of the more professional activism component.

Chitika: Mhm.

Tim: But I think that it would impact your design in studio as well-

Selena: Yeah definitely.

Chitika: Yeah.

Ethan: It definitely has been, for me

Tim: -it has?

Ethan: Yeah, absolutely.

Tim: So what's an example?

Ethan: Um, realizing that uh, your voice doesn't necessarily have to be the loudest, just because it's your voice and you feel like you may know everything about a specific topic. Um, interfacing with people who have varied backgrounds and different experiences, and bring other

points of view to the table. And really allowing for collaboration, um, leads to much better design-

Chitika: And just work overall.

Ethan: -mhm.

Chitika: Yeah, I think that's so interesting because, uh, like what you mentioned Tim, is – is what Selena's been talking about, or is using this platform to advocate for; which is this really good tangible actionable element of advocacy which so many of us struggle with, because I know I did when I started.

Selena: Right.

Chitika: Um, you know where I, I kind of had no idea where this conversation would go, and I think I was just expecting to kind of talk every once in a while and feel good about, like-

Selena: Talking.

Chitika: -yeah, [laughs] like we all agree we have a problem, [claps] cool, let's go home now.

Selena: [laughs] Yeah, but not do anything about it.

Chitika: [laughs] Yeah and then I – I think that comes from a place of not always knowing what you can do about it-

Tim: Mhm

Chitika: -and, and something as kind of – like for something like that to trickle right into something like your studio work because you've just learned to collaborate and listen to other voices and even carry yourself in a way that helps you push for things that are important or learn to back your ideas up with facts and figures—and more actionable plans – I just thought it was interesting because what you guys talk about are in some ways very different but very related outcomes of advocating effectively.

Tim: Right

Chitika: Yeah.

Tim: The other thing that I've noticed through advocacy, is you begin to get the input of non-architects, and bring them into the discussion. So, a lot of times, like when we were on the Hill the other day, you're seeing how your concerns are resonant with people who are not necessarily architects. And you're also building their knowledge of your importance, and – you know-

[sound cut]

[00:13:07]

Selena: Sorry guys, we – [unintelligible 00:13:09] – we just had to tell the Board of Directors to shut up.

[laughter]

Selena: So – if you can imagine that conversation. No I'm just kidding [laughs]. Um, yeah no continue what we were talking about.

Chitika: Uh you were talking about Capitol Hill Day.

Tim: Yeah and the diversity of opinion and outside viewpoints and all that kind of stuff. And the – other thing – Okay so I come from a place of a lot of experience and practice, but one of the things I didn't recognize when I was a student is the amount of outside influences that impact design. So for instance, right now on the AIA, we're – we're trying to roll out a new policy on codes. Which we want to influence all the building officials and governments in every state. So you got fifty states who all have to enact legislation and new building codes. And all fifty of those states contribute to energy reduction in buildings. And we're trying to move the needle, so that the energy reduction programs help to contribute to our 2030 commandment, which is trying to get towards net zero. So that's a tremendous effort that needs to be done. And we are not going to be able to get it done without student voices at the table, and the more voices we have in dialogue, the – the better success we'll have.

All: [agreeing]

Tim: I guess one other thing I think is really important to say – and maybe you guys can speak to this—is that I always thought it was like so overwhelming that it wasn't worth going into, there is so much to do that you just feel like its -

Selena: What is overwhelming?

Tim: -the whole process of like getting to get anything done. Oh why bother, it's so overwhelming. But you just have to start. It's like a diet program or an exercise program.

[laughter]

Chitika: I think in some ways the dieting is harder.

[laughter]

Selena: That's true.

Chitika: I would do advocating and Student Hill Day before- [laughs]

[laughter]

Selena: Do you guys want to reflect on Student Hill Day though-

Chitika: Yeah!

Selena: -because I mean, I think that's a really important part of effective advocacy, in a lot of ways. And you guys were on the same team going to the same delegates, right? [gestures to Chitika and Ethan] Yeah. Tell us about that.

Chitika: Tim missed out on the party.

[laughter]

Tim: I was on a different one, but go ahead.

Ethan: It think it was one of the most impactful things I've ever done. To be able to go to people who are willing to listen to what you have to say, and your thoughts on the matter. And then to be able to watch it actually make a difference, and make people's lives better. It was really just an incredible experience.

Chitika: Mhm. Yeah I agree. I was actually really, uh, conflicted and kind of nervous going in because the-

Selena: I think a lot of people were. Yeah.

Chitika: -well yeah, part of it is – is – I mean I don't think the issue is like charged, per se, as much as some other things could be, but as an international student, I felt kind of confused about, you know, my role in this situation and my ability to be impactful and almost my right to be there.

Tim: But, I don't know if they're going to know what the – you're probably need to tell people-

Chitika: Yes, I was just going to get into that-

Tim: -yeah okay.

Selena: Yeah.

Chitika: -so we – just for some background – we were meeting staffers in the Senate and the House to push for Bill-

Selena: -the Senate Bill 1428.

Chitika: -which is – um. Oh my god I forgot what it is.

Selena: Its essentially to, um.

Chitika: Oh right-

Tim: Change retirement plans.

Selena and Chitika: - thank you.

[laughter]

Chitika: So it was addressing the issue of student debt by creating an option for people to-

Selena: Employers.

Chitika: -employers – to match people’s payments towards their student loans. And then kind of match that by putting it into their retirement fund.

Selena: Yeah so instead of – typically um, if you want to put money towards your 401k, you would put a certain percentage into your 401k and then your employer would match that percentage into your 401k, but this allows – basically red tape to be taken out – to allow the employer to match a percentage of someone’s – say you would want to put 4% towards your student loans and they could match 4% into your 401k. So instead of only planning for the future or only taking care of the past, you can do that at the same time. So that’s... kind of a complicated topic actually.

Chitika: Yeah, it was hard to understand, so there was some of that, which was intimidating. Um, and part of it was, like I was saying, I just kind of felt like I wasn’t sure if I was the right person there to be talking about it, but-

Selena: Yeah.

Chitika: -thankfully my fellow advocates reminded me that [laughs] you don’t know, its important to discuss things that are important to other people. And I kind of rationalized it as, well just because I don’t go here and go through the same processes doesn’t mean that my friends and colleagues and peers would not benefit from this.

Selena: Yeah I definitely thought it was interesting going into a campaign that was already created for us, instead of campaigning for something that you’ve created. Because I mean, that’s something that I’ve typically seen, just in AIAS. Like you – like for example Chitika, you’ve always advocated for something that you’ve created through the committees. But this is something that we’re going into as a... as a third party. Which I thought was really cool, so –

Tim: Well, what I thought was cool was, we had these experts at the National AIA, who had done all the research, and they had found the correct bill that would be able to be supported on a bi-partisan – in a bi-partisan way. So my group went in, we spoke to both a Republican and a Democrat, and both of them responded positively. The Republican said we felt we should be doing more in a broader way, and the Democrat felt that this was the right bill, but they both supported it. But one of the things that I think is interesting is that, after – I don’t even know if you guys know this but – yesterday the AIA issued a social media blast on LinkedIn and other things, and there were members of the AIA who were going onto that LinkedIn and making negative statements about what the students had done-

Selena: Really? That’s very interesting-

Tim: -and yeah and they were saying — they were saying like, oh these students don’t want to pay for their national debt, they’re trying to get out of their debt, etcetera. And they are so uninformed, because-

Selena: -yeah because that's not at all what the bill is about.

Tim: -it's not at all what the bill is about! So the other interesting lesson that I got out of it was there's a complete, sort of knee-jerk reaction, by a lot of people where they don't want to really understand, right?

Chitika: There's definitely a reluctance to educate yourself and – which is not to say – I'm not trying to dismiss anyone's reactions to the overall issue, but even as an advocate, sometimes you have to push yourself to do research and kind of figure out what you're getting into. Especially because you have to combat half information and no information sometimes, coming in from opposition. And a lot of the times when you clarify the facts, people are on board. We also met with both a Democrat and a Republican. And we did our research on both of them. And we had different approaches on how we talked to them and got different reactions from them. But ultimately they were both really positive, which was really, um, I think in the large part, a success of us just doing our homework and knowing what we were talking about.

All: [agreeing]

Selena: I just find it so interesting that – no offense, but older members of the field would react so negatively to students pushing for something that affects, I guess more of... us... but would also affect their kids. I mean this is not necessarily just for architecture students, it's for all students, all loan types, and just student loan debt in general.

Tim: Yeah, well the whole point behind the advocacy initiatives are to begin to have that dialogue and discussion. So you now become aware that people have a different opinion about the issue. And I think that's actually as important as going in and talking to the people in Capitol Hill.

All: [agreeing]

Chitika: I agree. It think it can be really hard to ask for opinions from your peers sometimes, especially an issue that can be charged and discover that perhaps you're in the minority but... that's part of the process.

Tim: And the other thing too is – you find that some of these professionals believe, very strongly, that you, as a student should have the same experience, or rite of passage, that they have had. And they have a lack of awareness, that it's not an equivalent – [unintelligible 00:22:14] so my college education costs uh, \$3,500 a year. The same education now, costs \$20,000-

Selena: Or more.

Tim: -and I was able to make \$10 an hour over the summer working. And now you can – and that same job would only pay, like \$15. So it's not an equivalent situation.

All: [agreeing]

Selena: It's a difficult topic to talk to – or talk about, I think. I almost wish we could talk to these people that you're talking about, these older members of AIA or professionals in general, which might be something that you do on a chapter level, with an advocacy committee, right?

[laughter]

Tim: Right. [asks Ethan] And that's – have you found that you've had really strong conversations with the professionals in the Northeast Ohio area?

Ethan: Oh absolutely. I think we've made some really great strides towards educating ourselves and getting opinions, but also educating people who maybe don't look at things the same way that we do. We're kind of leveling the playing field, and kind of giving everyone the same information I guess.

Selena: Yeah.

[00:23:40]

Tim: Today I had a student approach me and ask how he could get involved with advocacy. And I told him, the first step would be to – he was actually asking specifically about how to get involved with advocacy at the AIA level-

Chitika: Ooh.

Selena: That's cool.

Tim: -he lives in – goes to school at Wentworth, and I told him, that's the Boston Society of Architects. You just need to do research on it and go down and get engaged. They have committees and I'm sure they would accept you, as leader of your chapter.

Selena: Yeah. Sometimes all you really need to do is take the first step and if there's pushback, you know, there's always ways around it and encouragement from other places. But I know – Chitika, you and I have at least tried, or are currently trying to build a relationship, or rebuild a relationship with our chapter, which is AIA Pittsburgh. I think Ethan's example of creating an Advocacy Committee kind of creates a legitimacy to that sort of, uh-

Chitika: That effort.

Selena: -that effort, yeah. And if any other chapters are struggling with that, that might be a way to go.

Chitika: Yeah I think the value proposition in question becomes really important where what are you doing to create value or have increased perceived value of yourself and your chapter and you as a voice in the community, so that other people pay attention to you and, and listen to you and whether that means you have a committee that hosts events and does outreach, or you kind of

just pursue other avenues and do whatever it takes to establish a street cred – “street cred,” so to speak. [laughs]

[laughter]

Chitika: “Boardroom Cred” I don’t know [laughs].

Chitika: I did want to say though, Tim what you said about the disconnect between, perhaps slightly more experienced – or well actually significantly more experienced – professionals, and young students is that um, I think it ties into this not as often talked about issue within advocacy and activism that we find it difficult to push for, or care about things we haven’t experienced-

Tim: Mhm.

Chitika: -and part of that is, you know, empathy is hard.

Selena: Being comfortable with being uncomfortable? [laughs]

Chitika: Yeah yeah. Well yeah its difficult – like you said; it’s, it’s the route that people take, is they find platforms that allow them to raise awareness about something that they care about. But it’s so interesting to think about something like the advocacy experts at the AIA or like lobbyists that some of us worked with, where their job is to focus on the process of advocating for something-

Tim: The persuasive process.

Chitika: -yeah, and you can, it’s kind of like the issue is almost assigned to you, or you have to find like a buy-in, and say well this is worth pushing for, even though it’s not coming directly from my life experience.

Selena: Yeah. I definitely think that overall, a lot of this conversation has just been talking about the correct platform that you choose. And, I mean, that’s sort of – that’s sort of what I’ve been talking about in my topic as well. Like what platform do you choose? What channels do you choose to do that on? And most of it, at least everything that we’ve talked about best suits what you are best suited for. Like Tim works, obviously, with the AIA, so he’s best suited for that sort of platform. But us students, at our level, well Capitol Hill was one of our first best platforms to do that sort of thing. And I know so many people that are really interested in doing more advocacy even at the state level, because of Capitol Hill Day.

Chitika: Yeah and I think it’s important to be sensitive to the issue as well. I mean, for you too, this platform of the 2019 Advocates Program is allowing you to take a lot of flexibility in just giving you a resource to discuss something that matters to you. We also are doing advocacy through AIAS when we did Student Hill, but that was a whole different experience where – you know like you said, the issue was kind of pre-determined and handed to us and we were relying on our platform for knowledge about what we were advocating for. So even within an organization, and [to Tim] maybe you can comment on whether the AIA has offered a similar experience, a similar set of experiences where you can be an AIAS advocate in so many different ways as well.

Selena: Well, AIA – Tim, you guys did an AIA Capitol Hill Day too didn't you?

Tim: We did. Yeah.

Selena: Was it on the same topic as we did, or was it on a different topic-

Tim: No-

Selena: -can you go into that a little bit?

Tim: -yeah we did a Capitol Hill day on two topics. One was energy reduction in buildings, and the other was design of schools for safety.

Selena: Okay.

Tim: And, actually, this topic of focus – well you weren't talking about focus, you're talking about platform. I think that it's important that students choose something that they care about. Because if you care about something you're going to be disciplined to engage. And once you care about that, you will gain knowledge and become an expert resource on that. Let's say you're very interested in architecture to help solve issues of homelessness. If you begin to have a lot of concern about this, you will become a resource, and that will give you credibility. And you will know things about it. And if you are more interested in sustainability, same thing holds. So the AIA, we've chosen, and tried to narrow our platform in the last few years, to six topics. And when I came in as chair, I felt that the topics were still too broad. That even 90,000 people can't handle and effectively lobby six topics.

All: [laughter]

Tim: And so we have this thing that we're doing called The Big Move and we're trying to align all of our advocacy efforts around Climate Change and action on climate change. Which is inclusive of a lot of issues of energy reduction and etcetera. The reality is that you can lobby for changes to the tax code in order to help drive success for climate change. There's a, there's a broad range of things you can lobby within, but when you sort of pick a topic you get some traction.

Selena: Right.

Chitika: Yeah. And I think it's interesting to start to consider the implications of seemingly unrelated or like distant topics. Because coming back to student debt, we discussed in our training, the implications of the passing of the bill on the profession and, and people's professional trajectory. So by no means are we advocating for, licensure requirements to change or anything, but for a bill like that to be passed, it would ultimately influence the way people pursue licensure and their careers, and what it means for them to have a different financial experience in their 20's. So, I think the really cool thing about that was to realize that to push for something that might be kind of a niche issue within your profession, you don't have to take the niche route.

Tim: Mhm.

Chitika: And you can kind of predict patterns and discover connections, you can – kind of get what you want out of this situation by pushing for something that maybe a wider audience relates to.

Tim: Right. And you can help one another.

Chitika: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah. So for instance, I do know this, that the Senate staff and the House staff tallied the number of constituents who came to the meetings.

Selena: Okay, interesting.

Tim: And they – when there is an initiative, they tally the number of telephone calls they get about things. They tally the emails, and that data is used to help influence decision-making. So if you are passionate about something, Chitika. And then you can get all of your peers to help support that. And then if Ethan is passionate about a different issue, and he does the research and can convince you to help, then you can all help each other on your advocacy platforms.

All: [agreeing]

[00:32:40]

Selena: Well do you guys have anything else to say about advocacy and different paths about advocacy? Because if not, I think we're good.

Tim: I think I would just say one last thing, is that, this doesn't have to be a design-related topic.

Selena: Yeah definitely not.

Chitika: Yeah.

Selena: 100%.

Tim: It could be, so for instance, on the AIA board, we have one director, she's very interested in issues of workforce development, so her advocacy initiatives really link to equity and diversity in the profession of architecture. And that impacts design because you have more diverse viewpoints on the table, but it's not directly a design topic. So I think there's lots of room.

Selena: There's definitely – I – The goal with this platform, this podcast that I'm doing is to definitely explore a lot of different avenues of advocacy. Nowadays there's so many different "movements", there is a lot of different fields in which advocacy is a huge part of. So, that's hopefully the goal, in the end.

Tim: Mhm.

Selena: Yeah. Awesome. Well thank you guys, for joining me.

Tim, Chitika, Ethan: Thank you.

Selena: Thank you all for listening and thank you all for listening to Designing Activism. You can follow the trajectory of this on our Instagram where I'll be posting some updates. The handle is @aias_advocacy. That is, once again, @aias_advocacy. So. All right. Thank you! Bye guys!