This transcript was exported on Jun 05, 2023 - view latest version here.

Michael Murphy:

There's something else here that's not just the container of our lives. It's actually this active agent in allowing us to live a full and potentially healthy life.

Dwayne Betts:

From Emerson Collective, this is Almost There. A podcast that explores the messy space that we have to fight through to make the things we want to happen, happen. I'm Reginald Dwayne Betts. Today, I'm joined by Michael Murphy. He's been the founder and executive director of MASS Design.

He's built buildings all over this world, from the Rwanda Institute for Conservation Agriculture, to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery. But more importantly, Michael spent a lot of his time thinking about space and beauty and how architecture might make us whole.

Michael Murphy:

Everything is architected in some way. All the buildings around us are architected in some way. What the prison and the hospital really show is that buildings shape us. All you have to ask is someone who's been incarcerated, or a nurse on a floor. Ask them how the building is shaping their work, their daily life, and they'll tell you 100 examples.

It's a medium not as much as a structure. The prison shows the most elemental pieces of the medium. Not only where it's been designed to shape behavior, but also where an absence of design has been intentionally restricted. For example, light or air. Or to keep people from having enough space to feel their body.

Dwayne Betts:

We know each other. You were born in '80, right?

Michael Murphy:

1980. February 1980.

Dwayne Betts:

We were born in the same year. You older than me. I was born in November. But it was actually really fascinating for me, when we first met, to realize that you were born in '80 and that we had some shared experiences. In the sense that, the architecture in prison for different reasons have been things that have stayed on our mind.

For me, it's because I carjacked somebody. And as a consequence of that, I was sentenced to nine years in prison. I'm not sure how you got interested in prison. I hear the connection here, but can you tell me how you actually got interested in prison before I reveal to everybody how we know each other?

Michael Murphy:

Well, when I was in college ... After I left my upstate New York hometown, Poughkeepsie, New York, and went to Chicago for college, I started working with these anthropologists that took me to South Africa. I studied in South Africa with them this first trip they did. We went to Robben Island. I started to at first

experience the former prison colony of the Apartheid state, where Nelson Mandela was locked up for 26 years, I believe. Or part of his 26-year sentence was on Robben Island.

This one guy said, "I want to show you something." We were walking through the prison. All the prison's docents, Robben Island's docents, were all former prisoners of it. They were all telling their stories. He said, "I'm pulling you aside." We went to the cell block off the tour, and he said, "There's this art project that one of those folks installed."

They asked former residents whether they would contribute one object of their experience. Someone gave a picture of their wife. Someone recorded a story and put it on a little recording device. Some guy had made a saxophone out of Campbell's soup cans or something like that. He put that in too. Every cell had some other object. All identical, but one object, one punctum into the life of that incessantly long experience.

The humanity, the dignity of the individual was revealed in just this tiny small project. And yet, the cells all looked exactly the same. It was an awakening experience as an art project, but it also was ... I think the thing I pulled away from it was just how few of the objects I could actually see. I couldn't see them all. I knew there were so many more.

Dwayne Betts:

Yeah.

Michael Murphy:

That endlessness, that infiniteness, I think, shook me. I went back to school and I became more and more interested in the spaces of ... In particular, in this case, political prisoners who were locked up in cells in isolation that were forced to contribute something or write.

I started following the writings of folks in Northern Ireland. Dirty Protest. Or writings on the walls of prisons of folks who were checking their dates off. Just trying to remind themselves that they exist in the world, that they're alive.

I became convinced, and I wrote my thesis about this, that the space of isolation challenges our own sense of our own existence, our abjectness. We would question whether we exist anymore. And that writing, carving into the wall, inscribing in that palimpsest is a reminder that we do actually exist.

Dwayne Betts:

That's wild, because I didn't know that. I started Freedom Reads, as you know, and I wanted to build micro libraries in prison. Somebody asked me, "What would you do if you had no constraints? If money wasn't a constraint? If access wasn't a constraint?" I said, "We put millions of people in prison. I would put millions of books in prison."

Now, the very notion of doing that makes me think that it is influenced even subconsciously by the art project at Robben Island. Because it is about thinking about the ways in which you could capture what people carry with them from day to day, and try to find a way to honor that in the existence that they live. I knew I wanted to do it, but I had no idea what the bookshelves would look like.

At first, I thought we just put shelves on the wall. I was talking to Scott Simple and Scott was like, "I should introduce you to the folks at MASS Design." I was like, "They build hospitals. They're not trying to build libraries in prison." But we created these beautiful sculptural bookshelves that allow folks to access

the books on both sides. But I think the other thing it does, and I didn't realize that until now, is it allows us to access prison in different ways.

Maybe I was burying a lead, because we're working on a project together in terms of thinking about, how do you write about prisons? How do you think about prisons as spaces that weren't designed to allow people to become healthy? No matter what we say about incarceration as punishment, I would sentenced to eight-and-a-half years, which means that it was an expectation that I will be coming home.

It's a way in which prisons, the architectural design of prisons, have thwarted the healthy building of relationships amongst those doing time and those who work in the spaces. I wonder. How do you think about prisons as a thing that exists? How does that subvert or challenge your belief, my belief, that beauty is justice?

Michael Murphy:

The way I think about the prison as a form of architecture is to try to remove the notion that architecture is the design of a building. The architecture is a state of being. It's a process. Everything is architected in some way. All the buildings around us are architected in some way, and they use elemental components of how the built environment shapes our lives.

What the prison and the hospital really show is that buildings shape us. All you have to ask is someone who's been incarcerated, or a nurse on a floor. Ask them how the building is shaping their work, their daily life, and they'll tell you 100 examples. There's some academic debate in the ivory towers of architecture schools of whether we should as architects aspire to or even proclaim that buildings shape behavior. But that is not a debate in the halls of the prison or the halls of the hospital. It is a fact of life.

Dwayne Betts:

Nor is it a debate if you go to a 30-floor project.

Michael Murphy:

That's right.

Dwayne Betts:

You talk to somebody who's got a fifth-floor walkup and the elevator broke down. It's obvious. Thinking about what we understand. Or if you go to a hotel.

Michael Murphy:

It shapes the way we work. It shapes our access to our essential things we need every day. It shapes the way we're able to ... It's the medium. It's a medium not as much as a structure. If we believe that, then the prison shows the most elemental pieces of the medium.

It shows not only where it's been designed to shape behavior, in particular, around confinement, around isolation, around security, but also where a absence of design has been intentionally restricted. I think that's also something that we have to think about. We can use the tools of design and architecture to amplify and elevate the experience of individuals. We can also restrict them. Both from negligence, but also intention to keep people from having the possibility of the full experience of the space.

Dwayne Betts:

I don't think I ever told you the story. I was in this prison and the prisons were connected. Four cells were connected, so that when the guards turned on or off the lights ... The lights were always on, but then they could get brighter. When they turned them on or off for one cell, it was for all four cells. I don't have great vision, so I would call and ask for the light to get cut on.

It was so interesting, because I know that this was just for efficiency's sake. They didn't want us to have control over our light, even if it was just changing it from high to low. Maybe they were going to save some amount of money by being able to regiment that aspect of our lives. But what it meant was that people would frequently say, "Guard. Can you cut the light off?"

Even if it was two in the afternoon and it was a rainy day and the window didn't permit enough natural light in to read. I would be like, "Cut the light on, man. It's not seven o'clock yet. It's not eight o'clock yet. I need to read. I want to read." I almost got in a fight with this guy. And then, the guy almost got stabbed by a friend of mine, because he wanted the light off.

He came down and was making a lot of noise and screaming and talking about what he was going to do. It worked out and got resolved without any violence. But the point is, it was the architecture of the space, the design of the space that predictably created that conflict. When you multiply it out by hundreds of cells, and arguably thousands of relationships, it's guaranteed to create chaos.

Do you think that, on the back end, architects should be thinking about this? Architects should be thinking about this as a problem to be reckoned with? Because it seems like the first criticism might be, "You should be working to close that prison. Instead of working to create a better experience for the people inside that space."

Michael Murphy:

Well, I think it's definitely ... First of all, thanks for that incredible story. The control of our environment, the agency to actualize our own physical space is part of how we experience the architecture around us. Having that restricted is a form of restricting the design. Restricting your access to design.

You may be able to turn the light on or off, but not being able to control that makes you part of something bigger. It's not fully in your control. You are being shaped by it. Regardless of whether you want it to be or not. It's a good example of that. I think there is this fundamental question when folks talk about architecture prisons, which is we shouldn't be designing or building any new prisons.

Any action at all on any carceral facility is a form of unethical practice. While I think there's a lot of truth to that ... And in the United States, we have way too many prisons. We need to be closing down prisons. That is certainly the case. There's also a question of whether we should allow people to live in conditions of torture, confinement, where their humanity is fundamentally surrendered and abused. Their dignity is ...

Dwayne Betts:

When you say, "They," and this is interesting ... When you say, "They," do you mean the men and women and children serving time in prison for crimes they committed and the staff?

Michael Murphy:

I would definitely say and the staff.

Dwayne Betts:

Because I do believe that most people do not agree or believe or contemplate the way in which that design influences the life of staff.

Michael Murphy:

It's a workplace also. People, however they become part of that ecosystem, have to go there every day. You talk to COs and you talk to residents. They talk about the level of anxiety and stress that just being in that space causes them. The heightened level of the fight-or-flight responses that they're engaging in. The fear that you talk about. The threats. That condition is what escalates life.

Dwayne Betts:

I've heard this story before. I know that you're probably tired of telling this story, but most architects don't know how to build anything. Your story begins really with your father being ill and you deciding to rebuild this childhood home. What made you want to do that?

Michael Murphy:

I don't know if I knew how to build before then either, but I came home from trying to make my way abroad as a journalist, when my dad got very sick with cancer. I don't think I really had a choice. I came home. It was the middle of winter, upstate New York, very cold. They gave him about three weeks to live.

I remember sitting with him on the bedside of the hospital saying, "What should I do?" He said, "Well, I'm going to try to stick it out as much as I can." So I went home. One of the things he did every weekend was work on our old house. We had this old house from the 1890s that my parents bought pretty inexpensively. He just tinkered on it for years and it seemed like the thing I had to do. Try to finish that thing.

Dwayne Betts:

What I hear you telling me is that you're dealing with this tragedy and you're taking on this project that connects you to your father as a way to hold some mind space and not contemplate the tragedy. But it seems like in doing that, you end up returning to the tragedy.

Or returning to your father, actually. You end up returning to your father and his work. Is it a moment that you remember, where it felt like, "This is me connecting myself to him."

Michael Murphy:

I think that was the awakening. I think one of the most stunning realizations is not when you're in it. When you're in the restoration, the toil, the labor ... That takes energy and effort. For example, the third floor. There was a third floor of the house, but we'd never use it. We just used it for storage.

It had wood panel walls. I think the former owner used it as an office. It's so hot up there. There was no air conditioning and things like that. So I took down those wood panel walls. Behind the wood panel walls was this 100-year-old wallpaper I'd never seen. Then, I tried to figure out how you take down wallpaper. And so, I started stripping down this old wallpaper and behind the wallpaper was this horsehair plaster that had this old color of paint.

And then, we started painting over that and trying to change that room itself. We started to just reveal and unpack the layers of all the history. There was inscriptions by the family beforehand and kids that were up there playing and writing their names on the wall and that kind of stuff. We started to see this history layered into this house. I saw it and it inspired me to ask other questions.

Dwayne Betts:

When you say we?

Michael Murphy:

Well, I'm saying, "We," because at first, it was me. And then, my dad came back from the hospital. He was still alive after three weeks and he started going back to work. He was very committed to staying alive and he just started coming back after a day's work and joining me on the project.

Dwayne Betts:

It's fantastic, actually. Just to think about the way in which we think about buildings and spaces as being purely functional, but as being purely functional as say an office and not as the history of where children played. Or to be purely functional as say the most efficient materials of the time and not as almost a palimpsest that reminds you of the way in which time has shifted.

You go from horsehair plaster to 100-year-old wallpaper to wood panels. All meant to beautify. But in terms of truly restoring it, you have to contemplate everything that had happened in those moments before.

Michael Murphy:

There was narrative embedded in those walls. It was the hand of those before us that had made those walls, horsehair plasters rendered with horse hair and plasterers. Every single inch of it was rendered by hand.

Dwayne Betts:

But you were first going through Europe working on being a journalist. And so, I could hear your appreciation for narrative and appreciation for story. And then, you create this amazing story with your father that has all of the things that make a good story. It has the emotional heartstrings, but then it has a repository for all that emotion that's functional, that's purposeful, that also reveals this other history.

One would think, "I want to be a journalist. I've got this story. I'm going to write a book." But, no, you become an architect. Now, I feel like I do want to know what leads you from that moment to becoming an architect.

Michael Murphy:

Well, it was that moment with my father. He was a year-and-a-half later in remission. Hair back on his head. We had finished the restoration of the porch. We painted the house. We had accelerated the restoration that would've taken him years. He stood out, sighed after a long day of work, toil, sweat. Summer day. Had a drink in our hands. He said, "Working on this with you saved my life."

I think that moment is where it really clicked that there's something else here that's not just the container of our lives. It's not just a passive participant in our family's relay race between one family to another or ownership of a house or use of a house. It's actually this active agent in allowing us to live a full and potentially healthy life.

This idea that he was healed by that effort seeded in my mind that there's this elemental component piece of the buildings around us, which shape us as individuals, that shape us as human beings. And also, keeps us from things, but also allow us to understand ourselves in a much deeper way. That to me was the moment where I said, "Architecture is a powerful agent of change and I have to understand it more. I want to be an architect."

Dwayne Betts:

It's this interesting thing. I hear you talking about your father. I hear how he became this catalyst for this interest in architecture, but also a catalyst for this gift that what we do with our hands matter. A lot of times, Black writers, Black artists are frequently discussed as if they're sui generis. We have no history. You talked about the history of this house.

I was working on a piece I wrote about Tariq Trotter on Black Thought, the front man for The Roots. There's this guy named Richard Nichols who was their longtime manager. He talked about them as their guru, their sensei. The person who would give him the latest Malcolm Gladwell book alongside some scientific treaties, who would make sure they were hip to Chinua Achebe and connect them to the artistic community in Philly.

But the point is, I realized I couldn't write about him without writing about Nichols. It seems like it's only a few of us who are lucky in that way, that we meet these figures to help transform how we see the world, and that become a part of the shadow that we have that we could either fill in or just rest under. You know what I mean? Because I feel like you were fortunate in that you had a father who created whatever was necessary for you to say, "It's important for me to do this thing," whose outcome is uncertain and relevance is uncertain.

And then, in doing that thing, you begin to think differently about the relevance of the act that you had just embarked upon. It leads me to Dr. Farmer. I feel like Dr. Farmer is somebody who also then helps you think about that and imagine that in a completely different way. I would love for you to just talk about him, because it's just so easy for us to have this conversation and not include these other people.

Michael Murphy:

No. Of course.

Dwayne Betts:

Just to be clear, so everybody knows, Dr. Farmer is not an architect.

Michael Murphy:

Dr. Paul Farmer was the head of the program on social medicine at Harvard. He started an incredible nonprofit called Partners in Health. He was a world-renowned doctor. There's great book about him called Mountains Beyond Mountains, written by Tracy Kidder. He's a famous and visionary medical professional, but really a humanitarian who more used medicine to advance goals of social, economic, and environmental justice.

He was an incredible visionary. In some ways, that existential moment of those father figures, they transfer. These folks come into our lives and the window opens. I think before my father was really ill, I probably was pretty scared to jump through the window. But my first semester in architecture school, I was asking these big questions. I wouldn't say I was necessarily finding a lot of answers until I went to a lecture from Dr. Farmer. Dr. Farmer was speaking on World AIDS Day, December 1st, 2006.

Dwayne Betts:

I'm so confused. Wait. Why is an architectural design student going to a lecture by this guy?

Michael Murphy:

Well, like many people, I'd read the book about him and been influenced, inspired, transformed. Not many architects actually had heard of him at the school, but I had known of him and heard he was speaking. So I went to see him speak and I was shocked, because he was speaking about not medicine, not Partners In Health.

He was speaking about buildings he was building. He was building clinics and schools and hospitals and, "We're building houses for people." That really changed the way I thought about things. I said, "Why is this doctor talking about architecture?" The way he's talking about it is he's talking about it as a healthcare delivery program. Not as a form or not as a style. Not as the product of a brilliant mind of architects, but actually as a fundamental essential need. That tied some strands together.

If architecture can change the way we think, change our health, actually keep us alive, as my dad said ... It has to be essential. It has to be a need. It has to be a right. Farmer was talking about it as a right. He was saying, we can't actually provide healthcare to people unless they have the basic fundamental services that allow that healthcare to work. Like houses. Like access to transportation. Like access to infrastructure and institutions that provide them better than the bare minimum of care.

Dwayne Betts:

One of the more compelling stories I heard about even the notion of creating a hospital is one that you have. Do you remember people saying, "I'm not going to a hospital to die." People would always make fun, particularly of Southern Black folks, who associated hospitals with death. They would think that these people were behaving irrationally. When in fact, I think it was logical in some sense.

The story I heard was about how the hospitals would circulate bad air. And so, you would go into the hospital to get healthy, but because the bad air was circulating and because there wasn't enough space for everybody to congregate as they waited for treatment, they would become ill with a disease they didn't have before they came into the hospital.

I know I didn't do a good job of explaining it, and I didn't even pretend to give you the solution. By, "You," I mean the people that's listening. Can you break that down for me? Because it makes me think about something else. I want to ask you this question, but I want to hear you describe it, to see if I actually am understanding this intervention in the right way.

Michael Murphy:

Well, Dr. Farmer talked about why it's necessary to build new infrastructure. Primarily, he mentioned because diseases are, as you said, Dwayne, being transferred and transmitted to other patients in medical facilities.

He said bad air is causing people to get sick and die. In particular, at that point in time, it was 2006, 2007. Tuberculosis or multidrug-resistant tuberculosis, which is an airborne disease ... Meaning, we're sitting in this booth right now. I cough, I'm sick ...

Dwayne Betts:

It's a wrap.

Michael Murphy:

You infect. You coinfect. Maybe you're immunosuppressed. You'd definitely catch it. And then, you go back to your family, you infect them. You come into the hospital. You have one drug-resistant strand of the disease. You sit next to someone who's a different drug-resistant strand, you coinfect, and now you have a double drug-resistant strand of the disease.

That's how this disease, which we largely figured out how to solve through drug treatment in low-income areas, in places that were poorly ventilated in hospital settings ... This multidrug-resistant strand, it was called extremely drug-resistant strand of tuberculosis, emerged in 2005, 2006.

It emerged because hospitals and hospital waiting areas and waiting rooms weren't designed for airborne disease transmission and infection control. But of course, now after the COVID pandemic, we all know that this is a fundamental issue of every built space we have around us. We're not healthy in spaces that are unventilated. Making spaces that breathe better actually is a fundamental service we need to provide to the world in order to make us healthier.

Dwayne Betts:

When I was in prison, I had this cell partner who was taking tuberculosis medication. And I don't know if he really had TB. He told me he didn't, but he got the medicine every day. We didn't have the greatest doctors in prison, but hearing you talk about ventilation makes me wonder.

Because I know you think a lot about the architecture of prisons. It makes me wonder how the shape of those spaces lead to the spread of COVID. Or maybe helped the spread of COVID not happen.

Michael Murphy:

Well, as you may know, some of the first places where the biggest outbreaks were when the COVID pandemic began were prisons and nursing homes. These places that were spaces of confinement where they didn't have enough ventilation, they weren't designed for airflow, people couldn't move. And so, you had these outbreaks happening in those spaces.

There was a kind of canary in the coal mine, that the disease was spatially manifest. In other words, it was moving through spaces that didn't have enough air, and it was the space that was determining whether you could breathe well or not. And so, it's revelatory that what prisons are designed for or not designed, controlling behavior, torture, keeping people from light and air, keeping people from access to the outdoors ... All of those things have other implications.

Buildings before the advent of mechanical ventilation all had to breathe. And so, you look back at historic prisons, hospitals, schools. They were all designed around air and light coming in and out, so the air wasn't stagnant. But once you could mechanically ventilate air, you could seal off buildings. You

could close windows. You could reduce light. You could mechanically and electrically control the indoor air environment, the indoor environment. And so, the structures themselves changed radically.

Dwayne Betts:

That is actually interesting, because I hadn't thought about how technology could push forward advances in one space, but if you live in a house now that doesn't have air condition, you out back. Because the house wasn't built to facilitate coolness and airflow independent of having a functioning air condition system.

Michael Murphy:

Right.

Dwayne Betts:

If the air conditioner breaks, you in trouble. I've got one more question for you. This feels dour. Talking about prison feels dour, but it feels like ... Ralph Ellison talks about, "Maybe on the lower frequencies, I speak for you." I feel like this narrative about prison is actually synonymous with the light and the hopefulness of the narrative about your father, but that might be me reaching.

That might be me just hoping that the outcome of this work that you've been doing around the architecture of prisons, that we plan to do about thinking and writing about the experience of people in these spaces, can be something as hopeful and inspirational as the work that you've done prior, as the work that you've done with MASS, as the idea that beauty is justice. Am I off-base in suggesting the possibility of that?

Michael Murphy:

I would love that to be the possibility. I think what we're seeking is elemental proof. Essential data, essential examples, where we know that our life is being determined by things we don't have full control over. If we're more aware of that, we can start to control it for ourselves and for our own agency. That benefits ourselves, our family, our lives. That's the awakening opportunity that's in front of us is to recognize things shape us. Whether we know it or not.

To be able to be aware of that is to take control over it in a way. To liberate ourselves from that other prison. In prison, we have clear examples of that. In a hospital, we have clear examples of that. But in our own homes, we may not fully know how much it's shaping the way we conceptualize our own family. The way we conceptualize our own own future, our own community, and what it means for the people around us, the street around us.

Dwayne Betts:

Well, I didn't expect this to turn into a deep dive into the relationship between prisons and architecture. I did expect it to be an exploration of what it means to try to write out the lives that we've lived and we've been able to do that.

I thank you for everything you shared with us. But more importantly, I think it's a good way for anybody listening to think about how do they both do the work and tell the story. And so, I thank you for that and I hope everybody enjoyed the conversation.

Michael Murphy:

Well, I thank you, Dwayne. You're an inspiration to us with being able to narrate these pathways.

Dwayne Betts:

Thank you for joining us. You've been listening to me, Reginald Dwayne Betts, and Michael Murphy, founder of MASS Design. But more importantly, a son, a father. Somebody who believes that the stories we tell each other matter, and that in architecting and designing the world, we are designing the narratives that will take us to our tomorrows and remind us of our yesterdays. Thanks for joining. What'd you have for dinner last night?

Michael Murphy:

I ate some of the mac and cheese that my son didn't eat off the plate I made him. Covered in ...

Dwayne Betts:

Saliva?

Michael Murphy:

Saliva. That was good. My wife wasn't home, so I had some goldfish.

Dwayne Betts:

That's what's up. That's the father's meal. Almost There is produced by Jesse Baker and Eric Nuzum at Magnificent Noise for Emerson Collective. Our production staff includes Eleanor Kagan, Brianna Garrett, and Paul Schneider. Along with Patrick D'Arcy, Alex Simon, and Amy Low from Emerson Collective. Special thanks to Nia Elliott. I'm Reginald Dwayne Betts. Thank you for listening.