

Ep.40 - Olga Stella

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Olga Stella

- A** Announcer 00:01
Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:28
Hello, my name is Ed Clemente. I'm your host today and I'm very privileged to have a friend I've known for a while. She's the Executive Director of Design Core Detroit, Vice President of Strategy for Communications and College for Creative Studies, Olga Stella, welcome to the show, Olga.
- O** Olga Stella 00:45
Thanks so much for having me, Ed.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:47
Yeah, Olga, you, I've known you quite a while, but let's hear a little bit first, because people in the know know what CCS is, but why don't you tell people kind of what you tell people real quick if they never heard of it?
- O** Olga Stella 01:01
Sure. So CCS is the College for Creative Studies. It's Detroit's private Art and Design School,

located here in Detroit for over 100 years. And it's a really important institution that is training, you know, creative problem solvers who are changemakers in our world, in every industry. And as part of my work at CCS, not only do I lead marketing, communications, but also all of our external facing programs that work with partners in the community, like our Office of Partnerships, which is the front door to the college, Community Arts Partnership, which works with a youth in the community, youth and families, and provides our design education, and in its 20 years, over 6000 students throughout Detroit, the city of Detroit, and then Design Core, which is where I spend the majority of my time at CCS last six years as Executive Director, which is really working to establish Detroit as an international global source of creative talent through the design businesses that we support all throughout the region.

E Ed Clemente 02:02

And, you know, for sort of people been around a little while it used to have a different name, just so people remember what it used to be called too wasn't it the Center for Creative Studies, right?

O Olga Stella 02:13

Yup, 25 years ago.

E Ed Clemente 02:16

And then the and I know, it's, why don't you physically say that kind of two or three locations, I forgot.

O Olga Stella 02:24

So, we're located in Midtown Detroit, we have a Ford campus that's right in the heart of the Cultural District by the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Charles H. Wright and the Historical Society. And then we also have the A. Alfred Taubman Center for Design Education, which is closer to it's in the New Center part of of Midtown. And that was a former General Motors Argonaut Building. So very historic. Many people say that that's where the discipline of industrial design was really invented, was at General Motors Research and Engineering Center. And that's where, you know, Harley Earl, like, you know, was headquartered and did his work. And so we're very privileged to have our design education, you know, in the in the former Argonaut Building.

E Ed Clemente 03:09

And that's an Albert Kahn building too, isn't it?

O Olga Stella 03:12

Yea, like, like many buildings in Detroit. But yes.

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Ed Clemente 03:17

And I know, the cool thing about that place is the little circular thing. Isn't there like, thing on the top?

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Olga Stella 03:24

Yeah, the turntable. I mean, that's, that was one of the original, you know, I think we're all familiar with General Motors Design Dome over at the Tech Center in Warren, but the original design dome that General Motors had was on the top floor of the Argonaut Building, we still use that as an event space and the design the turntable is functioning. And the whole purpose of a turntable from a, you know, product development perspective, is that you can photograph it from any light there are no shadows. So it's like kind of perfect lighting a perfect way to view in this case you in a car. But General Motors developed many products beyond the vehicles in the in the Argonaut, you know, a wide variety of things, so we don't have time to get into. So it's a really, I mean, it's great. It's a wonderful place for our students to learn. We're also very privileged to have University Prep Art and Design, high school and middle school in the building. So just it's a great and then Shinola is also headquartered in our building. So it's a wonderful if you think about it from you know, high school all the way to professional opportunities. You can get all of it at the Taubman Center.

E

Ed Clemente 04:33

Yeah, I think I did the bills, if you remember might have even been when we knew each other. I think you might have been working for Representative Steve Tobocman then. Yeah, we ran that bill through my committee because it was historical tax credit. I think we did for the Argonaut Building.

O

Olga Stella 04:47

Yeah, no, that would have been the case and at the time when the Argonaut was was being redeveloped into CCS's A. Taubman Center for Design Education, I mean it was it was the only other project happening in Detroit was the Westin Book Cadillac, it was a very tremendous project. And so I'm just really proud to be part of the community at the college. I think CCS has had a long standing role in supporting creative people in Detroit, at all stages of their career, and their development. And just this, you know, the real risk that it took in 2008, during the recession, you know, CCS really put itself out there with many, many supporters to really create this wonderful asset. And we're just happy to keep building on the asset that we have here in Detroit.

E

Ed Clemente 05:35

Yeah, it's a real anchor for the New Center Area. I know when you go down there, you can see the kids walking around a lot, especially the high school kids. I know I've seen them there. The

the kids walking around a lot, especially the high school kids, I know I've seen them there. The other thing too, is a lot of people probably know you, though, from DEGC, the Detroit Economic Growth Corp. And we, you were there for quite a while, we're you, off and on?

O

Olga Stella 05:54

I was, for 10 years. Yeah, I used to lead strategy there for them. When I first came back from the legislature and did the public policy work and strategy for a little while, and the bulk of my time, I led business development, attraction, retention, expansion, and then ended my time, there is the Chief Operating Officer. So, so the very full kind of 10 years, and I learned all the nuts and bolts of how to do deals in Detroit, and how to move policy. And just was able to, I think, to really connect, you know, my love for Detroit. And, and, you know, economic opportunity in that work. So and it was a natural transition for me to be able to then come over to the College and lead Design Core, because I really believe that at the fundamentally, you know, when we often when we think about economic development deals, we boil them down to dollars and cents in the kind of real estate aspects. And in Detroit, you can't walk away from, you know, the financial implications of real estate deals, you know, and what that means. But what companies are looking for is they're looking for talent, and they're, and they're looking for talent that's going to be able to work in different ways, that's going to be able to respond to disruptive forces, that has a different set of skills. And when I thought about the difference that I could make, and this next stage of my career, was really about figuring out how to support Detroit's talent on that global stage. And that's what we're able to do through the work at Design Core, and the work at the college and in terms of really developing what that next generation of creative problem solvers looks like. But also lifting up the problem solvers who are already here in our own community, who are the graphic designers, the product developers, the architects, you know, all these different fields of design, and creativity. And there is literally no place, product, system, you know, your clothes, everything that is on your body that you interact with a digital world, some kind of designer or creative has influenced what that place, product, system, you know, thing is works, how it works, how it works for you, you know, whether or not you want to keep using it, its features all of that. And lifting up Detroit's unique talents in this space, this is a real strength of our, not just our city in our region, but of our state, one that has been internationally recognized, you know, through the UNESCO designation of Detroit as UNESCO City of Design, but, but also by the state and by others, you know, in its economic development strategy. And so something I'm just really proud to be able to lend my talents to helping to support these amazing creative people who are here in our city in our state.

E

Ed Clemente 08:41

You know, I'm not a huge UNESCO person, but maybe not for the which you guys are doing Detroit because I didn't know much about it. But why don't you tell people what that really means? Because I think it means a lot more than people have any idea what that designation means to us?

O

Olga Stella 08:56

Yeah. I mean, it's a at first it's a real compliment, right to the city's legacy in design that goes back 100 years to Henry Ford in the assembly line. And then, you know, you can look at

Cranbrook and mid century modernism, and then you know, of course, the modern age. But more than that, and I think what the reason, you know, I don't like to, you know, me Ed, I don't waste my time, I don't like to chit chat, and you know, just go to conferences and hang out. I like to work. And this this designation is about people who want to work and who want to learn from each other. And so we're part of an international network of over 40 other design cities, spanning all the continents that are all using their their creativity, to create a more sustainable and equitable future in their community. And so we're learning from these other cities. We're sharing what we're doing here in Detroit with these other places, and we're importing their ideas as well and learning and figuring it out. And so it's been a really wonderful experience these last five years. I mean, some of the The highlights have been that Detroit, over 100 Detroiters participated in an international design Biennale in France in 2017 where we were at center stage and talking about inclusive approaches and how we work here in Detroit. And really, I mean over 200,000 people in Europe got to experience that. We've had many of our fellow cities come to Detroit in 2019. We hosted the, the network here and had 30 people from around the world, coming to learn about Detroit and to participate in our, our monthly, or annual Design Festival, the Detroit Month of Design, which takes place every September. So it's just a really amazing opportunity to both share our own story, learn from others, and you know, get some stuff done. So there's a number of projects that we've done over the last, you know, five years since we got the designation that we can directly tie back to that network.

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Ed Clemente 10:55

Yeah, this is a MEDC podcast and hopefully, we'll make some connections, you know, to work on some of these things as you move through this process even further.

O

Olga Stella 11:06

I mean, we've loved working with MEDC, you know, Pure Michigan Business Connect has been a really important supporter of ours for the last couple years, because at the core of what we do is support a community of design businesses, and trying to figure out how to help them grow their market in Detroit. And so our partnership with PMBC has been really important to that. And then the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs, has been a supporter of the Month of Design Festival. And so we're very grateful to you for all that, that support. So we know that there's only ways that we can keep deepening our relationship with MEDC.

A

Announcer 11:44

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E

Ed Clemente 12:00


Even though you're based in Detroit, your footprint is like beyond the UNESCO I mean, you got a lot of interesting students as well as partnerships around the world. Right?

 Olga Stella 12:10

Yeah, so the college itself, I mean, one of the reasons why I'm so happy to be part of the college community, you know, both of my expanded role now and when I came to the college six years ago, is because it really is, this is a place where businesses are running in and out of the college every day. You know, we've hundreds of relationships with companies that are doing projects in our classrooms, and working with our students, hiring our students who work, and they're in Michigan, but they're all over. 70% of our students are from Michigan, but 8% of our students come are international. And you know, the rest come from around the country. And so we've done some really amazing projects with international companies, and actually, because of the pandemic have really, I think, honed our ability to do these in a virtual setting, you know, with, especially with Asian companies. And so it's just a real I mean, we're, it's a it's a real asset, I think, you know, for our state in terms of just what our students are able to bring on an international stage.

 Ed Clemente 13:11

You mentioned a project, I thought it was in Japan, but I couldn't remember exactly. Can you remember which one that was we talked about before?

 Olga Stella 13:18

Yeah, so we I mean, so we've done a couple things. So one is, that might be the Toyota Boschoku project. So that was a sustainable mobility project that we did with our Color Materials Graduate Program. And the students research the needs for user experience with ride hailing services. So that was really looking at the designs of vehicle interiors for the future, for 2030. And so they worked in a virtual way with the Toyota Boshoku, you know, leadership and figuring out what these projects could look like. They developed color materials, finished toolkits, you know, to the company. And, you know, really learned a lot about the advanced technologies that the company was was using, and use that to help think about these, these finishes and toolkits. But we've also, you know, we had students all through the pandemic, who couldn't come here because of the restrictions on travel. And I mean, our faculty is so dedicated to really supporting our international students. We had some faculty members, basically teaching classes twice, in the middle of the night, you know, to make sure that our students in India and in Asia, you know, throughout Asia, had access. And so, it's just been, you know, it's been challenging I know for everyone, but this idea of being an international school is really important to our DNA. Our, many of our faculty are from around the world. Our Dean of Graduate studies is European. You know, we want to bring a global mindset to what our students are learning and experiencing regardless of where they're from, because that's the way the world is going to work. And those are the kinds of solutions we need for a better world.

 Ed Clemente 15:01

And as a side note, you're a bit international yourself.

 Olga Stella 15:04

 Olga Stella 15:04

Yeah, well, my parents are immigrants from the former Yugoslavia and came here over 40 years ago. And so I, I am very proud to, you know, to have had that experience of growing up as a Serbian American immigrant in the suburbs of Detroit. And, you know.

 Ed Clemente 15:23

You still speak it, though too, right?

 Olga Stella 15:25

Yeah, I do, because my mother still speaks it. And so, you know, you got to speak their native, you know, your, your family's tongue, right. So, it's been, it's, it's definitely impacted I was, I was talking to someone, you know, my parents, work ethic and the culture and it's, it's really made a huge impact in my life. And you know, and I think that's, you know, all of us bring, bring those parts of ourselves to our work every day, and to our experiences, and a lot of what we're trying to do, you know, what I hope to do through the teams that I lead, and the work that we're doing at the college is to, you know, create the kinds of inclusive environments allow more people to, you know, to be their full selves, and to help create, really, you know, products, places, services, systems that work for, you know, everybody, especially people who can often feel excluded from those places.

 Ed Clemente 16:17

So you've already kind of hinted at a couple of these things already. But what are some of the other disruptors maybe or challenges on the horizon? Because I know, maybe you're gonna correct me, but I thought the Steve Jobs quote was, was it form, function follows form.

 Olga Stella 16:35

Yeah, it's not it's it's not just if an item looks good, if something looks good, it's got a work, you know, work well. I think it's, I've I used to use that quote all the time, I just butchered it as well. But, um, yeah, no, I, you know, I was thinking a little bit about this Ed, and I, you know, I think, I think there's a couple things, I think one is, you know, we've touched on inclusion as a defining factor. And I, we just can't, if companies, if companies really, it's a, it's a more competitive market out there. And when we think about how do you get the largest market share, retain your customers, cut down your retrofit costs, and drive innovation, it's by developing products for people who are often excluded, you know, from the conversation. Whether it's because of physical ability, race, culture, language, you know, other other characteristics. And so that, that need to really have inclusive processes and design for inclusion is just something we just can't it's not a fad, it's not something that is a nice to have. If you want market share, and you want to be efficient and have strong customer loyalty, you have to do it, given how our country is changing how the world is changing, and it's the right thing to do. So that's one that I just, you know, can't underscore enough, and is really driving a lot of what we're doing at the college. The second one is climate action. Any of us who have lived through the last, you know, year or so right, in Michigan, with flooding, and just the climate impacts, there's a lot of, you know,

growing conversation around heat-related death. You know, even in our own state, there's a lot of these impacts to infrastructure that disrupt our daily lives and disrupt business, disrupt supply chains. And we can't turn away from that any longer, regardless of what our feelings are around, you know, the science of climate change. The fact is, things are changing. There are climate impacts, we have to be we have to start to address them and adapt, and hopefully, you know, mitigate them. And so that's something else, you know, next year, in 2022, the college will be hosting a conference around climate action with the Cumulus Association, which is a Design Research Association of International its International Association of Schools doing design research. So that's something we're digging more and more into. And I think everyone, any business, any elite policy leader, should really be thinking about what does this mean? So really, those two things, I think, go hand in hand.

E

Ed Clemente 19:19

A lot of our guests obviously have echoed some of those sentiments, but you know, especially on climate change, but also to your other point about diversity issues, is if you look at who the really sort of influencers are now, today, they're very niche oriented, some of them and I would imagine, you know, a lot of products now are being sold by people, not through the traditional corporate, you know, sort of plans. Individual people are really influencing people who look like them, act like them, talk like them, which didn't exist before and I think that's something you guys are probably involved with, I would guess you have some social media classes probably too I would guess.

O

Olga Stella 20:00

Yeah, I mean, I think that's part of like marketing, right. But what I would say is marketing is important, but if your product, so the, you know, the product is the the tech, the place, the system, if that product ultimately, itself isn't inclusive, right, and by that, I mean, really allow people to engage in it fully, it doesn't doesn't create any frictions with what that engagement looks like. So that that use pattern, then you can have all the marketing in the world. But just because a person who's similar demographic characteristics to me is selling it, if it's not a good product, I'm not going to use it. And that's ultimately, what I think the business proposition is, to the corporate community around, you know, inclusion as a business practice. It shouldn't, it shouldn't be window dressing, it really needs to be core, because at the end of the day, if you want that customer loyalty, and you want to expand that customer base, you're going to get better products, by designing for the people that may not normally have been within your radar. Because you're going to be solving, you're using one, one solution, maybe to solve more for more people's issues, and you're going to create that kind of customer loyalty, and having them come back, you know, and being loyal to your brand, because it's authentic. And I think that's, that's where we have to get beyond, you know, marketing.

E

Ed Clemente 21:33

And the you probably touched on this a little bit, but what advice would you go back if you could maybe talk to yourself about or even a student today, maybe looking at a degree, or something? What would you tell them?

O Olga Stella 21:48

I mean, I think flexibility is key and adaptability. You know, none of us know what the future has to hold. I, you know, I definitely don't like you know, you don't Ed, right, we're all doing our best here. And so if you have a growth mindset and you're always willing to learn and to be flexible, you're going to be able to adapt to what those opportunities are. So, you know, of course, we want everyone to come to the College for Creative Studies and use their creative problem solving skills, you know, one of our disciplines, but but I think a growth mindset is the key, regardless of what field you're in.

E Ed Clemente 22:28

And the very last question is what, you lived here. I think your whole life, right? And so what is your favorite thing to do, either in Michigan, or what event, or where do you like to travel?

O Olga Stella 22:42

Well, I mean, the obvious answer is Detroit Month of Design every September in Detroit, Michigan, only because it's you know, something we we put our blood sweat and tears into every year. But you know, I've I've lived in downtown Detroit for over 20 years now. I'm almost on the same block the whole time. And I just really, I love living in Michigan, I love living in the city. I love raising my family here. And a lot of it's because I get the best of all worlds, I have access to all the art and culture and kind of big city amenities that I would want. I love the river. But then, you know, less than an hour away is all the nature and hiking and outdoor sports a person could want and you know, within an hour and a half, I can get to a great lake. And so I don't think there are very many places in the United States that have this kind of quality of life. I think people have underestimated the quality of life that are here. And sometimes, you know, they think about Detroit, and they have the kind of their worst mindset in terms of the headlines. They don't realize that there are a lot of people having really, this you can really have a good life here. Especially if you have privilege, like like I do. And so I recognize that, you know, some of some of that is, you know, as a result of my own privilege, but, but it's a great, this is a great place to live and just a real, I think more people should check it out.

E Ed Clemente 24:16

Okay, well, that's a good answer. Once again, I want to thank my friend Olga Stella. She's the Executive Director, Design Core Detroit and Vice President Strategy and Communications for the College for Creative Studies. Thanks again, Olga, for taking time to do this today and keep up the good work there and look forward to hearing more great things in the future from you.

O Olga Stella 24:36

Thanks so much Ed. Thanks for having me and for doing this great podcast. It's so informative.

E

Ed Clemente 24:40

Don't forget to listen to next week's episode with Dr. Tariq Sobh. He's the Vice President of Academic Affairs and Provost at Lawrence Technological University, but more exciting, he's the new incoming President for the institution. You will learn a lot about all the different things that involve entrepreneurship, engineering, robotics, design and learn about his interesting path from Alexandria, Egypt to Michigan.

A

Announcer 25:04

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