

## Economic Architecture Podcast - Episode 7 Transcript:

*The following transcript has been edited for clarity:*

**Timothy Vordtriede:** In the early sleepless nights of January, there was myself and a lot of other community members on our phones in the middle of the night. So between WhatsApp and Reddit and Instagram and Slack and Discord and all these channels that pop up in our new ways of communicating, I started to notice how quickly people came with answers and they were definitely not the right answers.

**Stuart Yagur:** Shortly after 6 pm on January 7th, 2025, a fire started on the hillside above Eaton Canyon wash. By 10 o'clock the next morning it had spread to over 10,000 acres. The fire was not fully contained until January 31st, nearly 24 days later. By that time, the community of Altadena had suffered tremendous losses. 19 people had died, thousands of families had been displaced, and 9,000 buildings were destroyed, making the Eaton fire the second most destructive fire in California's history.

**Timothy Vordtriede:** So on the night of January 6th into the morning of January 7th, and that whole next day, a significant chunk of it burned from the Eaton Canyon Fire. We lost, I think 6,500 residential structures and another few thousand, or maybe just a few hundred commercial structures.

**Stuart Yagur:** In the early days of January, as people were searching for answers on how to move forward, three community members asked themselves how they could use their own professional skills to help their neighbors. Together. Tim Vordtriede, Chris Driscoll and Chris Corbett founded the Altadena Collective. It's a place for homeowners impacted by the Altadena fires to coalesce around the vital information necessary to rebuild, repair, and replenish homes after the unexpected disaster.

They designed a solution under some of the most pressing conditions that rethinks how we rebuild homes efficiently, effectively, and safely. In this week's conversation, Tim walks me through their work and its innovative new approach for rebuilding homes.

**Timothy Vordtriede:** It is an incredibly difficult ask to say to trauma survivors now, under duress, 'You have to make these lifelong decisions. What's your home gonna be for the next 20 years? Stop crying about what you lost. Let's get focused on extracting this money. Let's close our books on your case.'

This is what a disaster looks like and how long it will take to rebuild. This is what you should pay an architect. This is, you don't need to do that. You need to just hire a contractor. All of it felt, I'm sorry, all of it didn't feel, all of it was not good information, quantifiably so.

**Stuart Yasgur:** I'm Stuart Yasgur, and this is Economic Architecture, the podcast.

**Timothy Vordtriede:** I am a design professional and I've been working in architecture in Los Angeles for 20 years. My wife and I and our two young children decided to move to Altadena three years ago because it felt perfect for us and for our lifestyle. We could actually reasonably afford a home up there. We lived there for three years., and then our house, which is actually this one over my left shoulder here, burned on January 7th.

We started Altadena Collective to be an information resource and an open resource so people can start communicating what's really needed. You have to start with architecture. If you just go out somewhere for a bid because your insurance company is saying, go get a bid, get any bid, doesn't matter, just a bid. What are you gonna bid? A generic box of nothingness. A home built, somewhere else in the US based on how insurance potentially evaluates claims. No, you need to have a design that is either representative of what you lost or what you want, in your future to live in. Yeah. I've decided I'm not even gonna process my own trauma for another couple years.

**Stuart Yasgur:** Yeah, I mean, even having known about this for a long time, having been there, it's just the scope of what happened is still hard to wrap my head around, every time I hear it.

**Timothy Vordtriede:** It is unfathomable. I grew up in St. Louis, Missouri or just on the Illinois side of the river there, where we had tornadoes each year. And, you know, every once in a while, there's a very localized disaster of a tornado that takes

out a home or two, and you can see the swath the tornado carved, and that's devastating. But it's nothing like this where, I say our home was lost, but our entire block was lost. Right? And the block to the south of it and 20 blocks to the north of it, it's the entire town basically leveled.

**Stuart Yasgur:** Just to name it, we're just in, we're in late August, but it's only late August, right? This is still incredibly recent. You are doing something else, which is pretty remarkable. You're turning towards solutions at the same time. And it's methodical, thoughtful, and intentional.

I think it's hard to wrap your head around. If you think about a community that's existed for a long time where it's not like they have the capacity to build a thousand homes at a time, let alone 6,000 homes, and now all of a sudden you have to go through and without that capacity there, people have just experienced this incredible trauma.

Massive kind of bureaucratic process of figuring out what are their rights, what are their resources, what do their finances look like? And then imagine, start planning for the future in the midst of all of that, and then somehow be connected to the capacity to design it, to contract it, to start building it. There's an incredible chasm between where they are and what needs to eventually happen here.

**Timothy Vordtriede:** And how much organization is required to get there. Yeah. And how much knowledge needs to be had to get there, from the expertise of the building process to expertise on navigating insurance claims and mountains of paperwork. From my background in design and project management and project design deliver, it's a process. I started to reach out to my kind of rolodex of friends and colleagues and say, 'Is there something we can do to join together to help the community by providing our service, our architecture and management at a very cost effective rate, knowing that we have thousands of people to address at one time?'

We started altering the Collective, me and two other folks who both happen to be named Chris: Chris Driscoll and Chris Corbitt. One I've worked with many years before doing hospitality and highend single family home architecture at a larger

firm in downtown LA, and the other one we actually just met through community meetings that were being held in January and February.

But he was a former Disney imagineer and really a good big picture thinker as far as architecture goes. And the three of us really coalesced nicely into how we can rethink approaches, and also deliver people what they need, which is their home back as soon as possible.

**Stuart Yasgur:** Wow. Yeah, so wrapping our heads around the magnitude of this challenge then, how does the Altadena Collective help? You just shared a little bit about what the initial inspiration was, but how are you stepping in to try and help homeowners take that step forward?

**Timothy Vordtriede:** We really see or have seen the Collective as a gap filler of sorts and an open door to answer any questions that people may have and to get people set up on the right path for their rebuild. The Collective itself is intentionally a non-entity. There's no 501(c)3. There's no LLC. It's just, it's a grassroots, umbrella notion for architects to work together on the design process, across firms. Yes.

Can we leverage the scale of the disaster into combining and replicating services and both consultant and tangible services? Structural engineers, for example, every home needs it. Usually the cost for a single family home in this part of the world is somewhere, simple home, 1,500 square foot or less, is between \$7,000, \$10,000, or \$12,000 per home. Can we leverage that downward by having multiple people go with the same structural engineer? Yes, easily.

**Timothy Vordtriede:** We have engineering proposals now sub \$5,000, so that's basically cutting that cost in half. And you think about that in terms of what other trades are needed in the design process in the soft cost realm. And then thinking about that in the construction process, which we have less control over. We're not contractors, we're not actually building homes, but they were built cost-effectively as a development a hundred years ago. We can think about that style of an approach in the same way, even if they're not being done by the same builder and at exactly the same time. We can still talk about bulk sourcing materials.

What if we were able to buy lumber by the train car load? What if we were able to buy a warehouse full of tile? Roofing shingles, things like that. And especially considering now, fire resilient materials so that we don't just build the same tinder boxes back. We build back homes that are 85% more likely to withstand another fire. How do we manage joining all that together? So that contractors can leverage a network of materials.

Because we're in California, we also have a lot of web developers and tech people out here who can rise to the challenge and create platforms. Let's take wood flooring, for example, a material supplier, some warehouse or vendor or back to the mill that's gonna run oak flooring. They can sign up into one of these platforms and say, 'Here's the offering, or here's what my retail price is, or here's what one house costs.'

In the front or the other side of that platform is contractors and homeowners saying, 'Yep, I'll sign up.' Okay, now we have 10, 20, 50 people who want this same style wood flooring. Now what's the price or these? 20 people want this exact water heater, electric heat pump, water heater that's super efficient and gets tax credits and other credits back for it. Now we have 50 people wanting it. Now what's the unit cost? So we have minimum order quantities as a baseline of understanding for just about everything.

**Stuart Yasgur:** Yeah, and taking the challenge that comes from the fact that so many people need this at the same time and it's turning to an advantage. You're actually getting economies of scale, right? You can have some pricing power and start to say, okay, we need this number of them at this level of quality and at these price points. Hopefully then also efficiencies with the contractors, right?

**Timothy Vordtriede:** Then taking our knowledge from architecture and project management into saying, 'Okay, Neighbor A at, 123 Olive Street, you're good enough friends with people at 125 Olive Street. What if we introduce you to contractors together?' So now a contractor can say, 'Alright, I'm doing these two homes next door. I can fence it as one property. I can provide what's called the general conditions of the site, porta-potties and rumble plates, and all the little details that go into making construction site, the trailer.' Now we're cutting that cost in half.

Oh. 121 Olive Street and 127 Olive Street, you want in two? Alright. Bigger fence. Shared cost across the board. We still want to go through the traditional process of vetting an appropriate builder for each homeowner. But with a lot of attention and a lot of contractors coming in, we wanna say, 'Look, there's opportunity to talk in groups and arrange these things.'

We're only seven months out from the disaster or almost eight now. One of the early successes is doing a land survey. a one-off survey can cost you \$4,000 or \$5,000 because it's just a little postage stamp parcel of land, 50 foot wide, 200 feet deep. But land has been mapped and tracked per block. If we talk to the blocks together and say, at least basically everyone on this block, 'What if you got a survey together, or at least five or eight or 10 people of the 20 parcels on a block.' Now that survey cost is less than \$2,000 a survey. Wow.

Because the labor significantly reduces. You're putting that tripod in the street that they do right? When they find their pins, the markers in the street and shoot. So it's essentially the same labor, the same field work as if you're doing one, you get to do five at a time.

**Stuart Yasgur:** And the crew's already out there and they don't have to commute and all that stuff.

**Timothy Vordtriede:** Absolutely. Yep. Every contractor knows how to be efficient because it is a tough business and the margins for the amount of risk that's taken, the margins are pretty low. So a good builder is always looking for a way, for better or worse, to save time, save money, increase efficiency.

What's always in the back of my head is, how can we make this more easily digestible to the building industry, contractors, suppliers, dealers, all the people who stand to give a discount for one reason or another. Because that's how the marketplace works. Then also align and sort homeowners so that they can be understood as bulk folks. A good example of that is a highly reputable kind of white glove service, a high level of service.

A window dealer here in Southern California, they're the main name for windows and doors around Los Angeles. They have tended to be a little more expensive

because they are a very reputable dealer. That takes a lot of time. Homeowner comes in, there's a lot of time, they represent all the major brands. You spend, man hours and resources. Pitching these homeowners. We went in there in April, late April and said what if we develop an Altadena catalog with you and start like bringing homeowners in, like basically by the busload.

So you're only having the conversation, once or twice, not hundreds of times. And they said obviously we're saving on our upfront costs. We're still making the sale, and we'll pass on the savings. You're doing a lot of the individualized legwork. It's taken out of the equation.

Now they're big partners on the rebuild here, having set a low, middle and high grade of window and the low still being code compliant, fire resilient, dual glazed windows, temper glass, all the right things that we don't miss out on. The insurance benefits and the co compliance and the fire resiliency that we need, that's the lowest end. Then levels of tactile quality and scale go up from there.

**Stuart Yasgur:** That's great. That's great. Yeah. Then does that mean that the homeowners are also signing up to the same contracts?

**Timothy Vordtriede:** No, it can all be individualized because it's basically a catalog. Similar with tile. Like I was saying, these platforms that are coalescing the three data points, minimum order quantities, what's the item? And then, I guess there are more than three, but there's lead time and negotiating that. There's always too many things at one time. House A is starting now. House B is gonna start in a month. Are those on the same timeline? We'd like to say yes because we may not be buying 200 square feet of tile on the exact same date. Certainly not under the exact same account or contract. But if we can negotiate a promise that, within this month 10 people or eight people will buy this tile, treat it as one order, or treat it as one scaled purchase.

**Stuart Yasgur:** We had a chance to talk a little bit about the role of owners' representatives. How does a homeowner know that they're getting what they've contracted to get? Especially, most homeowners have never been through a build process before.



**Timothy Vordtriede:** Yes. Around late May and early June, we started to realize that as we're getting out into the community, going to all the trade shows, hosting community meetings, joining in with other groups that are trying to assist with the kind of holistic, how do you repair your life component of any natural disaster, post disaster.

We realized that not that many people know much about building. Or what the steps are, what the processes are. There's a lot of pamphlets and roadmaps and different approaches. Traditional versus design build versus volunteer build all sorts of different ways to get a home back.

We realize we need to not just inform people by broadcasting, but by continually helping people through the process. That's where an owner's representative comes in. It's a standard industry role for larger scale projects, commercial, hospitality, institutional, and even a little further west than us, a lot of highend single family homes because those clients understand the value of an experienced person who knows how to manage and orchestrate the whole process.

Historically you'd say the architect as master builder would do that, and they'd also have a hand in the building trade. But we've really analyzed everything, broken it all apart into its constituent elements basically. So that capacity can be reached and the architect does a limited portion of it. The builder does their limited portion of it. Everyone stays in their lane, and the conversation that's needed between these professionals bounces off the homeowner who's never done this before and doesn't know what the heck they're talking about, usually.

Then an owner's rep stands in and says, 'I speak for the homeowner with my experience and I want this schedule to be met, and ways to do that, or things to look out for, or I want this price to be met and let's not do it cheaply, but let's do it effectively. The homeowner wants to make these decisions but let's not force them to make decisions on tile at the start of the project. Let them decide on tile, six weeks before we're about to install tile.' They can see the process instead of being inundated by the choice paralysis of all the choices you need to make. Let's package them in steps in which they're a priority.



That's what owner's reps do. We established underneath alternating a Collective, or, in spirit we established, an actual nonprofit called Collective or as an owner's rep entity that for those who qualify, I get pro bono owner's rep services. The light touch is, here's what a schedule looks like, here's how to interview contractors.

We will level your bids for you as in create an apples to apples comparison of construction estimates for you. Then the more heavier touch if and when needed. It's all on a case by case basis: weekly site visits, attending construction meetings on behalf of the owner and conversing on behalf of the owner with the architect and the builders, and making sure everything stays on the rails.

**Stuart Yasgur:** Wow. That's incredible. So you're actually creating this capacity for residents of Altadena to say, 'Okay, if you need an owner's rep. If you need that kind of expertise, this is a place that you can go to and then some of it pro bono,' and then others would be able to pay for that service depending on what kind of engagement they're having.

**Timothy Vordtriede:** We have two different avenues. We've established a company for the fee for service work that is, owner's rep and basically introducing the disaster relief sphere to the concept of owners' reps, because it's just not been widely known there either. It's like case management for the building process only. And everyone's like, 'Ah, why doesn't that exist yet?' Fee for service component through one company for those who can, frankly, with their insurance, pay out and through their own funds afford something like 3 or 4% of the overall construction budget to go to a managerial seat.

Then for those who can't, either they're already underinsured by X percentage or, just in a median income that doesn't meet a threshold. We're only working in Altadena. Every project that we're facing is within a four-mile radius of any other project. Then yeah, staffing up for that capacity.

**Stuart Yasgur:** That's great. We've had a chance to talk on several different occasions and every time we talk, this is moving so quickly. How do you think about where you are now in this process and where you're going?

**Timothy Vordtriede:** First off, I've been surprised at how quickly it's moved based on the data that we have from other wildfires around the Western US and the scenarios we were told about based on the scale of the devastation. I'm surprised at how quickly things are moving

A perfect example is, it'll take 12-14 months for the debris removal to be completed. That was done in eight months, flat. I think the last residential site was completed a week and a half ago. Which is incredibly fast for the size of this. The companies under the umbrella of Altadena, we have, I think right now we have 62 or 63 architectural projects and about 13 or 14 of them have planning approval from the planning department, and three of them have building permits ready. So they're ready to start construction.

**Stuart Yasgur:** Wow. That's encouraging.

**Timothy Vordtriede:** Running it more like a streamlined pipeline as it were, not to discredit the art form that architecture is, and the individualized service of the thing, but we just have a lot to help. We need to and we have lowered prices for people so that we can meet capacity and also be affordable for folks. We just have to keep moving quicker than the normal process. I like to say we're not here to build your dream home. We're here to get you out of a nightmare.

**Stuart Yasgur:** It's a very pointed line. For folks hearing about this what can they do? Is there a way they can contribute to participate, to be supportive? What's helpful?

**Timothy Vordtriede:** From the survivor's point or from the greater world?

**Stuart Yasgur:** That's a great question. You tell me.

**Timothy Vordtriede:** From the survivor standpoint, one of the first things that we did early on is, I insisted we need to have a physical office close by. A big table, a big conference table that I'm sitting at now, that we can just have a conversation and people are free to walk in or set an appointment and just have the conversation because we want to meet survivors where they are in the process.

Because everyone deals with their own trauma in their own way. Everyone has their own level of motivation for rebuilding or not. We want to just have that conversation and see what resources we can air traffic control towards people from the larger community or, even nationwide and worldwide.

We'd want the kind of acknowledgement that we're still here and the crisis is still ongoing just because the fire's not burning any longer and the debris is all cleared. It is a long process to rebuild an entire community. Many nonprofits are still seeking funding sources, and eight months on, people need more help now than they did in the beginning because it's starting to get to, I'd say, we're approaching the middle game of this where construction is happening. About 2% of the homes lost are being rebuilt now, and it's just gonna start getting harder and harder to pull materials, pull labor and have more and more starts as we get into the bell curve of a lot of rebuilding at once. This is all based on historic data from other fires and other disaster relief areas.

**Stuart Yagur:** I think it's remarkable to see what you're accomplishing already in Altadena, and unfortunately there are also gonna be too many communities around the country who are also gonna need to benefit from the lessons that you're helping to learn right now.

**Timothy Vordtriede:** I think taking our lessons learned, especially from how urban this wildfire was and the structures that were built to assist and help people get back on their feet and helping to push data and processes through disaster relief to modernize it more essentially. More entities bubbling up out of this to say here, help is there. I was so surprised by how many people felt hopeless in the beginning, and there was no one there to help them up.

A lot of the emails that we get now as people reflect back a few months are like, Altadena Collective, if you weren't on the Zoom meetings or if you didn't show up at this town hall and say what you said and have this umbrella that you're building, or maybe life raft, I don't know. I would've never thought I could rebuild. I've never, I wouldn't have known what to do.

That always surprises me because I didn't think we were doing that much, to be honest with you. I was just, and my colleagues were just importing what we knew

or projecting what we knew to the community. This is how you engage in designing and building a home in a methodical way. I didn't know that it was impossible for people to fathom otherwise.

**Stuart Yasgur:** Yeah. And that also, by doing it together, you're creating the pathway for them to see it. That's possible as well.

**Timothy Vordtriede:** You mentioned a bit about the community, the home that we lived in was exactly a hundred years old. Its 100th birthday was at the end of 2024. It is one of nearly 300 of the same general type of home. This other one over my right shoulder is another type, but it is an English revival cottage between about 10-15 hundred square feet that was rapidly built as a development and an expanding development because there's some like inspirational homes that saw it a few years later and said, oh, we'll do something very similar. But they're, English cottage stucco homes with high-pitch roofs called Janes Cottages that were done by a developer E.P. Janes between 1924 and 1926. That was a big boom area for the neighborhood or foothill enclave of Altadena.

Another boomtime was post-war. There were a lot of homes built between 1948 and 1955 as well. Then looking at the maps by about 2000, the community was essentially complete. There's not any open swaths of land to develop. When we say we lost everything, we're being pushed back nearly 120 years.

Just knowing the sense of community that when you see, oh yeah, it's not just me in isolation. It's all of my neighbors together. We're all in this together and there is help coming, locally and federally and statewide, and there's people who are there. The amount of two-way conversations and active change that we've been able to affect at the county level and even the state level is unprecedented.

We live in these worlds where we don't think politicians are capable of listening, which certainly seems very true in a lot of ways. They really have from this, and it's about leveraging that conversation. Politicians want to be liked and be reelected, so give them ways to win by changing policy.

**Stuart Yasgur:** Tim, it's remarkable to hear how much has continued to change and grow in the work that you're doing. Thank you so much.

**Timothy Vordtriede:** I appreciate it.

**Stuart Yasgur:** I was listening to the episode and spending time reflecting on it. You know, I think one of the ways that I was starting to think about it is, in this time when we're, constantly inundated by all of these boldfaced headlines and these fiery diatribes, that sometimes the most profound things we hear or encounter come in the quietest of words.

I think it takes a little bit of time to really step back and recognize what it is you're hearing. What the situation is. What he went through and what he actually experienced. Then once you step back and start to understand what those words reflect, then you're just at the beginning.

Tim is sharing that in one day, his house caught fire. He lost his home. He lost the life that he was envisioning building for himself and his family together. One of the things that is so hard for me to understand and frankly I'm a little bit in awe of is how quickly Tim was able to go from this horrific experience he had and his family had to start focusing on creating something positive, something constructive.

It's very understandable for someone to have gone through something like this when they're asking, what do we do? How do we move forward to think about themselves, to think about their families, to think about their loved ones? And of course that's critical.

But in another aspect of what Tim is doing, which is so powerful, is that when he thought about the we, he's also thinking about his neighbors, his community, the people who live down the street, the people who live in the next block over. How do we, in that broader sense, really take a step forward to rebuild the community that we have that means so much to us?

You know, if we're being honest with ourselves, it's not something that each of us can do. That's an incredible capacity that he had to move forward in a really difficult time. To recognize this is where we need to go. This is how he can be constructive. This is where he can help.

I'm Stuart Yasgur. This is Economic Architecture, the podcast. Stay tuned for future episodes of the Economic Architecture Podcast, available every Monday at 9:00 AM Eastern Time, wherever you get your podcasts.