Economic Architecture Podcast

Episode 24 Transcript:

The following transcript has been edited for clarity:

Amy Chester: What an opportunity this is. It's an opportunity that honestly excites me. When have you ever been asked, like, what kind of community do you wanna leave your kids and your grandkids? Never. Never at all. So, imagine you actually have that time and say, hey, in the next year, we're gonna plan what it's gonna look like. Let's talk about your values. What do you value? What's the hierarchy of things that we want in our community?

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

Stuart Yasgur: This week, we sat down with Amy Chester.

Stuart Yasgur: In our fascinating conversation, Amy shares her thinking behind the innovations at her organization, Rebuild by Design, and why implementing knowledge from the community level is integral to finding solutions to the increased risk we face from climate.

Stuart Yasgur: She's the director of Rebuild by Design, an organization that's merging community stakeholders and regional knowledge with global expertise to create a more robust understanding of how climate is putting different communities at risk.

Amy Chester: According to our own research, we have found that 95.5% of congressional districts have had a federal disaster declaration from 2011 to 2024 for a weather event, 95.5% of congressional districts. So what that means is that the problem is that we are all experiencing climate change right now.

Stuart Yasgur: In the week we taped this conversation with Amy, she had just launched the Atlas of Inspiration. The Atlas of Inspiration was a follow-up to the Atlas of Accountability, which tracked climate-related disasters from 2011 to 2024. From stormwater to heat-related disasters, her organization created a series of atlases to give people firsthand access to look up their own county, the history of climate disasters in their county, and to connect with their congressional district member to follow up for further information.

Amy Chester: Whether you're red state or blue state, whether you're rural or city, all of the incredible mosaic of what makes America, America needs to be addressed, and how we respond to climate change.

Stuart Yasgur: It's really an invitation for people to learn more about projects that have been effective. And a call to action to replicate them in communities across the country.

Amy Chester: It's interesting because maybe your listeners know that the federal government has never given a disaster declaration for heat. So even though heat is the number one killer, the federal government gives disaster declarations for different events that have an economic impact, not a mortality impact. So if you were to actually look at all the other places that have had, or have experienced heatwaves, it would probably go up to be even higher.

Amy Chester: So, I run an organization called Rebuild by Design, which was started by President Obama's Hurricane Sandy Task Force. So, we were birthed in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, and the idea was to look forward.

Amy Chester: So, as you may see in the fires, in different hurricanes and situations, people are really eager to get back to exactly what it was like before. But we realized during Hurricane Sandy that there was no before. Everything is now after. So the task force set aside a billion dollars of

disaster recovery funds of the approximately $65 billion and said, did a call out for interdisciplinary teams and said, if you come and work with communities and local governments on the grounds, and if you develop something that would've not been done before, and if it will address multiple challenges and have multiple benefits, we will give you money for the first phases of those projects.

Amy Chester: So 10 teams worked with us around the region and worked with many other organizations and local government, and experts. And they developed projects that were then brought to the public and basically asked, do you wanna support this? So at the end of the process, seven teams were awarded to their projects, $930 million.

Amy Chester: So that's from 10 million for one team to up to 335 million. And this was back in 2020, sorry, 2014. So, $930 million to seven projects in 2014 has now become $4.5 billion of investment into these projects.

Stuart Yasgur: Wow, that's amazing. That's quick math five times over. That is unbelievable.

Amy Chester: Yeah, and I'd like to explain it in a way that I hope that communities can really understand that if you have a big idea, you may not have the money for it right away, but big ideas attract dollars.

Amy Chester: And if you have a project that has a lot of support on the ground, that support will say after funding cycles, after funding cuts, after new mayors and governors come, it's the people that want the projects and that will attract money. So, it's actually really interesting. It's actually a really interesting kind of experiment of what happens when you have a big idea.

Stuart Yasgur: Yeah, I think it's a wonderful example, 'cause all too often problems are enormous, but then people are really trying to address a problem they're worried about what's possible, so then they, there's a temptation to shrink the idea, to shrink the size of your aspirations. But as

you point out, if you come up with an idea that really rises to the magnitude of the problem, like that itself can surface a magnet to help attract the resources that you need to get it done.

Amy Chester: Yeah. And most governments are scared to put out a big idea because they know that they won't be able to implement it right away. And we looked at this as an entire generation. We even got pushback from governments to say, oh please don't put the biggest idea out there because we don't wanna be held accountable.

Amy Chester: And we didn't, and listened to them at the time. But then, fast forward, and during the Biden administration, there was a lot more money floating around for infrastructure, and the bigger idea could have happened if it was out there.

Stuart Yasgur: Right.

Amy Chester: The idea that there are communities on the ground post Sandy, that understand what their risks are, that are working hands in gloves with local governments, with experts from around the world have resulted in some really great infrastructure projects that now you can come to our region and sit and feel, and you will be completely surprised that it's flood protection as well.

Stuart Yasgur: It's a powerful teaser, right? You're just talking about a big idea, and that it's now grown to nearly $4.5 billion worth of investment. How do you articulate what the big idea was?

Amy Chester: The big idea is to do anything except the wall. So that communities you need do not need to be walled off from their waterfronts or from each other. But instead, let's build infrastructure that can have multiple benefits, like a park or like a street. So, I'll give you an example.

Amy Chester: Hoboken is right across from New York City—from the West Side of New York City along the Hudson River. It is, or it was at the time,

the fourth densest city in America. It's one mile by one mile, so it's approximately a square, but not necessarily a full square.

Amy Chester: And the back of it was filled in over time because it was actually an island. So, the back of it was marshland, and that's the area that continues to flood. So, when the Dutch came to America, they filled in Hoboken to make it part of New Jersey. And the back area, so this is the West Side of Hoboken, that the area that's opposite the Hudson River, is the lowest point.

Amy Chester: And when it rains really hard or when there's a breach of stormwater coming from the Hudson River, it collects in the back area like a bathtub and fills up. And then it can't be, it can't move. It takes a very long time for it to be discharged. So, the team that worked on this came up with this framework: resist, delay, store, and discharge.

Amy Chester: Resisting, meaning the breach points from the Hudson River. So, making sure that the Hudson River doesn't come in when the river swells for a hurricane. Delay, using green infrastructure and other techniques to hold the water because the sewer system can't hold up, can't process it as fast as we would like.

Amy Chester: Storing means holding the water where you can't delay, and then discharging it when the sewer is actually able to catch up. And what that has manifested in the city of Hoboken is five different resilient parks that are in the backside. These are neighborhood parks. One park, called Resilient City Park, can hold 2 million gallons of stormwater.

Amy Chester: A million above the park, with green infrastructure and other ways to manage that. And a million gallons below the park in a giant bathtub.

Stuart Yasgur: So, first of all, I think when people are talking about stormwater coming in, you're talking about sewers, and now we're talking

about parks, totally different. But also, I can't picture what a million gallons of water looks like. I know what a milk jug looks like, but I can't even fathom what a million of those would look like. So how do we start wrapping our head around this?

Amy Chester: Essentially, it's a giant, what they call like a bathtub. It is a concrete structure, so underneath their park has a concrete structure that is hollow. And what the park does is it has actually a pumping station on the park, and it pumps water from 20 blocks around the park and holds it underneath.

Amy Chester: So think about that. Twenty blocks of water that would normally flood that community is being held in that park. On top of that park is green infrastructure and native plant species that hold the rainwater. And they also have a basketball court, which is a nod to what they've done in Amsterdam and Rotterdam and places around the world that have been dealing with flooding for a long time, where the water that hits the surface is taken or channeled to the basketball court, and that basketball court itself can hold a couple of inches of water—the entire court.

Stuart Yasgur: That's amazing. They've created a massive holding facility for all this water that otherwise would've created floods in the city.

Amy Chester: And I promise you, if you went there, you would never know. You would have no idea, because what they've done is they've created a basketball court and an incredible play area and passive recreation areas, and a huge area for hockey and for very active recreation like soccer, and on top of it, it's like this big mound of a park. On top of it is this great café, and you can sit out there and just take in the city, and your children can run around 'cause there's this really amazing water feature that's right outside of the café.

Amy Chester: And you press the button, and there's sprinkler systems, and no one would ever know that it's flood infrastructure.

Stuart Yasgur: That's amazing. How much of an impact has this had on the city? How much of production has this created?

Amy Chester: So, Hoboken's done a number of things to both resist and delay, and to store—the three of them. And the five parks are a part of it. They are constructing a waterfront park, a new waterfront facility, and a flood wall that will go inside the community, for certain pieces of it.

Amy Chester: And that will help with the resist from the beginning. And the other thing that they've done is rethought their streets for pedestrian safety and to hold water. So, they are a Vision Zero City, which means that the mayor has taken a pledge to say we want zero pedestrian deaths. And a lot of cities around the world, and definitely in the U.S., are rethinking their streets.

Amy Chester: And, at the end of the street, they're creating a little area that allows the person, the pedestrian who's walking, have a better vision right and left. So, you can check if any cars are coming.

Amy Chester: The city of Hoboken has done that in a really interesting way because they put green infrastructure in those areas. So since they have created those traffic calming measures, they have had zero pedestrian deaths. And it has also contributed to their resilience. And we learned from Hudson Sewer Authority that Hoboken's flooding has been reduced by 88%.

Stuart Yasgur: That's amazing.

Amy Chester: It is amazing, and it's something that you can replicate. So, I'm a New York City girl. I grew up in Brooklyn, and I look at Hoboken, I think about every single neighborhood throughout New York City should have a park, and maybe we can't afford it all in this moment, but if you think about it in the next 20 years, we can.

Amy Chester: And we did this interesting report where we looked at parks in New York City as major infrastructure, the potential of parks, and what we found is that 77% of parks in New York City are gonna intersect a future flood zone.

Amy Chester: Not only to think about flood protection, but also to think about it as community infrastructure. Also to think about it as traffic calming measures. You layer all these benefits in. You put a lot more trees, a lot more green space. Not only does it hold the water, but it calms people.

Amy Chester: You have better mental health, you have better physical health. It cleans the air, and attributions can go on and on if given the moment to think about it as a way that you're thinking about a future measure. What do we need to do for our future? But if you're thinking about it as past, it's too late. So we feel really strongly that if communities have already suffered, it's actually too late. We need to do it before.

Stuart Yasgur: Right. And the options that are in front of us before people have actually suffered are immensely more kind of productive, and you're drawing our attention to what we could do potentially in really dense urban areas like New York City. Quintessential dense urban area.

Stuart Yasgur: We have these green spaces, the public spaces that are critical to New York and New York's identity, right? You can think about parks all across New York, but they can also play this dual role, which is fascinating. So this is something that, it affects residents, it affects buildings and building owners, developers, et cetera, but it also requires real public action. How receptive are people to start thinking differently about infrastructure this way?

Amy Chester: It's interesting. I would say the number one request that we hear over and over again is green infrastructure, and I can't put a pin on why, but I can assume that it's because of that connection to open space

and loving your neighborhood. So nobody's saying we want a flood wall. They're saying, wait a minute, what does this flood wall look like?

Amy Chester: For instance, the U.S. Army Corps has proposed, I think it's 16 different flood walls around New York and New Jersey. We held this like kind of interesting teach-in, and we asked the community organizations that live near these flood walls, what would you need to learn, in order to take part in this kind of public conversation about whether you want this or not?

Amy Chester: And we got back a whole list of things, and it was so interesting because they were like, how does it function? What are our options? How expensive is this? Might we be able to use it for something else? And they're just extremely intelligent questions that you would obviously ask yourself, or your neighbors would ask yourself.

Amy Chester: But there is a feeling among policymakers. I think that they are scared to have these hard conversations and scared to come forward and say, hey you know what? We don't have all the answers, but let's figure this out together. And that's what I think holds people back.

Stuart Yasgur: That's interesting. So, on the policymaker side, you're seeing kind of a lack of that kind of executive will to lead in. Take the reins.

Amy Chester: It's very hard for an elected official to say that they don't know the answer. Think about that for a second. I can't think of a time in our political history where the president came up and said, I don't actually know what we're supposed to do now. Instead, they say, oh, here's what we're gonna do.

Amy Chester: We're gonna retaliate by sending troops in, or we are gonna retaliate by building infrastructure, or whatever it might be, but you don't really take a beat and say, let's think about this. And that's really what Rebuild by Design did with Hurricane Sandy.

Stuart Yasgur: I think it's really interesting. Can I pull together maybe a couple of different threads that you said though, because just listening to you right now is making me rethink where my thoughts went when I heard you talking. 'Cause in some ways you said look, when there's when people have already suffered, it's too late. And it's too late to stop what has happened.

Stuart Yasgur: And you also pointed out at the beginning of the conversation, when you suffer from something like this, like Sandy or a storm with floods, like the immediate human instinct is, I don't wanna let go of what was. The way my home was, my community was, my vision of my life, and all of these things.

Stuart Yasgur: And it's a real moment of realization when you recognize, oh wait, I now live in different worlds today than I did yesterday. And I have to wrap my head around that. But also, I think what you're pointing us to is that we can also start to picture what the future looks like that's different. A future where we are intentionally building resilience into our communities and not just to enter our homes, but all our communities, and how we're living together.

Stuart Yasgur: And that we start to have a public conversation about how do we start to create resilience in our community using all those other things like parks that are so central to how we all live together.

Amy Chester: Exactly. And what an opportunity this is. It's an opportunity that honestly excites me. When have you ever been asked like, hey, what kind of community do you wanna leave your kids and your grandkids? Never. Never at all.

Amy Chester: So, imagine you actually have that time and say, hey, in the next year, we're gonna plan what it's gonna look like. Let's talk about your values. What do you value? What's the hierarchy of things that we want in our community?

Amy Chester: Do we wanna be a pedestrian community? Do we wanna be a car community? Do we wanna be one with public spaces or not? Do we wanna have lots of malls? These are all things that people can say yes or no to, given the opportunity to opine on it. But after a disaster, as you said, people don't have that ability to take a step because they need to put their lives back together.

Stuart Yasgur: Right. And you mentioned that this is how, so Hoboken and in New York, and there are some really interesting plans that are happening in New York. Are you seeing other places starting to be receptive to this?

Amy Chester: It's interesting you say this because just this week we launched, actually yesterday, an Atlas of Inspiration.

Stuart Yasgur: Oh great.

Amy Chester: So, the stat that I started with, the 95% of congressional districts, that came from our atlas of accountability. So, we've actually mapped all of the weather events that have happened between 2011 and 2024. And we mapped it by county, and we mapped it by congressional district. And that's the Atlas of Accountability, and that's on our website. Or you can just go to atlas of accountability.org. And that followed a report that we did, which was called Atlas of Disaster, which actually talked about all the things that we had learned over the years. And that was the first entree into figuring out what this looks like if you map the entire country.

Amy Chester: Just this week, we released the Atlas of Inspiration, which looks at projects throughout the country that communities have been implementing as a call for replication.

Amy Chester: So you could put your address in, or you could just poke around on the map. And what you'll see is that a box will pop up.

Amy Chester: It will tell you how many disasters the federal government has given to your county from 2011 to 2024. So let's say you're in Kings County and the answer is something like nine disasters. It's likely more in Kings County. That's Brooklyn, by the way. And then it shows you how much money you got from FEMA. How much money you got from FEMA and HUD together?

Amy Chester: What does that per capita look like? And it has a link to a report that's just for your state, which has a number of maps, which has the social vulnerability map, the energy reliability map. It shows you exactly where FEMA's dollars have gone and exactly where you've gotten to disaster declarations. And it connects you by social media to your congressional representatives.

Stuart Yasgur: That's great. This is phenomenal, especially today when there are conversations about changing the role of FEMA and HUD and the federal government, and responding to and preparing for these disasters. And so, if you wanna understand how this impacts you—it directly could impact you—you can just go and look it up. That's fantastic.

Amy Chester: Yeah. And we created it because it was very hard to talk about what will happen for one degrees or two degrees. I don't know what the word is, but we were like stuck, very much stuck in a very combative atmosphere. So we decided to take a look backwards and just show how these disasters have been coming more, more often and more increasing in costs and destruction.

Stuart Yasgur: I love it, in part because it's really actionable, right? It's concrete information that you can act on today. One of the things about the Atlas of Inspiration is there's so much time people spend writing about the problems, but people often are not as aware of the solutions that are emerging, like what people are actually doing today and how that could work in their world. If you have the opportunity to be able to look and see, okay, what are communities who are facing something similar to what we're

facing? What are they doing? And what does this look like, and what's involved in that? That's remarkable.

Amy Chester: And you can search by region, you can search by weather event. So it could be heat, or storm, or it could be either stormwater or storm surge. And just get an idea of what's out there. And then it connects you straight to that project. Our URL is rebuild by design.org, and you can get to all the atlases from our front page there. If you just wanna skip that and go to the Atlas of Accountability, you can go to Atlas of Accountability.

Stuart Yasgur: And so, as you're at this stage, you talked, you started in the beginning talking about big ideas. How do you think about a big idea, looking forward?

Amy Chester: The idea that communities can come together and have conversations that are not combatives. Figuring out how to do that in a way that is really productive exists for sure. And the question is, how can we do that in many places?

Amy Chester: So, what are the institutions that we need? What are the skills that we need? What would it be like to have a huge conversation across the U.S. about how we wanna respond to this challenge?

Stuart Yasgur: Yeah, that's a really interesting thought in part because, in a very polarized political moment, you and your neighbors often face similar kinds of threats from extreme weather events and the prospect that you can take action. You can have a conversation with your neighbors that can be productive about how you take action together, and that is something that you can see having in common with people across the country is really interesting. Because it's the civic space that we need to engage in is, how are we gonna work together to address the problems we're facing.

Amy Chester: We actually took a look in our Atlas of Accountability to understand whether the areas that are most effective were Democrat or Republican. And we weren't even gonna publish it.

Amy Chester: We just wanted to understand it for ourselves, and we didn't publish this piece, but when we added up how much money for red states and blue states—they were pretty much the same. And then when we looked at congressional district, we did it twice, two different ways. One by congressional district, if it was red or blue. Democrat or republican.

Amy Chester: And then also if their governor was democrat or republican. It was very interesting. And what we found is that of the counties that have had the most disasters—so these are 12 or more disasters between 2011 and 2024, 77% of them were red states, were republican. And that makes sense 'cause we saw what happened to the girls in Texas. We have seen what's happening in Appalachia, in Kentucky, over and over again. In Helene, the destruction was brought to North Carolina. Like it was quite something.

Amy Chester: And we just heard yesterday that the task force that the president appointed to give feedback on FEMA, the feedback was, we need to keep FEMA. And we hear this all around, we need to keep FEMA.

Amy Chester: What we need to do is actually tweak it and make it better. And tweak it and make it work for whether you're red state or blue state, or whether you're rural or city, like all of the things, like all of the incredible mosaic of what makes America, America, needs to be addressed, and how we respond to climate change.

Amy Chester: We need to be having these conversations with our elected officials and explaining what we need before and after a storm. And what I hope will happen is that we can actually create a new agency or make, FEMA times two agency that can help communities not only in the couple of days in the aftermath, but shifting a lot of the resources into the before.

Amy Chester: How are we thinking about this in ways that is going to promote climate migration to the areas where we actually want economic development? Or how are we gonna do it in ways that promote different industries? So we could be sure that people have jobs. This is such a big idea and a big opportunity if we take it.

Stuart Yasgur: And I think that, as we're doing our work in Economic Architecture on this, we are seeing so many kinds of innovations that are developing, like when something happens, we need a response, I think obviously.

Stuart Yasgur: But to the extent that we can start to move resources to avoiding the disaster from ever occurring, the better off we'll all be, and that that's a space for incredible innovation and, really large potential on public policy market-based across the board.

Stuart Yasgur: You've already touched on what the next question I'm gonna ask you, but if you're a person listening to this, you recognize, okay, how important this is, over 95% of the districts across the country are experiencing this. What can people do? What's an action step that they can take?

Amy Chester: Go to Atlas of Accountability, print out your state's maps, and bring it to your neighbor and ask them, what could we do about this?

Stuart Yasgur: That's a great way to invite people to start doing things together, to building that civic conversation that we need.

Stuart Yasgur: Amy, this is fantastic.

Stuart Yasgur: Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us. It is amazing to hear about how your work has continued to evolve and grow from where it started. Really appreciate it.

Amy Chester: Thank you so much.

Stuart Yasgur: I think one of the things that I take away from my conversation with Amy is the importance of starting a civic conversation about these issues. Maybe a civil conversation about these topics. How do we find more bipartisan support on the issues that we think divide us? Amy's innovation gives individuals the agency to understand their climate and their communities better.

Stuart Yasgur: Ultimately, our work at Economic Architecture is not only to change how markets can work better to help each and every one of us live a more fulfilling life, where we are able to contribute to the world with our fullest potential. But it's also reminding us about the agency we have.

Stuart Yasgur: The agency we have to be part of change. To be agents of change and ultimately to be part of the solution.

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