

# MARGINS

## Season 4, Episode 2: “Organizing Space”

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### The Big Idea

**Mary Ellen Slayter:** From Managing Editor magazine, this is Margins. And if you've got content in your job description, we've made this podcast for you. I'm your host, Mary Ellen Slayter. In this season of Margins, we're exploring what it means to be organized.

**Elena Valentine:** And I'm your cohost, Elena Valentine.

**Elena Valentine:** So when it came to even the theme of our season, organizing, it seems like *mise en place* in organizing space was the first thing that came to mind. Is that true?

**Mary Ellen Slayter:** It was. And it actually came out of a conversation that I had with one of our guests, Katie Juban, who's an old friend, close friend, who is a chef, who is simultaneously the least organized person I know and also one of the most when it comes to her kitchen. When it comes to how work gets done, she's not that uptight in every other aspect of her life, but when it comes to the layout of that kitchen. And that was something I learned from her, actually, that was really important is if you put your stuff where it goes, it makes everything else so much easier. I both bristle at that idea and also find it very intriguing.

**Mary Ellen Slayter:** But then I sometimes think about other things about space and how we can use space to keep things together. We can use space to keep people out. How space is organized can help shape who feels welcome in a space and who doesn't feel welcome in a space. And I actually thought about that a little bit this week, because the Louisiana legislature is in session right now. And I've had the experience of a few times of going down and testify. I've become a person who is comfortable with showing up and telling my legislators about themselves.

**Mary Ellen Slayter:** What I will tell you, and based on the experiences of other people, it is a space that is designed to change people's behavior. It's formal. You go through security. It's this little warren of tiny little rooms. It's grand in some ways. I mean, everybody just stands up a little straighter when you're in there. You're there to do this official business. And on one hand, you're like, yeah, so people know how to act when they come in here. On the other hand, it has the effect of making other people feel uncomfortable.

**Elena Valentine:** That's right. And it's fascinating, right? Because when we think about this theme of organizing space, it's not just the actual physical space itself, the artifacts of a space, but it's also how do we, as people, feel in that space, the energy of the space. On one side, we have the Marie Kondo spectrum where, okay, if everything has its place and everything is neat and not cluttered, we have this energy of, for some in their home, feeling like yeah, I can tackle anything. I have a positive mindset. But on the other end, it's also thinking about how are we organizing spaces for other people? And exactly what you're saying going into the legislature, that uncomfortable feeling, all of the spaces that they're taking you through, it's an energy setting there, and whether or not do you belong or not belong.

**Mary Ellen Slayter:** And it's supposed to be where democracy happens. But I would say that for a lot of people, they

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have to overcome a lot of discomfort to show up there and speak to those people.

Mary Ellen Slayter: Right. And part of that is created by the grandeur of the space. I'm glad you mentioned Marie Kondo, because I think that she has taken over the organizing world and that whole industry. For her, it's not just about the stuff. There is a religious and cultural element to this that goes deeper than just if my things are in this order, then I feel more organized. Organization of her space reflects the organization of her soul.

Elena Valentine: I mean, that's what's so fascinating. The nuance and complexity of this is on one hand, we could take this episode to think about organizing spaces a spiritual practice, a philosophical practice. And what I'm really loving about how this episode has come together is on one hand, we're talking to someone like Katie, who is a chef, where things like mise en place and putting things together in the kitchen are here to make things more efficient and, obviously, the energy she feels towards what she can do. On the other hand, I talked to someone like Katherine, who is an architect, who's thinking about not just how are we creating a space but how we're creating equitable spaces, to this point of the spaces we create, how does that come off of whether or not you belong in that space or not.

Mary Ellen Slayter: Right. Well, so what it makes me think of, honestly, is church, right? So, when we think about a variety of religious traditions, and we think about the temple. This is where, again, I find Marie Kondo fascinating because she is saying, make your home a temple and the objects in your home should be things that are worthy of being in a temple, essentially.

Elena Valentine: Amen. I mean, my life mindset is to think that way.

Mary Ellen Slayter: So now, when we start to think about walking into churches, this is where architecture and religion intersect, right? So, you can have the simple country Baptist church with its bare-bones pews and that whole there's a setting there. You can have places that are intended to be welcoming. You don't have to be dressed up to come here because that's a core part of that. I'm talking about an old school type of Baptist, not all Baptist, right? There's another tradition, if you think about the Catholic Church and the grandeur and the awe and the mystery that is intended to inspire, right? Those are very different feelings.

Elena Valentine: And they're signals of how you are expected to behave.

Mary Ellen Slayter: Correct.

Elena Valentine: Or traditionally expected to behave in that space. And so, the nuance of all of this is it's the physicality, the architecture, the actual space with how do you behave in that space, how do you congregate in this space or not.

Mary Ellen Slayter: Right. Well, then there's the Mormon temple experience, which is I also find fascinating because there are parts of it that outsiders can see. And then there's the part of it...

Elena Valentine: Or part that they cannot.

Mary Ellen Slayter: ... they absolutely cannot, right?

Elena Valentine: Yes.

Mary Ellen Slayter: And there are rare moments where they do let outsiders in. So whenever they've done renovations on temple, you can go in and see before they reconsecrate it. And forgive me, any Mormons who are listening to this. I just called that the wrong thing but it's for lack of a better word it's, okay, now it's back to being the temple again, and you can't come in here. Again, as a non-Mormon, I have no idea how people behave inside that space once it's been reconsecrated. But I do find it interesting that they chose to hold that space back. And for me growing up in

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that Protestant country, Baptist tradition, it's hard for me to wrap my mind around but I'm also fascinated by the way that they organize their spaces.

## Interview 1: Katie Juban

Mary Ellen Slayter: Whenever I think about organizing space, I often think about the phrase *mise en place*, which is gospel in professional kitchens. I reached out to the person who taught me that expression. My friend, Katie Juban, a chef in Nashville who has run kitchens in some of the country's best restaurants.

Katie Juban: I think the phrase you're referring to is *mise en place*, which in French means to put in place for the uninitiated. The way that most modern kitchens run is based on a military brigade system invented by the French in the Napoleonic era or slightly earlier. This thing that we call *haute cuisine* was only available to royalty and aristocrats and stuff. But once it moved out of Versailles and into the streets, you had to figure out a way to... Because it really wasn't a very respectable profession back then or now. So, there was a way to keep everybody in line militaristically and it was absolutely modeled after French soldiers and the chain of command in the army.

Katie Juban: So, all of our little terminology and stuff, it's all in French and it's all weird. And the *mise en place* part, it's the heart of everything we do. Whether it's setting up a station, cooking a dish, writing a prep list, getting an order together, running a huge party, it's all about taking steps before the action starts to make sure that everything you need once you need it is not only exactly where you know it is but close, convenient, organized in such a way where you don't have to think about where... If you're going to make a *sauté* of a dish in service that has five components, all five of those components need to be kept nearby the place you're going to cook it and not scattered in several different places throughout the room.

Katie Juban: So that when it's time to cook 17 of those dishes in a 30-minute period, when you're in the dinner rush, you know where the backup is down below. You grab another pan, you put it up there. It basically means to put everything in place before you need it. Thinking about each step that you have to take to accomplish a goal and putting tools in place there to make sure that you do that in the most efficient way.

Mary Ellen Slayter: In fact, *mise en place* is such an important organizing principle that you'll find it at every restaurant, even Taco Bell.

Katie Juban: I'm sorry to absolutely break people's dreams and stuff, but the setup at a line at a Taco Bell is not incredibly dissimilar to the setup at 11 Madison Park. They're using the same stainless steel holding pans with the same refrigerators and rods. And the six ingredients that go into the Crunchwrap Supreme and the six ingredients that go into the elk tenderloin dish or whatever, they're all living in the same refrigerator and the same little holding pans and organized in the same way. When the order comes in from the drive-through at Taco Bell, they're going through the same steps. They're repeating the same process just not with truffles.

Mary Ellen Slayter: But does *mise en place* end in the kitchen?

Katie Juban: It really does trickle down or up to all the other facets, not only of your professional life, but once you start being a lifer in it, your personal life too, and just the way you operate. And I've always had this very stubborn, proud, oppositional defiant thing where because I have to be that way at work and just hyper-organized and hyper *mise en place* and everything thought out 10 steps in advance, I have this compulsive irrational. When I come home, it's like, no, I'm throwing my socks in the fucking corner. I have to turn it off somehow to retain some sense of myself.

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Katie Juban: And I understand that I've been doing this so long that the organized part is integrated into who I am anyway, but I still have this, like I said, irrational, oppositional defiant thing where I come home and I'm like, "I'm not doing the dishes. I'm not doing my laundry. I'm going to spill something on the floor and halfway wipe it up with a paper towel and figure it out tomorrow." It doesn't make a lot of sense, but I was never a naturally organized or disciplined person really until I started working in kitchens. I'm sure it was in me somehow, but I was never inspired to be that way until I started cooking professionally.

Katie Juban: So, there's this need within myself to retain some pieces of the artistic chaos, which creativity and artistic stuff can get somewhat constrained when it's like 250 grams of shrimp and that's all. If it's 255, then everything's fucked. So it's really weird. And it's introduced me to all kinds of professional and personal skills that I never really imagined myself doing when I was younger. And I got into it because cooking was fun. And now I know how to use Excel already. I feel I've gone to business school in a way. There's a lot of producing P&Ls and forecasting and budgeting and stuff that also has to do with being organized and having mental *mise en place*.

Mary Ellen Slayter: If you want to run a successful kitchen, then you have to get everyone on your team working together smoothly. How does Katie do that?

Katie Juban: Actually, there's this guy, Danny Meyer. He's a famous restaurateur, Union Square Cafe, whatever, wrote a book called *Setting the Table*. And his management philosophy, which has been parroted and adopted by a lot of larger successful hospitality companies in the last 10 years. The phrase over and over is constant gentle pressure, which is the opposite of constant abusive pressure, which is what the industry used to be. But it's this idea that you have to choose to manage, number one, because the safety of people is at risk here. But by choosing to manage, you have to constantly just remind people in a polite humanistic way that there are systems. And that the reason that there are systems is to keep you safe, keep me safe, and keep the guests safe.

Katie Juban: We don't do it because it's some arbitrary set of rules that are set up to catch people doing things wrong. It's not a trap. We do this because it's the thing to do to keep you safe and to make the restaurant profitable and orderly and efficient. We do it because it makes us not poison people. Makes us not have people get their hands chopped off or fried.

Mary Ellen Slayter: We all want to keep our hands out of the deep fryer. But for Katie, organization is ultimately about something else. Trust.

Katie Juban: God, baby cooks, they get so mad and they don't understand. They think I'm just picking on them. And it's like, "No, if your station isn't clean, if you don't wipe down after everything, I mean, oh, well, what's the big deal if I'll give you a plate at expo and it's got a little smudge of sauce on the bottom because I didn't wipe off my workstation before I plated the food?" Well, I mean, okay, number one, that's an extra step that I have to go through so that the guest doesn't see that. But number two, your work habits are fundamentally disorganized. I can see that by the way you keep your station.

Katie Juban: And if you think I'm picking on you, because you don't run your sani towel down that stainless steel pass every time you perform a task, if you're not taking that step, what other steps are you not taking? If I open the refrigerator to see your backup, is it in disarray? If you're not wiping your station down after every 10, 15 minutes, you're probably not labeling everything. You're probably not rotating your container. If you go and you get the six-quart container of red sauce, you only need one quart on your station for, are you using the rubber spatula and scraping out all the product that you can to make sure that we're using everything we have, or are you just dumping it and not wiping it and not changing it?

Katie Juban: Every extra step that you take as a cook shows me that you're being diligent, that you are organized, and that you care about making it safe. I think the masons are onto something, at least in the sense of physical architec-

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ture creates internal architecture. In the sense of if you build it on the square, people will live on the square. The more organized you are in my line of work, the more successful you're going to be. And the more organized the facility and the space is, the more people feel... I mean, I don't want to but I almost have to describe it as they feel pressured to maintain those spaces and maintain those systems of organization as they found them.

Katie Juban: If you walk into a place and it's obvious that it's a little bit dingy and in disarray anyway, you're not really going to think twice about, "Oh, maybe I didn't flip out every container on my station tonight. Don't worry about it. Nobody around me really cares." We label everything with masking tape, blue tape. In a lot of fine dining spaces, if you don't use little scissors to cut the ends of your tape, there's no tearing the tape with your fucking hands. Uh-uh (negative). That's disorganized.

Katie Juban: Ragged corners of tape? Seriously, I mean, I'm not making this up. If you don't cut your tape with scissors and it can't be any longer than, what, two inches, two and a half inches, even if the word is bouillabaisse, all of these little practices come down to that minute attention to detail that separates the good from the great. And if you can't be bothered to take those little pieces of attention to detail, then why would I trust you with my truffles and my caviar? So, if you're going to take shortcuts with a masking tape, then you're definitely not butchering my fish.

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## Interview 2: Katherine Darnstadt

Elena Valentine: We're living in organized spaces every day. To better understand what this means, I spoke with Katherine Darnstadt, founder and principal architect at Latent Design, a progressive architecture firm that sits at the intersection of architecture and community development. We started by discussing Latent Design's philosophy and mission.

Katherine Darnstadt: The ultimate goal is social and spatial justice in the built environment. That's what I will work for my whole entire profession. That's period, the end. And I don't know how far I will get to resolving any of that, but that's using the tool of design and architecture as part of process and a skill set to resolve that. I think where it feels at times of doing many different things, teaching or architecture company or construction company, those are all part and parcel to that end goal of understanding what does equity in the built environment look like.

Katherine Darnstadt: And it can't just be through one pathway, because that's not how our system of development is set up. It's set up through architecture, design, construction, nonprofit, finance. So, you have to know all of these different pieces. And the way I learn is by doing, right? So, that's why there might seem there's multiple disparate elements happening in my professional pathway at any different time, but they all reach to that goal.

Elena Valentine: When we're thinking about a high-rise building in downtown Chicago, how do you apply that same kind of approach in questioning when we're thinking about equity and justice in a space like that?

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Katherine Darnstadt: That I think comes from acknowledging the land and what was there and what the histories of the loop were, the site in particular that we're working on, which had an SRO, has a vulnerable population that already lives on the site. So how do you start to look at a building and a program that addresses the needs, things about affordability in the loop and things about all the individuals that we rely on that can't afford to live in that part of the city, right? So it's acknowledging what we call defining the context in terms of what was there, what can we acknowledge, what shifted, and how can we resolve the core issues that are happening on the site.

Katherine Darnstadt: Because the core problem on the site isn't that there isn't a building. The issue is there's not social services, there's not affordability, there's not safety in the public realm, there's not a space for small businesses to thrive next to chain retail. Those are the issues. Then you could design a space around it.

Elena Valentine: So, what is the next challenge Katherine sees for organizing space?

Katherine Darnstadt: One that really does bother me is understanding how you develop equitably, right? Because we could design a process that has more engagement, has more thought to it and creates a better space in the end. That's step 2 or 10 of a process. Step one is really having the money and having the power to actually make the space and to make the project, right? And I think that's the one that I'm trying to understand a little bit more personally and professionally.

Katherine Darnstadt: And I think that's the one that I'm trying to understand a little bit more personally and professionally, is deciding you are going to make a project that serves the community and doesn't necessarily serve solely private interests. Because every project is a project of pure determination and will to get done to create something. But you have to be the one who wants to do it and can do it. And you build the team from there. So how do you have the power and the privilege to make that project happen?

Katherine Darnstadt: The way I think about it is that more development and philanthropy, is that just more equitable developers, is that more conscientious bankers? I don't know what that means yet. I don't know what that process is, but that's really what it comes down to. In Chicago, we're short 100,000 affordable units, affordable housing units in the whole city. We build 800 or 1,000 a year. So, we're going to do this for 100 more years? No, we have to figure out the process of getting it to 2,000 or to 5,000 a year. How do you do that? You have to have more people who want to do that and can do it.

Elena Valentine: What is it going to take?

Katherine Darnstadt: I think there's a few steps. When you think about the built environment and buildings, it is finance, it is land access, it is construction and design. It's all of those pieces. So, you have to go after it in a multi-pronged approach. So, how do we make construction more affordable? There's a whole probably teams of people working on that already. That's their interest. How do you make access to capital easier for developers of color, right? There's people working on that. And all of that eventually has to be coordinated and aligned. And then, again, showing examples of how that happens. Because I think what we think of is development as the high rise in downtown. But development is what we really need is the two flat in Garfield Park, we need more of those.

Katherine Darnstadt: We don't need all new high rises, the Loop or the West Loop. We need more affordability in our neighborhoods. And that's actually the neighborhood developer or the person who wants to buy a building and say, "This is what I want to do. I want to live in one and rent out the other affordably." That's the people who need the support and access to capital to do that, because developer isn't a word that equals gentrification. It's knowing how to actually make the space. And those are the people that we think need more access and more support, because they're the ones who already are mission-driven.

Elena Valentine: How can you become more aware of the things Katherine is thinking about every day?

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Katherine Darnstadt: First, I would think about how do you get information about a project. So, if you see development happening in your neighborhood and you want to know more, you should first find out are you contacting the owner? Is it large enough that you have to go to a community meeting for it? I think being engaged in that process is first step. But the one good thing that has happened with all these Zoom meetings that are happening is more people can be engaged, can give opinions, because it's not like let me show up to a meeting after I'm exhausted all day from work at 7:00 PM. to go sit in a room and hear about something for two hours. Now I could watch a video. I could do it asynchronously, and then I can give my comments.

Katherine Darnstadt: So that's good. That has been great to expand access to information, but that's one way to be engaged and involved. I think another is champion spaces, right? So if you're on your walk in your neighborhood and you see a vacant lot or you see a vacant building, how do you use your own imagination to think about what's needed and what could be there, and how could that be part of advocacy once you start being engaged in that built environment? Can you push priority areas? Can you say, "Our neighborhood needs a grocery store or this vacant lot could be a garden"? All of these things can come forward and become really valid.

Katherine Darnstadt: And then I think when it's looking at your own personal space or priorities of thinking about size of your place, everyone could be smaller or larger, right? Is there enough space? Does everyone have both privacy and public zones in their home? And then, what's your access to the outdoors or views or natural light, and what does that look like in terms of where you could walk to? It always goes back to where's the safe space that you could be in your neighborhood versus just in your home.

Katherine Darnstadt: And I think that's the beauty of a simplicity of a problem to solve. That's actually also very challenging, because we want to, as architects and designers, is make all neighborhoods safe spaces for anyone to feel they could enjoy without being over-policed, without being unsafe, and being joyful in it. That's the challenge, right? And I think if everyone thinks about their space and their neighborhood and can bring forth and feels comfortable bringing forth ideas, that's one step to getting more positive advocacy in the built environment.

Katherine Darnstadt: And people, because they do have access, but sometimes they don't feel that they're smart enough to do it because they say, "I'm not an architect. I'm not this. I'm not that," when they are experts in their neighborhoods, absolutely, because they live in everyday. And I think that's the professional shift that has to happen concurrently with people feeling more comfortable to make their voice known. When it comes to organizing space, the biggest compliment is organizing a space in a situation where people feel comfortable to say that.

## Outro

Mary Ellen Slayter: So, that's it for this episode of Margins from Managing Editor. You can find us on Apple Music, Stitcher, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts. Make sure get organized and subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

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Elena Valentine: And a special thanks to the mise en men who made this episode possible. Producer Rex New, audio editor Marty McPadden, and assistant producer Michael Thibodeaux.

Mary Ellen Slayter: We'll see you all next time.