

THE WORK SCIENCE CENTER



The Work Science Center Podcast

Episode 4 Designing Coworking Spaces for Women

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Keaton Fletcher: Welcome to the Work Science Center Podcast, brought to you by the Work Science Center of the Georgia Institute of Technology. I am your host, Keaton Fletcher. You can find more about the Work Science Center at our website www.WorkScienceCenter.GATech.edu. In today's podcast I talk with Ali Greenberg, Founder of The Broad. The Broad is a coworking and community space in Richmond, Virginia, designed for women and gender minorities to help facilitate professional and personal growth and relationships. Ali and I discuss what it means to design a space with women in mind and how science can help facilitate the success of women and gender minorities in the modern workforce.

Alright, Ali, thanks for joining me today. So, to start off could you tell me a bit about your background, how you establish The Broad.

Ali Greenberg: Yeah, so my background is a pretty traditional liberal arts background. I went to Washington and Lee; pretty broad education in all things liberal arts. After graduation I moved to New York where I worked as a strategist in advertising agencies. So, my background really became a lot of consumer research and understanding what makes people tick and how to connect more authentically between brands and consumers. So, after about four years in New York I was ready for a change, and I ended up settling in Richmond, Virginia after just kind of taking a road trip to a lot of different cities and finding this one. It was entrepreneurial and creative and I felt just like a palpable energy in the air.

So, I settled into Richmond and about six months in was when The Broad became an idea. I had been spending a few months working out of the existing coworking spaces that were here, which were great for a variety of reasons. But, primarily because I had a project that I was working on as a freelancer that was actually full time. So, my first two months there, it made a lot of sense to be at this space and to be paying a premium for it. But, as soon as that project was over I was basically never going to have a similar project again; it was a pretty rare thing in my line of work. So, I found myself quickly overpaying for a space that I really did not need. And, what I really was getting was *co-working* instead of what I thought coworking was, which was more of a community. So that was my first inkling that "hey maybe there is something else in this area that would be beneficial" because I had this idea of what I thought about a coworking space and what I found that it was great, but it just was different. They were basically cool, sexier office buildings and I was missing the *co* part of it, the community and the connections that I really needed. I didn't need a workspace, I needed friends. I was brand new to a city; I needed connections. So that was where I first started thinking about maybe there is a better way to be doing this.

And as far as how The Broad came about, in particular, I used that consumer research background and I did focus groups, I ran surveys, I did competitive research, and then ended up kind of building the idea around three main pillars. One, that coworking versus community disconnect that I saw. The second one being that there were a lot of events in the city but not a lot of curation around them. And then, the third being that there was a lot of networking, but not a lot of actual connections. And those three things felt like a really natural fit for a central place, yet they were not being met by anything here. And then add to that just the need and the potential of women's spaces and it seemed like a perfect fit. So, I saw some different spaces opening up in



other cities that have the same model as us and those were top-of-mind, and I was already using them as case studies for clients and decided to just test and see if people were interested in it here, and based on our research they were.

KF: So much to talk about. So much to unpack. Real briefly, for those of our listeners who are not familiar, what exactly is a coworking space? And then, you sort of talk about this difference between *co*-working and coworking and that community, so could you just give me a little more there?

AG: Absolutely. So, primarily coworking is really office space. There are communal areas. But for the most part when you think about the WeWorks of the world they are very nicely designed shared office spaces, so it is really great places with kegs and beer and great coffee and fun couches but then you walk down a hallway and it is lined with glass doors where people have offices of one to five people behind it. So, you have this community and you are sharing a resource, and it is a subscription model, so it seems a little bit more modern, but ultimately what it is, is office space. There are some other spaces that are more focused truly on the coworking part of it, and being more of a community, which take on a little bit more of that coffee shop vibe, or maybe the main floor of a library at school, a common house type of area, but for the most part the big businesses that we talk about when we talk about coworking are really in the business of office space rentals.

KF: And so, who is using these office spaces, these coworking spaces, or The Broad?

AG: Yeah, I think we have a pretty different market at The Broad compared to these traditional spaces. I see us as in the same ecosystem but not even competitors, because the people that come to us, or at least the work people, because actually only about a third of our members actually even are here for the coworking. They are remote workers they are generally working for themselves for a large company or they are just popping in and out on side projects. Whereas they might be a great fit for other traditional coworking spaces, but what you see there are more nimble business that are maybe one to three person teams that are looking for a more flexible lease. Commercial leases can often be quite long, they require a build out. So, these coworking spaces allow companies to have just more flexibility both within their budget and within their facility. You do not have to worry about needing a conference room that only gets utilized ten percent of the time and you are paying the extra premium for it, when you can just rent or book a couple hours at the conference room as part of your membership. So I would say for the most part, coworking spaces are really geared towards more nimble companies that are looking for alternatives from the more traditional commercial leasing.

KF: And, so you are so much more than just a coworking space, especially if only a third of your members are there for the coworking space. So, what else does The Broad do?

AG: Yeah, about a third of our members work with us. We have no dedicated desks and no offices. So we really are for the people that are looking for an alternative to the coffee shop or to their home office. And then, on the side of that, we kind of are a space were you do not just bring your work-self, but you bring your whole-self to The Broad. So, we call ourselves a work space



and social club. I often use the term community center and really just sort of a home base or headquarters for the women of our community.

And, we do everything from weekly yoga classes, to office hours with professional service providers whether they be accountants or lawyers, they are on site every single week to answer questions from our members, totally inclusive of membership. We do perks and discounts at local businesses that are owned by local women. We have roundtables and panels and workshops and classes. We are doing a Spanish class starting in September. All sorts of really fun stuff in addition to just social events and book clubs and informal meetups. So, really a place that, yes you can bring your business self to and we can have a workshop on how to pick a location for your business, or how to get your legal affairs in order to start up a business. But, we also talk about what it means to be pregnant, what it means to buy your first house, how to buy ethical fashion. Really, just about your whole self in this space.

KF: When you were designing The Broad, what thought process went into the space itself? Because, you are trying to fit a lot of these different aspects into very functional space. What did you consider? What did you have to give up on?

AG: It was definitely a battle of form and function because work spaces, there is this huge conversation around open floor plans, and what is actually productive. We wanted to make sure that the space that we have was actually utilized as best as we can. So we have 2,500 square feet initially, we actually just expanded an additional 700 square feet in private space that we use for workshops and rentals.

KF: Congratulations.

AG: Thank you. But, our main space is essentially a loft; so, beautiful, great architectural details, lots of history. And then you realize, oh wow, it is really loud when I walk in here. Or, there is no door to go behind. So, wanting to make sure that we can create pockets of privacy as well as areas to collaborate wherever possible. So we were really focused on that. Making sure that there were various seating options, from places where you can lounge and put your feet up, to soft surfaces, hard surfaces. Places you can stand and work. Places that you can collaborate. Places that you can hide away and no one will bother you. So really trying to make sure that each space worked as hard as it could for us.

It means that when we went into the bathroom, we made sure that the amenities were fully stocked in there. That it has everything you can imagine that you might need throughout the day. It means that the temperature is something that we think about as a huge design cue. Most public spaces are heated or cooled to a decades old thermal comfort equation that was developed, I believe, in the '60s by a guy named Fanger. It was with the best of intentions but it was based on the average basically mass of a forty-year-old man in 1960 and his comfort. So it means that women are always just freezing wherever we go, and in the office you will always see people with their sweaters and blankets. So, making sure that it is comfortable in here and just the small design cues that let you know that it is a space built for you. I am sitting right now in our breather room which is a private space. You can see the dim lighting. I have diapers in the bin next to me. It is a place that you can nurse comfortably. You can pump comfortably. You can cry



comfortably. You can take a phone call or have an interview comfortably. And just knowing that we need those spaces that are not just after thoughts and checking the box of, “hey, we need a pumping room because that is legally required,” but it is actually a place that you feel restorative here.

KF: It sounds like really integrated into the space and integrated into your thoughts is the fact that this a space for women. So what do you think is important that people do not necessarily understand about women in the modern workplace? I mean, obviously, there is a lot of conversation going around about what it means to be a woman in the modern workforce, but what is your take on it?

AG: My take on it is that it still a huge conversation, and it is something that we are going to be working on for a really long time. Spaces like this are so essential because they provide us an opportunity to talk about it and to have conversations and to hold space for that conversation when often it was kind of like “Ok, brush it aside. Things are better. Shouldn’t we just be happier that they are better?” But, the truth is yesterday was Black Women’s Equal Pay Day. It was August 6th, so that is the date of the year that it takes for a Black woman to make the same as a white man did the year before. Which obviously comes way later than general Women’s Equal Pay Day because white women, we make more. So, just knowing that these things are very real data points, and that we need to be aware of the reality and not just think that “hey, now that we have parental leave, we are solved.”

There is still a lot of work to be done, and overall when you walk into a space, and you walk into your office, that is probably a building that was designed by a man. The architect was probably a man. The person in purchasing who is procuring even the seats and the height of everything was probably a man, just based on institutional history.

So, just being aware that women make up such a huge percentage of the workforce but we still are not in positions of power. Not even power, but just decision making when it comes to simple things like purchasing. And those design elements, and the cues that you see in spaces that you exist in are really important and really impactful. When you walk into The Broad, it was designed by a woman. And, the lighting is by a woman. And, the murals on the wall, and when you see our soundtrack, it is all women. It is just sort of a pervasive understanding that you are not only welcome here, but you are represented here. And, that is something that we do not see in those places.

KF: Relatedly, throughout this conversation, you are very in tune with the science or studies that have been published. One, where do you go for this information? I feel like being on the scientist side, we do things and publish them in regular academic journals and they are not necessarily the most easily accessible for people who would actually use it, like you. And then, two, I know that we have run into this especially in psychology, less so in modern times, but a lot of the studies are done entirely on men, or without that emphasis on women. So, when you were trying to create The Broad, was there anything that was empirically based for women? What can the science do to help you?



AG: I do not think that there is a ton. We know that especially in the medical sciences they do not even test on women most of the time based on this old paternal idea that it dangerous for our bodies and might sacrifice our fertility. Women just literally are not part of the conversation. I think that the sciences can do such a better job—because they are basically starting from zero—of including women in the dialogue, but in particular, including an intersectional viewpoint. And, I know it is a lot to go from zero to understanding all aspects of the gender spectrum, because baby steps are sometimes needed. But, when we use the term women, we actually spell it with an x, and that is meant to be truly inclusive to understand that gender is not just a binary thing. It is not even a genetic thing, or a genital thing. It really represents everyone. So, The Broad, yes, we are making space for Womxn, women with an x, but really we are making space for women and gender minorities, which is our larger raison d'être. And when you think about that, it is still a new concept, but it is something super important. Even if we are not ready to study it in the sciences, even if we do not quite yet have the terminology, just being able to acknowledge that and say “hey, we know that this has not included everyone, and we know that this is a limited view point” I think goes a long way to just acknowledging that there is more out there to learn.

But as far as where I do go for information, it definitely is where the science has trickled down the pop culture almost, of the Fast Company articles, and Forbes, and The Entrepreneur, and HBR (Harvard Business Review). All of that stuff which takes some of the more qualitative data, I would say, because yeah, it is kind of hard to access a lot of the other psychological stuff. We have been fortunate, at least with The Broad, that coworking has been such a popular business trend, so you can learn a lot from trend pieces that are going on, and then also the focus in particular on women's spaces in the last year-and-a-half to two-years has really taken off. So, we are always seeing what is going on in those areas, as well as collaborating among other spaces. So, what is really cool, in particular for women is that we are now trying to be much more collaborative, rather than competitive. I talk to people in Seattle, from The Riveter. I talk to people from Atlanta that run Circle and Moon. And we are doing all of these similar things, but in vastly different geographies, and being able to share learnings and what our members are actually needing is hugely helpful, in a way that I do not think the WeWorks of the world are doing with their competitors.

KF: So, are there questions that as you are thinking forward for The Broad, that you wish science could help you answer?

AG: I think that if we could quantify the old boys club, that would be great. I do not know how we could do that. I do not know how you quantify the social, political, and economic impact that comes from traditionally male-dominated networks, whether they are in the C-Suite, or the bank, or the country club. But, that is essentially what we are trying to do here. It is most directly being manifested through workspace as the most understandable avenue, but we are so much more than that. Ultimately, what we are trying to do is make space for women, in all aspects of the world, and understanding that professional power, is economic power, which trickles down. So, trying to understand how we could quantify, not even monetarily, but psychologically and emotionally, what are the impacts on that privilege that man have been afforded, in particular, that White men have been afforded in the workplace and in social networks that women, or people of color, or



gender minorities, have just not been afforded, because even until a couple of years ago gender minorities were hardly recognized. So, being able to think about that would be very interesting, but it is also very hard to quantify social capital. But, I think that that would be really, really interesting, especially in a post-*Lean In* world where women are talking more about career advancement and collaboration and not fighting for one seat at the table, but expanding the table. It will be really interesting to see how things will shift.

KF: What is your take on it? Where do you think things are headed?

AG: I hope that we are really headed to a larger table. I think spaces like The Broad, or The Wing, or The Riveter, any of these spaces are really built on that concept of holding space for each other. Really, the idea of Shine Theory, which is essentially that not only do I shine when you shine because it radiates on me, but I cannot shine if you do not. And, that creates sort of a bond and an imperative to help each other succeed, rather than previously we might have needed the other person to fail in order for us to get a leg up. So, that idea, Shine Theory, and even amplification, which is quite similar, that you saw in the Obama administration, where the women in the cabinet meetings would literally repeat what the other person said, and would say “As, Sarah said, I believe this...” in order to amplify that voice because it was often getting drowned out. So, those kinds of things and learning that we could collaborate and really work together rather than work against each other, I think, is really, really powerful. And, knowing that Millennials will be taking over the workforce quite soon and we have different views of just work-life balance in general. My hope is that we will necessitate more creative solutions to these long-standing problems. But, it is hard. But that is why last night we hosted a negotiation workshop, where we had twelve members and guests sit around drinking some wine, because it is okay to mix both, and talk about how we negotiate salaries. And, why it is okay to let there be silence in that conversation. And, why that is power. And, really just holding space for all of the conversations, and holding space for each other is just going to be huge. And I do hope that that is the future. And, we will keep working hard to make that happen here.

KF: Anything you want to add?

AG: Really, just that design matters. Yes, it matters in physical spaces, and noise and comfort of a space so that there is productivity. I think more so than anything just acknowledgment of someone’s existence and validation that they matter in a space. You cannot be what you cannot see. I do not think you can be a productive employee, and you cannot be a truly creative person if your environment has not been built to cultivate that. And, we are hoping to do that here. And, I think so many spaces can benefit from just not even huge differences, but just slight shifts, or even just once in a while asking, “hey, why is it that we do that?” And, if we think there is a better way, or if we think that there is room for improvement, maybe just ask the people that will be impacted, rather than just making assumptions on their behalf. So, until the decisions are made by those that are being designed for, the design will never be right.

KF: So, where can people find you and The Broad?

AG: The Broad can be found at WeTheBroad on Instagram and Facebook, and WeTheBroad.com, online.



KF: Thank you so much, Ali. This was really helpful, and I am sure that other people will find it just as helpful as I did.

AG: Yeah, thank you so much for reaching out, Keaton. It was great to chat with you.

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