



## EP 0: INTRODUCING *THE THREE BELLS*

### Adrian Ellis in conversation with Stephanie Fortunato

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[THEME MUSIC]

[00:00:07]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Hello, and welcome to The Three Bells - a podcast brought to you by the Global Cultural Districts Network (GCDN), in which we explore the challenges and opportunities waiting for us at the intersection of culture and urbanism.

I am Stephanie Fortunato, Director of the Department of Art, Culture + Tourism for the US City of Providence, Rhode Island. I am currently sitting in the ancestral land of the Narragansett and Wampanoag people, and I want to gratefully honour the indigenous elders past and present who have stewarded the land throughout the generations, as well as the first peoples across all the lands and countries who are joining us today.

Providence is a dense post-industrial city in the North-eastern United States of just under 200,000 people. Home to a vibrant arts community supported in part by our local government office. We are proud to call ourselves the creative capital.

We have been members of the GCDN since 2016. And I am thrilled today to be speaking with Adrian Ellis, Chair and Founder of the Global Cultural Districts Network.

Arts communities and our partner industries around the world have felt the impact of this global pandemic. Our artists and creatives are struggling right now. Cultural institutions of all sizes are grappling with the economic fallout, their own responsibility to local, black, indigenous, people of colour in their communities, and larger issues around racial justice.

The yet unrealised uncertainties on the horizon in the post-pandemic period with the climate crisis. An eternal optimist, these radical upheavals have also helped usher in a new era of change. And I hope that we are moving toward what one colleague calls, "a new better". That's why I'm thrilled today to be speaking with Adrian and looking forward to hearing more about what he sees in this cultural moment and beyond, and how peer networks like the GCDN and its members fit into this story.

After my chat with Adrian, I will be joined by members of the Three Bells production team for a key takeaway segment to identify actionable insights to take from today's conversation. The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting and The Binnacle Foundation.

The podcast and supporting material can be found at <https://gcdn.net/podcast/>.



*The Three Bells:* a podcast about culture in its urban context produced by AEA Consulting and the Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** Adrian Ellis. He needs almost no introduction to listeners of this podcast, as he is friend to many and ultimately responsible for bringing us all together, as they say it's all his fault.

I do want to highlight a few notes of his biography.

He founded AEA Consulting, is a prolific speaker writer, thinker, and cultural critic. He has served on many arts and civic organisations as a board member, volunteer, consultant and staff - really too many to even list here. But I do want to say something that I always found really interesting about Adrian. A lifelong jazz fanatic, he served as the Executive Director of Jazz at Lincoln Center from 2007 to 2011. And in 2012, the Jazz Journalists Association named him Jazz Hero of the year, which I feel has to be one of the highest honours that he's received in his really distinguished career. I also love that he actually began his career in government, in the UK - something that I have an affinity for.

And so I want to welcome Adrian to the program. Hi, Adrian.

[00:03:14]

**Adrian Ellis:** Hi, thank you. I'm thrilled to be here.

[00:03:16]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Well, it's been quite a year. And many months since we've last checked in. I know over the past summer; we were focused on the research around the social impact of cultural districts and preserving the value and identity of cultural districts around the world. But I also know that you've had some big changes on a personal level, and I wonder, how's it going? Tell us what have you been up to?

[00:03:39]

**Adrian Ellis:** Oh, so on a personal level. Yeah, absolutely. I am living in Italy, in Umbria, some 35 kilometres or so South of Perugia. We bought a house here about two years ago and it had always been our intention to move here eventually. But COVID speeded it up. The fact that our son graduated early, amazingly, I think he got bored with being taught in COVID, and just knuckled down and did nothing, but scraped through exams.

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Congratulations. (laughs)

**Adrian Ellis:** So, we're free from that. I'm not going to pretend that 70 million odd Trump voters didn't influence me a little, but also, Brexit, because if we got residency before - which we did December the 31st, we have in effect the same freedom of movement in the Schengen area, as we would have had had Britain not committed kamikaze act of Brexit.

So if you put those together, it just seemed like an adventure. Also, AEA, the consulting company that I have a hand in, has a lot of work on this side of the Atlantic - which is in a way, many ways more accessible from here than it is from the States.

So we did it. We moved in November and our furniture finally caught up with us - the 25th or the 28th of December, I think. And so, we are just about getting out of cardboard boxes and into a degree of normality here. So that's my story. I'm sticking to it.



[00:05:01]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Ah! What a thrilling moment and *buona fortuna* with your settling in there. It's really a dream trajectory actually, and in a lot of ways. And I think it touches actually on a couple of things that I wanted to talk about.

One is the disruptions actually, in travel and tourism, and I think you've highlighted both the impact of some of the nationalist policies - in the UK, in the United States, and how that is changing. I think, how we think about lots of things. But global strategic partnerships for one, and our movement across these communities, even within the Global Cultural Districts Network.

And you have spent many years as a frequent flyer, traveling from continent to continent. So I'm wondering how you're beginning to think about how communities that have traditionally relied upon cultural tourism, and really have focused on investing in cultural districts and other destinations and attractions as a strategy to encourage that cultural tourism activities.

I'm wondering how you're thinking a bit about their recovery.

[00:06:07]

**Adrian Ellis:** That was a lot in there. I think one has to break it down a little. So your first point was around, I think a backlash to the general trend of globalisation. In other words, if globalisation is about ideas, and people, and money whizzing around the world faster and faster as a result of deregulation and technology, then there is no doubt that there has been a sort of populist reaction to that.

And it's manifest in Brexit. It's manifest in America first. It's manifest in Hungary. It's manifest in Poland, in Italy, and that is a movement that does have implications for the cultural sector because, not just the sort of psychological dispositions of cultural leadership, but actually the values of the institutions are antithetical to those philosophies. The values of freedom of speech, the values of freedom of inquiry, the values of artistic - freedom of artistic expression are all to some extent threatened by those movements. So I think that this is a period when the rhetoric of those institutions is likely to be increasingly tested.

So I think that there's a set of issues around the role of cultural institutions in a period of increasing nationalism, which is interesting and contested and tough. I think that's slightly separate from another issue which is - okay, is all this whizzing out in the world that cultural tourism is premised on? Is it a) desirable, and b) sustainable?

And I think, the question that clearly COVID has ground that to a halt, but will it come back, and should it come back? A lot of investment in cultural infrastructure has been at least partially premised on the idea that infrastructure will get people to visit, and cultural tourists spend more, stay longer and tend to return.

Many institutions that are premised on that are likely - clearly in the COVID context to experience a challenge, but also back to nationalism, to the extent that that populist impetus makes travel more difficult and makes barriers to travel more difficult. For example, getting into the UK from the EU, then it's likely - there's likely to be an adverse impact.



**Adrian Ellis:** Clearly the longer-term impact of COVID will be interesting because even when there is a vaccine, and that vaccine is widely distributed, it's by no means obvious that people's patterns of behaviour might not change.

It might be that all people want to do is jump on planes and whizz around the world again, because they, like, they miss it, but it may also be that - I mean, for example, I went to Oakland in February for three days. I'm not doing that again in a hurry.

**Stephanie Fortunato:** (laughs)

**Adrian Ellis:** I mean, that was just absurd. And then the fourth factor, overlaying it is CO2 emissions clearly, and a sense of increasing both responsibility, but also guilt - what people call now, "flight shaming", around excessive personal travel. So my take would be that generally, cultural tourism - on which at least part of the model of many cultural districts as a premise will - I mean, it's not going to tank, at least in the longer term won't tank, but it may tail and so a long-term strategy that is premised on it is probably questionable, or I should say, premised on its continued growth.

On the other hand, many cultural districts are already highly sensitised to that. And both expediency and philosophy tells them that they should be increasingly concerned with and preoccupied by their relationship to their wider, immediate and physical environment.

And therefore, I think that most districts are already thinking very hard about ensuring that they are deeply engaged with the communities in which they're located. And that the tourist aspect is nice and important and significant, but the balance is clearly tipping to what our responsibilities towards the communities in which we're located.

Now I think that's already happening. It's clearly been precipitated by COVID, but I think that what COVID did is nudge that philosophy forward, but that philosophy was already pretty well, you know, articulated, if not implemented.

[00:10:21]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** And you know, I think as an office of local governments we're a bit of an outlier in the cultural districts network here. But that tension between visitor and local has always been present in our work.

And it's really interesting in this moment in which our cultural institutions, large and small across the world really are beginning to see not only their hyper-local communities as new resources and partners, to be able to think about the cultural and social and economic recovery of their institutions and their local communities, but the potentialities that are coming out of that. And I, you know, I did throw a big question at you and in response you returned that in kind.

But I, you know, I think some of the exciting possibilities coming out of this moment are the innovative, new arts programming that we're seeing because of that new interest and a discovery of what local community members and local cultural resources have to offer to our wider cultural context.

And I think, in this moment of healing, this moment in which we need to consider new innovative strategies, I think that is really important. It's a real way to redress some of the ills of global capitalism and it's reach into our localities.



[00:11:40]

[MUSIC TRANSITION]

[00:11:46]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** I think one of the exciting things that is coming from this cultural moment is the exploration of new technologies, and how they can help us to connect and connect with more frequency. GCDN has been doing a great job of more regularly bringing members together for conversations, and to really share not only our experiences, but to support and to catalyse I think the next steps of cultural production within our local communities. And this podcast is certainly one of the latest strategies in which GCDN has tried to, again, bring new resources to the field.

But I wanted - and I want to talk about this. I want to talk about why you decided to start this podcast - but I want to start with the name, The Three Bells. Can you tell me a little bit about where that comes from?

[00:12:38]

**Adrian Ellis:** Yeah, I can. And it's self-indulgent in a way, because it relates to some personal experience, but you know, what the hell, why not? I know a little *comune* called the Montecastello di Vibio. And Montecastello di Vibio, there was an American sociologist and anthropologist who in fact passed away in 2019 called Sydel Silverman. And she wrote a book which was based on her PhD, which was field research here in the community here in 1960. And it was called *The Three Bells of Civilisation*. And civilisation was the civilisation in 1960 and preceding it, in this area of Umbria. And she had a very particular thesis about it, which I'll say a bit about.

And the three bells are - there's a slightly unusual bell tower, which I can actually see from my window here, which has three bells in it. And so her book was called *The Three Bells of Civilisation*. And I thought, why not? I'm here. I'm doing this here. I'm looking at these three bells. And she intelligently thought it would make a good hook for her book.

And I thought, why not for this podcast? And I'll just read you briefly something from the preface of her book because I think it captures at least something of what GCDN is about, or what the larger aspirations are about the relationship between culture, community, and society, which is what her thesis and her book was on.

"If one explores the range of meanings that may be intended when someone is said to be *civile*. It may become evident. The concept is used in Montecastello has many senses. It means certain personal attributes, such as genteel behaviour, courtesy and generosity. It means making good appearance, observing the correct formalities and etiquette in social interaction and guarding one's good face or *bella figura*.

It means talking eloquently and arguing well. It means having command of written language, familiarity with the idealisms of government and appreciation of formal culture. It means participating skilfully in the public life of the piazzas and the bars. It means showing concern for one's inferiors while maintaining the demeanour appropriate to one's position.

It means dressing, dwelling, speaking, and behaving in the manner of the city whilst appreciating the country. It means having access to more important places while demonstrating civic pride in one zone. It means cherishing glories of the past while believing in progress."



**Adrian Ellis:** Now that's a highly aspirational definition I think, of the community of Montecastello di Vibio. But I think it sums up something about a set of values around the relationship between culture and civic life. So I thought it would be - you know, so that's what lies behind the three bells. It's slightly sort of overwrought; I know. But I - but I do think there's something in there about the relationship between what we're all preoccupied with, which is urban life and the arts, urban life and culture that back in 1960, Sydel Silverman was digging around in and exploring in this beautiful part of Italy.

[00:15:34]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** That's quite a wonderful passage and we'll have to make sure to put the link to that in the notes from this podcast.

And I love that. I love that way that you have integrated, not only your own personal shifts, but the larger impetus for bringing us together as a peer network and really thinking about, what makes our urban centres so unique and what connects us in ways. And culture is certainly the connective tissue through that.

So the podcast itself - what are you hoping to achieve by having a podcast?

[00:16:08]

**Adrian Ellis:** When we all got grounded in February and March by COVID, I think we all found that it was useful through Zoom and its rivals to huddle, if you like, and have conversations. And we all did that. And the GCDN members did that. The sort of, first round was very much just, you know, sort of saying "I'm alive. Are you alive?" "Yes. I'm alive."

And there wasn't a great deal of content to it, but it was useful that we were talking to one another. We had either several rounds of those live discussions and it'll continue to be useful, but I also think they're quite an extravagant way, in some ways of communicating content. And I think that there is a finite appetite for that way of assimilating information and of course in parallel proceeding, well proceeding COVID, there's been an enormous increase in people's appetite for listening to relatively concise, well-reasoned podcasts.

So I thought that it would be helpful if we thought about a transition - or at least a partial transition, from those live discussions to something which is slightly more considered, slightly more focused, slightly more efficient in terms of communicating information and analysis. And at the same time, still readily assimilable and associated with GCDN and all the rest of it.

So it's an attempt to find a way of building community, A). B) getting useful substantive information and insight out to the GCDN community and see, sort of expanding our intellectual horizons by going out, and nabbing people, and dragging them in, and interrogating them - when people who we might not, necessarily be immediately within our world. And oxygenating the discussion with people from adjacent sectors or skills, or insights that we might think are relevant.

So it's an experiment, but the idea of the experiment is to build up an efficient, ongoing conversation about issues of common concern. All coming back ultimately to that intersection between culture and urbanity.





[00:18:09]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** I love it. I love being part of this experiment. And in general, the idea of creating a lab to really unpack some of the ideas about culture in cities.

And I think, going back to Silverman's words and thinking more broadly about some of the shifts that we're seeing in people's patterns, people responding to this pandemic, and thinking about their own lives and their place in large urban centres, and moving to smaller cities like Providence. We've seen an influx of people from some of those big cities who are coming here for the quality of life. But knowing that we have all of the benefits that you can find in a great world-class city, I think we're going to see some interesting cultural shifts coming out of that.

[00:18:58]

**Adrian Ellis:** It's very interesting because it's far from here. What will happen to the great urban concentrations, those global cities as a result of the pandemic? I noticed that - we live in the Hudson Valley and I've noticed the sort of migration of people who could, out of the city, tore up the Valley into both renting and buying places, and Airbnb, and whatever they could do to get out of the city.

Now, clearly that is to some extent, a short-term reaction to the immediacies of the pandemic. This is clearly going to be a period of people's reassessment about what constitutes quality of life and what constitutes the balance between time commuting, where they work from, how they work. So patterns of work, patterns of leisure, patterns of schooling are all going to be subtly affected by people's experience of - and how they've sensitised the experience of the last few years. And I can see smaller and mid-sized towns and cities - Providence being an example, of having some advantage in this compared with the really dense urban areas of New York city or Chicago.

And it will be - it will be interesting. I mean, clearly, this isn't an all or nothing. This is about degrees of alteration, but do you - I'm interested, have you already seen that in Providence?

[00:20:21]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Yeah, it is really an interesting moment here because while there is a widespread unemployment/underemployment throughout the community here - particularly in the creative sector and with the service industries, we are also seeing some people who are coming here.

And we've seen some openings of restaurants and boutique hotels. And the pace of development in some ways has not slowed as much as one might have anticipated earlier in the face of the larger forces. And so I think, again, getting back to some of that tension, that balancing act between really thinking about the investments and the local existing communities, and thinking about how to also create long-term bridges for those new community members.

We have great art and architecture. And the food scene - you know, while it's on life support at the moment, those are all assets that our city has and that I think people want to be able to access in their day-to-day lives. We haven't seen necessarily how these trends, how these new influx of people will infuse our arts and cultural sector and how that will also result in new opportunities I think, for our local community.



[00:21:48]

**Adrian Ellis:** May I sort of briefly turn the tables on you and ask you some questions because you're at the sharp end of managing the impact of this crisis on the cultural sector. And because you've got a sort of citywide view, you can see probably trends that if you're sitting in a single institution, you don't necessarily see as clearly.

Let me put a hypothesis to you.

So when COVID first struck, the systemic optimism that infuses our sector and makes people get up in the morning and do the things against all odds that they probably, or rationally, not to be able to pull off. That kicked in. Meanwhile, those organisations have tended - there are exceptions, but broadly to sort of look after their own.

I understand that. It makes perfect sense if you're looking at your organisation: You're thinking about your responsibility to that organisation. Then you have tended to say, where can I cut in order to basically hang on in there and have some chance of this organisation surviving through to - what is now, sometime in the back end of 2021. That has caused mayhem for freelancers of all sorts.

**Stephanie Fortunato:** (laughs)

**Adrian Ellis:** But many of them have the skills. The other irony of the ecology and the way the ecology is planned out is that they have both the creative skills and often, sometimes even the operational skills on which those organisations are - have been highly dependent.

Obviously, there is a moral dimension to this. There's also a practical dimension to this. I'm wondering whether you are seeing currently a change in perspective where, because of the lengthening of horizon really means utterly fundamental existential threat to the cultural sector. Because of the duration which we're now talking about - could be at least two years.

And that's slightly dark. But I'm just intrigued to know whether, from your perspective, you see that as just too awful to contemplate - our systemic optimism, just wipes it away. Or whether you think that is a realistic possibility.

[00:23:44]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** So I think myself, as an eternal optimist. I am just too bought into the system to actually back out of it, Adrian.

(laughs)

Even in the most contradictory of moments, we have to hope that we're going to come through this stronger. We're going to come through this with new understanding and that the contraction that we're seeing right now throughout the sector will actually result in a different kind of abundance. I have every faith that the artists in my community and in the communities around the world will help lead the way to re-imagining what's possible on the other side.

And I'm putting my energies into that. But it has been, you know, a conversation, an evolving conversation.





**Stephanie Fortunato:** I think you've taken us well through the stages from that initial triage to this moment now, in which we are seeing before us multiple pathways that are possible. And I really appreciate actually, the work that AEA did around the scenario planning to really help us think about preparing for those different potentialities. But building in flexibility to understand that it's a trajectory. There's a spectrum of opportunities that are available and depending on how people are using this time, I think they'll be better prepared for that.

You know, I am seeing some organisations who are taking this as a moment of introspection. Their operations are severely limited or suspended at the moment. And they are using this time to create a more resilient path forward. Really to think about their role and part of a larger community and their responsibilities. And so, that stillness, that introspection I think, will bubble up down the line.

And then we've also seen organisations that are actively restructuring; not only how they do their work, but the form of artwork itself. There was a collaboration that has been happening between WaterFire, which is one of our landmark creative placemaking institutions and The Wilbury Theatre, which is a local, smaller contemporary theatre company. And they have done a number of projects together that are really reinventing the experience of live performance. It's exciting to see that. It's exciting to see that new work, and that new cultural context for understanding why we want to experience the arts in real life - especially in the face of so much digital content coming our way each day.

[00:26:22]

**Adrian Ellis:** I agree with you. It's clear that this is a once in a lifetime catastrophe at all sorts of levels, but it also is a once in a lifetime opportunity to reflect profoundly the role of cultural institutions. It's quite difficult for organisations to take full advantage of that because they are understandably panicked by the exigencies of, you know, the financial existences. I guess it's about leadership, creating that space for people and organisations really to reflect profoundly because one hopes there won't be another: quote, "opportunity", unquote, like this.

[00:26:55]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** You know what, Adrian, just on that moment - that point of leadership though, I want to say one of the other things that makes me most hopeful in this moment is that leadership is no longer from the top and honestly, it's never always been from the top. But what I am seeing in Providence, and I think what others are seeing, are the rise of the next generation. Young people who are really leading the way.

They are not only calling for new practices. They are really calling for change more broadly. They're calling for new structures of cultural institutions and cultural forms. And as challenging as it is to me as a local government official, and as challenging as it is day to day to respond effectively and efficiently to those calls, I really do appreciate the push and the prompt from those young emerging arts leaders in my community, and around the world. And I think that is probably the greatest source of inspiration that I have at a day-to-day level.



[00:27:54]

**Adrian Ellis:** Yes. I do feel like there is a generational shift as well. And it's clear both just in who's deciding to hang their hats up, but also that next generation - with a very different and more collaborative I guess, perspective on both arts leadership and the sort of alliances that institutions have, which are beyond the cultural sector and with social services, organisations so forth. There is a sort of, permanent shift in the ecology.

[00:28:22]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Well, Adrian, thank you. Thank you so much for sharing this time with me. For sharing your thoughts and perspective, and a little bit more about what's going on in your life, which I think, you know, that humanises you, to those of us that think of you on a different plane than the rest of us.

(laughs)

But we wish you best of luck as you settle into your new home and unpack those boxes. And look forward to how that influences – not just the name of this podcast, but how we think about the opportunities and possibilities for the urbanism and culture to really be a driver going forward for a better future.

[00:29:00]

**Adrian Ellis:** Thank you. It's been a pleasure and it's - I'm certainly not on a different plane. The great thing is I'm not on any plane at the moment.

[00:29:06]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** (laughs)

And that's an important takeaway in itself. Thank you for joining me.

A key goal of The Three Bells Podcast is to ensure that the conversation is practical and relevant, and to enable the ideas discussed to be translated into reality and actionable plans. To assist with this, each episode includes a critical reflection on the conversation - particularly how the ideas discussed can be translated into practical takeaways that many will be able to apply to our own practices, organisation strategies, and thinking.

[00:29:37]

[MUSIC TRANSITION]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Without further ado, I will now invite the brilliant and passionate Criena Gehrke, CEO of HOTA - Home of the Arts in Australia's Gold Coast.

Criena, welcome.

[00:29:51]

**Criena Gehrke:** Hi Stephanie, what a lovely conversation you and Adrian have just had.

[00:29:55]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Oh my gosh, it was so wonderful to be able to talk to him. And I'm so glad now to have you joining me for the key takeaway segment of this episode. Such an amazing opportunity to connect around this podcast.



[00:30:07]

**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, I was just sitting here, I guess I've got a number of reflections on the conversation - notwithstanding the fact that I don't think I'd clocked that Adrian is a jazz aficionado. That makes a lot of sense to me now. But I'd love to start with just reflecting on something that you said, Stephanie, which was around the fact that you see yourself as an eternal optimist.

And, I would say that I put myself firmly in that category as well. I'm very much - not even a glass half full, but a glass overflowing sort of human being. But I do wonder whether our eternal optimism and our "can do" attitude as a sector has actually not stood us in good stead at the end of the day, because we are problem solvers. And we'll step up to any challenge. But I do wonder whether that means we're not getting the cut-through in terms of being perceived as important and vital to invest in during a very difficult time in the world.

[00:31:09]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** It's an interesting place to start. It is pathological to be an optimist, really, and any day, but certainly now. And the thing about it is, I feel like we are problem solvers. And because of that, we've taken the challenge of trying to make plans, trying to move things forward really seriously. And used a lot of energy and creativity in coming up with all sorts of ideas about how we might move forward. And I am also concerned that there might be a burnout around that, as well as not being able to be seen and taken seriously. But you know, I think at the end of the day, what we're really looking at is both a social and cultural re-emergence as much as a - an economic one.

And that kind of connects into something that I've been thinking about what Adrian read by Sydel Silverman, and the observation that she made, you know, back in 1960 - about participating skilfully in the public life of the Piazza. And I've been thinking a lot about that because in so many ways, the commons - these are the places where our social life plays out, right? This is where we come together. And for those of us at GCDN who are stewards of these public spaces, I think that we have the opportunity to really heighten awareness of why the arts are important to our communities and why we need culture to help move us forward and help us evolve.

[00:32:34]

**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, I found those reflections really quite moving actually, to hear Adrian speak so eloquently about the role and the importance of these cultural precincts. And I think we're saying the same thing. I turned my attention very closely to this notion of adopting a values-based approach in everything that we do. You know, and I think that as gathering places, as places of storytelling and meaning, we have always absolutely seen that as vital and authentic in our communities, but there needs to be the firm commitment, the policies, the initiatives, and then how we measure our own success, I think, based on a values-based approach.

[00:33:18]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Yeah, we really need a clarity and focus around that. That's the thing I was thinking a lot about in our conversation, you know. Adrian, I think wisely pointed out that cultural institutions in some ways can have an advantage, I think, because there's so much at the intersection of culture and civic life. There's so much opportunity I think, to really be leading the conversation about the values that we want to see more largely in society.



**Stephanie Fortunato:** And so I - you know, I think there is something rather aspirational and beautiful about that. But if cultural institutions don't have clarity then I think it's easy for that ambition to fall away in the face of some of the real challenges that have become even more present, I think, given the realities of COVID.

[00:34:06]

**Criena Gehrke:** I was reflecting on my own organisation and we're not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but we do have clear values that we articulate within the precinct. And included in those, are the value of art, the value of imagination, and the value of citizenship. And it means that as we evolve and as we make decisions whether it's around programming, our role, our recruitment; we come back to that notion of those core values. And then we hold ourselves accountable for them, and to them, both through our measurements but also in just the way that we behave every day.

[00:34:49]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** I love that you've included imagination as one of the values that are articulated at the forefront there.

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs)

**Stephanie Fortunato:** You know, it's so easy like - that's like the building block of everything and it's so easy for that to be the thing that - that is lost!

(laughs)

[00:35:02]

**Criena Gehrke:** Well, it sort of segues into the other reflection that I had, which was that conversation that you and Adrian had around globalisation and cultural tourism. And it's interesting, isn't it? I agree. We lose sight of things like imagination, and the role of the artist, and what is that feeling that we're trying to create, which does bring connection in communities.

And I do think that COVID has provided the opportunity to reimagine, and actually get back to gathering places. And you know, the civic square/plaza ideas which is that we are a place that represents our community and is all about them. And the reason that I think it's interesting in terms of that value statement is it starts to shift the way that we should measure our own success.

So there's been so much push, quite rightly - these places are big, they're large investments for either private or government, but we've had a tendency to judge our performance based on economic benefit, cultural tourism return, instead of what is that deep belonging in a place that brings your community together, that creates benefit in all sorts of social, health, wellbeing outcomes, and actually provides an authentic experience within your own place.

[00:36:26]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** I'll say that Adrian's hypothesis there about the existential threat that the sector is facing because of the duration of this pandemic. You know, I think it's that - it's that listening to our communities, working with our communities and really being in sync, and having art and culture at the heart of the activities that we are undertaking together, really will bring people together in a way that almost nothing else can, right?



**Stephanie Fortunato:** Art has such a power to transform. And I think that's going to be the push forward that we really need to get away from some of the more surface measures of success, like economic development or cultural tourism, number of visitors - that sort of thing.

[00:37:07]

**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, it's forcing us to go deep rather than wide.

**Stephanie Fortunato:** I love that.

**Criena Gehrke:** We've just had a really interesting conversation because the Gold Coast is a city of 600,000 people. We're about to grow into a million people pretty quickly and we have usually 11 and a half million visitors per annum. So we are a tourist town closely located to a capital city. So we are regional, but a very unique sort of regional proposition. And of course, there's been a huge focus on that aspect of cultural tourism, both driving national and international visitation to the Gold Coast.

But this has been a fantastic opportunity for us as a team to think about that deep engagement and not talk so much around audience development strategies or cultural tourism strategies, but how do we have deep community engagement initiatives? How do we support our own community to be touching, feeling, smelling, enjoying, participating in arts and culture because it is their place.

This place belongs to them. And what I'm anticipating - because you see it time and time again through history, is that if we take this opportunity of pause and reflection and deep connection to our communities, then when the borders do reopen and the world looks different, people will be attracted to the experience that they have, because it will reflect the community, the place - that buzzword that's floating around authenticity. And that's well, I do believe -

**Stephanie Fortunato:** That's such a tricky one, isn't it?

**Criena Gehrke:** It's a tricky one because you go: what does that actually mean? It's a bit like when we talk about world-class. Yeah, but how are we measuring that against? What?

**Stephanie Fortunato:** (laughs)

**Criena Gehrke:** How about we just be ourselves? And you shouldn't try and be more interesting than what you actually are because then that tips it into weird territory. Just be yourself and everything will be magnificent. You know, I do think that this is an important moment where we all turn our attention to that deep, rich community engagement and we invest, and we listen.

[00:39:02]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** You know, there's also this opportunity because we have now been in community. I think, in ways over these past couple of months to make connections across community that I think is going to really result in richer, more meaningful experiences because there's so much collaboration and connection.

And that's what we're really, I think, hungry for right now, right? We're thinking about how can we make those connections last in the long-term here.



**Stephanie Fortunato:** But you're in a totally different space and place than we are here in Providence, Rhode Island. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you're having festivals? You're really bringing people back together again in a sort of COVID-safe, new, normal way.

What does that like? What are you hearing from audiences?

[00:39:46]

**Criena Gehrke:** People are delighted to be out and about and making that connection. So you're right. We are in a very privileged position to be able to be back up and programming - still not at full capacity. We've also got the advantage of a great climate and a beautiful parkland setting so we can do things outdoors. And the science is showing that it is safer to be programming outside.

People are craving that experience and they are coming together, and they are celebrating. They are, I think, more willing to try new experiences that are being provided because they've had this limited opportunity for such a long period of time. So we've really felt it's palpable, actually, those audiences coming together.

And one of my favourite moments, this last year now, was when we reopened downstairs venue and we had cabaret style seating and the performer was a beautiful musician called Tex Perkins - quite an interesting, famous Australian musician. And he played in front of a hundred people.

He proudly said, "This is the only gig in Australia tonight.". He sang Kermit's Rainbow Connection to banjo at the end of his set and a hundred people almost wept with the joy of being together. You could feel it. It was palpable. And it was actually a salient reminder to me about the importance of what we do, because I think these precincts and these institutions are businesses and we can sometimes get embroiled in the business of art and forget ourselves as people who are fortunate enough to be able to lead these places. That why we do it, is that feeling.

You know, and if it's for one person, a hundred people or a million visitors per year, the reason we do it is because nothing is as profound as that sense of connection that you get through that artistic or cultural experience of being together.

[00:41:43]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** I'm a little weepy, just even hearing you describe that. But you're right. There is something sacred about that. That's the heart of community life, right? When we think about what we can, at the end of the day, connect around - it's that shared human experience and exploration of what it means really, to be alive and together in a place.

[00:42:04]

**Criena Gehrke:** I was actually in a forum with chief economists. So me, and a whole bunch of chief economists. And what was interesting was that they were saying the same thing in terms of economic impact, which is:

Ignore your community at your peril. Always.





**Criena Gehrke:** And then when you think about what that looks like in action, it is truly around turning our attention and our investment into that kind of artistic practice and that kind of deep engagement with community. And I think that is a unique opportunity in terms of our programmatic approach as precincts and cultural institutions in the way that we invest and support artists, and the way that they work, and the kind of experiences that we offer our community.

And so, undertaking deep, rich community consultation, asking good questions of your community: Why are we here? What do you want from us? What do you want to see? Opening our doors and investing so that a diverse range of communities are included and feel welcomed. And that takes time, and that takes experience and expertise, and it takes dollar investment in that kind of approach.

[00:43:18]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** But that is the way that we are really going to be able to build on this moment. Because the end of the day when we look back, when we think about Silverman and the work and study that she did in the 1960s, and why it's still resonant today. It is some of that looking back to build forward. And it is the art. It is the things that we make and the stories that we tell about the stuff that we make that, I think, really is where we can begin to make meaning and sense of a collective experience.

And in the States here, obviously, we are deeply embroiled in conversations about many racial injustices and the sort of long legacy of systematic racism and oppression. And that has really shaped also our experience and understanding of this moment of COVID.

But I think that when we think about the possibility for a collective liberation, there is something that we can't look away from. We need to work together. We need to create experiences and investments that are going to do exactly what you say - that deep investment in our future.

[00:44:27]

**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, maybe this is a follow-up conversation for us all to have with Adrian because that notion of key takeaways that you can translate to actions is interesting to me, which is why I kind of went down the path of - lose your audience development strategies and look at community engagement because it's a nuanced difference, you know? But it's a trickier task than I think we anticipated because some of those takeaways are still quite high level, philosophical, ephemeral approaches, rather than here's two or three actual verbs. So how you translate that into the doing.

And I think if I could capture my reflection on your conversation with Adrian in two or three succinct sentences with actions, it would be:

- 1. We should all be held accountable to our values statement.**  
So develop values for your precinct and on behalf of your community that you then judge everything by.
- 2. In order to have deep, rich engagement with community, then you need to invest in that.**  
You need to call it out. You need to say, yes, we might present shows. We might have a gallery. We might do experiences, but we need to actually invest in what I would call "old school community cultural development", because that's our



responsibility and it's more vital than anything else at the moment, and it will reap rich rewards moving forward.

3. And the other reflection that I had in the conversation was around **leadership, that there is a next wave coming.**

That the next generation of leaders will be and expect to be representative of our communities. They're digital natives. They are very strongly focused on social justice outcomes. And again, ignore our communities at our peril and ignore our emerging, young, magnificent leaders at our peril because that's where our future lies.

[00:46:25]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** That was a beautifully succinct wrap up. And so, Criena, thank you. Thank you so much for sharing your reflections on this conversation, helping me make sense of it, helping me begin to think about what we can do about all of this.

I'm so grateful to have this conversation with you today.

[00:46:42]

**Criena Gehrke:** Stephanie, it was an absolute delight. And these are important conversations to help us all navigate through these very interesting times. Stay well hey.

[00:46:53]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Absolutely. We really are all in this together.

**Criena Gehrke:** We are, see ya.

**Stephanie Fortunato:** And thank you very much for tuning into this episode of The Three Bells Podcast. If you have not done so, please do subscribe to our feed on your listing platform of choice.

I'm Stephanie Fortunato and it's been great to talk to you.

[00:47:07]

[THEME MUSIC]

