



EP 1: LEADING WITH EMPATHY AND KINDNESS Claire Spencer in conversation with Adrian Ellis

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Adrian Ellis: Hello and welcome. This is The Three Bell's Podcast - a production of AEA Consulting and The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network (GCDN).

I'm Adrian Ellis, Chair of GCDN. And this week, I'm interviewing Claire Spencer, CEO of the Melbourne Arts Centre.

We cover a lot of ground: Claire's route to her current position, the remarkable project she conceived - The Arts Wellbeing Collective which she founded in 2016, but which is also perfectly designed for the present moment, the formidable precinct development currently in planning for which the Victoria government has committed a 1.5 billion Australian dollars for the first phase, the broadening mission of cultural organizations post-COVID, and the responsibilities of anchor institutions for their wider communities.

And afterwards, I discuss Claire's incisive observations with my colleague on the podcast, Crien Gehrke.

Claire, I'm thrilled to have you on the podcast. Thank you, and welcome.

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Claire Spencer: Thanks for having me on this podcast. I'm coming to you from Melbourne. Beautiful Melbourne autumn evening. I'd like to acknowledge that tonight I'm on the land of the Kulin nations, the first Australians who occupied this land. And I would like to pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. It's the greatest privilege of my life to be working and living on these lands.

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Adrian Ellis: So you run the largest arts centre in Australia: Melbourne Arts Centre. It's got distinguished residents; Australian Ballet, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Melbourne Theatre Company, Opera Australia. And it's also described as both the gateway and the heart of the Melbourne arts district, which is home to about 30 cultural organisations.

So, obviously I want to talk to you about those, but before I do, I'd love to ask you a bit about your journey there, because superficially, it looks as straight as narrow.



Adrian Ellis: You had 11 distinguished years at Sydney Opera House; you were the COO and the CFO, and then you were appointed to Melbourne as the Chief Executive in 2014. Last year, you got the Order of Australia.

So that would look like what I would describe as a linear career. But if you dig a bit deeper, it's less linear. I think you did a Graduate Degree in Theology at Cambridge, and then I think you went into audit and accountancy. So I'm very interested in the extent to which you had a general philosophy of career planning and what you say to people who ask you about the planning of their careers.

If you're anything like me, you get very bright people, very earnestly asking questions about, you know, "Did you work all this out in advance or something?" and my answer is "God. No." So I'm very... I'm curious about how you found your groove and how your sort of early formation related to that groove.

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Claire Spencer: Yes, my story is something I'm asked about quite a lot. It's a funny, old journey. It's not linear. And yet when I look back on it, particularly in the context of these last 12 months, it kind of all makes sense.

It's like, you know, I've been preparing my whole life to do this job in 2020. But I was very fortunate. I was educated in the UK at a time when you could still study what you were interested in and what you loved at university, not what you wanted to be. Which was very lucky for me, because I actually had no clue what I wanted to be.

Some days I still wonder if I still have no clue, but my life and career since I did that theology was really one of opportunity. And sometimes by necessity. So, you know, I graduated University and on graduation day, my father, who I adore, said to me, "Darling, I'm very proud of you and there's no more money."

So really, that necessity to... (laughs) to find a career pathway was pretty immediate. And I looked around and this thing came - called audit came up, and I wasn't really sure what it meant, but I thought, well, I'll just do that while I'm deciding what to do when I grow up. And I, you know, I started working for Ernst & Young in London and had some incredible experiences as part of that.

And I always say to people, those young people who do often ask, well, "How do I get to do what you're doing? And what was your path?" I always say to them, Don't have a plan, which is a bit strange, isn't it? I've actually said that to a graduating year of high school students not too long ago.

Don't, you know, don't hold yourself to a plan, look to the periphery, and think about what you love; think about what interests you and where your passion takes you at any given time. My passion was not in audit. So I left that and took an opportunity in telecoms actually, right at the time when the internet was exploding - that sort of shows how old I am, Adrian, doesn't it?



Claire Spencer: But you know, at a time when the world was obsessed with data and the internet, and I thought, "Oh, that looks interesting. I'll do that for awhile." And that's what brought me from London to Australia and you know, I worked doing that for a while and had some incredible opportunities to work with some really super clever people.

But realised that wasn't for me. And so I quite opportunistically took a three month job in Finance at the Opera House. And I realised on about day two that I'd found my people and I just loved it. But even - Even the path at the opera house, wasn't linear.

You know, I started in Finance, but I worked in IT, I worked in projects. I implemented ticketing systems, I ran HR, I ran the restaurant side, you know, I did all sorts of things and was really based on that philosophy that, you know, if something looks interesting and you can add to your toolkit of skills then go for it.

And as it turned out, you know, it's pretty good training to be a CEO - is to kind of spread yourself around and have different experiences, work with different people in different disciplines.

And yeah. So I feel I've been very blessed, but it's interesting when you sort of do talk to young people now there is this need for, you know, "I need to have a plan. I need to know what I want to be." And I don't think it always has to go that way.

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Adrian Ellis: Do you think it's tougher for the current generation setting out on their careers than it was for you? You're younger than me, but I had the same experience, which was, you know, I got a free ride through university and I felt no pressure to be making big decisions. I wasn't carrying a financial, any financial burden.

And there was far greater social mobility to be bummed about it in Britain then, than there is now. Probably the same for Australia. There was high employment. So I'm just curious to know, because I give exactly the same advice and then like you, I think afterwards, well, was I simply generalising too much from a particular place in a particular time?

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Claire Spencer: It's such a good question. My eldest son actually, is just about to turn 18, so it's a very relevant conversation at home as well as more broadly at the moment.

I do think there is pressure on young people to decide what they want to be now, and to really start to channel their education very early.

Which I think is a... I think is a great shame. There is so much to be learned just from learning, just from being in a university environment, just from, you know, researching, learning how to communicate an argument and investigate different points of view. And I do worry that has been lost.



Claire Spencer: But then I, you know, I look at, I look at some of the young people I know, and they seem so much better equipped to take on life than certainly than I ever was there, you know, investing their part-time job wages in shares and you know, cryptocurrency and I'm just like my goodness. I didn't even, you know, it didn't even cross my mind when I was that age.

So I think it's, it's six of one, half a dozen of the other, isn't it? But I do try and encourage people to not, you know, not be so inflexible with a plan that you set yourself that you miss opportunities when they come across your path.

Sometimes a sideways move, or a diagonal move, or jumping from one industry to another can really open up tremendous opportunity and experiences. And I think sometimes people can narrow themselves down a little bit too early and too rigidly. And those opportunities can be missed.

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Adrian Ellis: So you alluded to the stresses that maybe the younger generation has professionally that we were privileged not to have. There's a second sort of really important strand that I want to explore, which is The Arts Wellbeing Collective, which I think you set up in around 2016.

I'm interested in the origins of it, but I'm also particularly interested in just a sort of, a description of what it is: How it has moved beyond the Arts Centre across Australia and more generally? And third, particularly, what does it mean in the COVID moment?

In other words, it looks as if it was designed to cope with now. And I don't believe that you were so prescient in 2016 that you saw this coming, but equally it seems extraordinarily, an extraordinarily timely initiative. So I'd love you to say a bit, particularly for listeners who are not already familiar with it.

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Claire Spencer: Sure. So I'll explain what it is first up. So The Arts Wellbeing Collective is an initiative that we set up in Arts Centre Melbourne back in 2016. And it is a collective of arts organisations who have a common goal to create an environment for people who work in live performance, that encourages more positive mental health outcomes for them as workers.

And it really, it came about from a need actually, a very immediate need at Arts Centre Melbourne when we very sadly lost a member of our team in mental health related circumstances. And, you know, I hadn't been, I hadn't been CEO for very long, you know, three or four months and I- I thought, well, my goodness, what a terrible thing to happen. Let's have a look at what we have in place to sort of look after people. And I did the scan and we had all the usual things, you know, there was a helpline that people could call and a pretty caring organisation.

The culture was pretty good. And yet, you know, certainly for this young man we clearly haven't done enough.



Claire Spencer: So we thought, well, what can we do? Let's look around, we'll find something that's specific to the live performance sector, because all the standard, you know, wellbeing things were very much about, well, you know, spend more time with your family and have early nights and do more exercise.

And we just felt that it didn't really work for a live performance industry working life. So we thought we'll find something that's more tailored to our organisation. So we looked around and we couldn't find anything. There were lots of very generic programs, but nothing that we felt would really land well at the Arts Centre.

So we thought, well, okay, we'll create something. It was one of those moments where you sort of look back and you think my goodness, that was an unusual decision to make because we're us administrators, right? We're not psychologists, but we recognise that we needed to do this properly.

So we worked with a team of psychologists right from the beginning, about how to create a tailored framework that focused on mental wellness and building mental wellness in a live performance working environment. And the very first program that came across my desk for approval was really - like it was really good. It was really different from anything I'd seen before.

So I thought, well, I wonder if any other organisations would be interested in working with us on this, you know, we're going to do it. Let's see if we can share that benefit. So I spoke to our resident companies initially - so we have a resident opera company, ballet company, theatre company, and symphony, as many performing arts centres do and they all, you know, they all signed up to it very enthusiastically.

And so The Arts Wellbeing Collective was born from that. And we decided we would run it as a pilot program for the first year, and we made it open access. It was free for anyone who wanted to join as either an individual or as an organisation. I thought we'd get maybe 10 or 15 organisations max. And at the end of that pilot year, we had, I think it was 120, something like that.

So we thought, well, there's obviously demand for this. So let's review everything we've done in the pilot and work out what this might be going forward. And that was back in 2016. So we sort of - We rolled it. We continue to develop it from then. And we look at it now and we've got over 400 organisations from around the world, which it still astonishes me that this is the only offering that's kind of tailored for people who work in the live performance industry and it offers all kinds of training, self-development, support.

We do have a support helpline in place now that's specifically tailored for people who work in the live performance industry. So you don't spend, you know, the first 20 minutes explaining what a stage manager does or "Wow, that's quite a stressful job" or what being on tour means, you know, there are psychologists who are very versed and experienced in working in our sector, which has made a tremendous difference.



Claire Spencer: But there's a lot of material that's accessible, all free, through the website <https://www.artswellbeingcollective.com.au> which is all there available for people to look at.

So it was kind of a blessing in a way that we already had that infrastructure, and resourcing, and expertise and relationships in place before the pandemic hit because I'm sure Australia wasn't alone in this, but the impact on the live performance sector was immediate and brutal and the cuts were very deep. And you know, to just have that in place, to be able to provide support for people through the initial days of the pandemic, but also, you know, still very much so now, as we're starting to return to performance and what that means for people's mental health.

It's been one of those things where you kind of look back and you think it felt kind of predestined that we did this work back in 2016/17, because I - to be honest, Adrian, I just don't think we would have been able to set it up quickly and effectively enough once we were into the COVID crisis.

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[MUSIC TRANSITION]

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Adrian Ellis: I'm interested in what that means for your interpretation of your responsibilities as a cultural leader. That sounds a bit pompous -

Claire Spencer: (laughs)

Adrian Ellis: But there's a very specific point about it, behind it, which is that organisations like yours, have taken on the mantle as anchors in cultural districts, as anchors of their surrounding areas. And if you're an anchor, then you presumably have a set of responsibilities for welfare that extend beyond your immediate staff. And yet one of the dilemmas that leaders have faced under the financial pressures of COVID is, you know, who are we there for? Are we there for the sector? Are we there for the freelancers? Or are we there for our own narrow interpretation of our institutional survival?

So I think that every cultural leader, every leader of an anchor institution feels that tension. And I'm wondering how you navigate that territory. And I think that The Arts Wellbeing Collective, in a sense, is an illustration. And I suspect, of a broad interpretation of those responsibilities rather than a narrow institutional one, but I'm just curious to know how overt the choices are.

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Claire Spencer: Yeah. Have you been hiding in my boardroom? Because this is a conversation that's very - has been very relevant over the course of the year. There is a tension there and I think you know, 2020 was so complex. We took a decision pretty early that we needed to focus on both our own survival, but not in a - it's going to sound a bit weird, but not in a self-focus kind of way, but if the Arts Centre can survive and thrive, then it will take the industry with it.



Claire Spencer: So we made a decision, as I said, pretty early that we do not, we cannot, we must not, operate in a vacuum away from our community and industry during COVID. And in times of financial hardship, I absolutely recognise that it can be tempting to look inwards and to focus on, you know, only on your own solvency and cashflow. And of course those things are important and they cannot be ignored, but they cannot be the only things. That was the realisation that we came to and we had our own solvency crisis, right?

We generate 80% of our own revenue and that - it was like a tap turning off on the 15th of March last year. It just stopped. So we, you know, we haven't sailed through this by any means, but we felt very strongly that we needed to retain that position in the sector, and in the precinct, and in the city, and in the state. And not just focus on the, sort of the financial wellbeing of our venues here in Melbourne.

So you know, it has been a tough call and on, you know, some days you have doubt? So the, whether that's been the right - the right response. But I, you know, maybe you've caught me on a good day, but I think it absolutely has been for us. I think it's been an opportunity for us to really step up and say, we are not just venues.

I think we become much more conscious of our role. Kind of outside of being a performing arts centre, but you know, "What is our role in the sexual harassment debate?" "What is our role in the Black Lives Matter debate?" You know, what's our position and role in First Nations here in Australia?

It's actually in a weird way. It's given us the time and the space to think more deeply about those things, and to do more listening than perhaps we were doing before when we were just, you know, romping through 1500 productions a year.

You know, there's ongoing conversations around cultural equity. And to be honest, what's the point? If you can't be in that space, you're just a venue for hire. And that is not who we are. That's not what we were created for. That's not what, you know, we have an act of parliament that sets our remit out and it's not just about putting on shows. So yeah, I think we've become better listeners.

We actually have a much greater purpose. And I think, I think you've got to reflect on that and find a way to navigate the complexities of, you know, being a live performance venue, but also recognising that there is a much bigger game that's being played at the moment and we've gotta be, we've gotta be part of it.

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Adrian Ellis: So part of that much bigger game is the larger district in which you're located, and for which you are anchored; gateway, heart, whatever the appropriate metaphor is. The Victorian Government's committed, I think, 1.5 billion in its 2020/21 budget to the first stage of a precinct more than a make-over - a sort of radical, physical remodeling which I think includes for you: refurbishment of the theatre buildings, new campus, expanded Australian music vault.



Adrian Ellis: So, I'm fascinated. This is an enormous level of funding, and capital is always easier to generate than revenue in the cultural sector and the not-for-profit sector in general. I'm just wondering, what sort of impact could one reasonably expect when one thinks of how one might deploy 1.5 billion in the sector?

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Claire Spencer: It's a great question. Very topical. And maybe I'll just take a minute to give a little bit of context around the project and where it's come from. So the Melbourne Arts Precinct was first conceived as an idea back in the - back in the 1950s, as a way of creating a cultural heart to Melbourne.

There was enormous post-war migration to the city, and a real desire to create something extraordinary. And so the National Gallery of Victoria and Arts Centre Melbourne were conceived and then built progressively over the 20, 30 years that followed. And then following that, this whole arts precinct has sprung up around those big institutions.

And that's something which Melbourne is incredibly proud of. It drives a lot of visitation, it drives a lot of engagement and a lot of employment. But there is a sense that it's not quite finished. So one thing that we don't have in Melbourne is a large scale gallery for contemporary art and design.

We also lack the space for some contemporary collections that we have, particularly around Australian contemporary music. And our facilities here, particularly in Arts Centre Melbourne, and now, you know, pushing 40 years old - which anyone who runs a performing arts centre will tell you that when you're in the danger zone about, not just asset maintenance, which of course is debatable all our lives.

But really having contemporary facilities that make contemporary audience expectations around access and amenity and so on and so forth. So it's an incredibly bold vision of the Victorian Government to say: We have an extraordinary arts precinct. It can be more extraordinary.

And so, the work will be delivered in two phases. It will take, you know, more - probably upwards of 10 years to complete. But there will be a new contemporary gallery, there will be a new performing arts building, which will be, you know, rehearsal spaces of all different sizes in. It will have two new galleries, it will have a new creative learning space. It will release a whole lot of space in our main buildings to return that to public use. So, incredible ambition of this project. And then it's all linked by this beautiful new public realm, which will be the largest public garden that's been built in Melbourne. And I think it's a hundred years - something extraordinary like that.

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Adrian Ellis: The public garden is described as immersive, which sounds very exciting. What is immersive in this context?



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Claire Spencer: (laughs) It's a great question. It's not going to be a passive garden. There will be opportunities to just sit in it and enjoy it passively, but there will also be an opportunity to engage in arts practice, to see arts practitioners in action. We're not building a big venue. It's not that kind of activation, but you can expect to see artists creating, working together, collaborating in that space. As well as small scale, smaller scale performance in a really beautiful context. So it's going to be a very special place. It's still being in the process of being designed at the moment. But the early sense of it is something quite extraordinary.

It will echo large swathes of particularly the Victorian indigenous landscape that used to be here in Victoria. And it will be self-sustaining. It's not going to be a highly manicured garden. It's going to be something really very - a little bit wild, you know, and, that you can just be in and enjoy.

So we're incredibly excited about it. But in terms of the drivers, because of course, money like this doesn't just drop down from heaven and land in your lap. This is the - you know, the result of many years of advocacy by not just - you know, my contemporaries, but our predecessors as well to really, bring this precinct to its full realisation.

So it's driven largely by employment at the moment. So, like many economies around the world, Victoria has been through a recession. So there is a high degree of - very high desire to invest, to drive employment outcomes. And that will be through, you know, the employment engagement of many creative workers in the creation of the precinct, but then also the ongoing employment that those new institutions will drive.

It will also drive visitation. Victoria is known as the - or Melbourne actually, is known as the cultural capital of Australia. So really is an opportunity to hit a lot of those metrics. And the economic - the overall economic return on the business case in the long term is positive.

So, you know, we just feel blessed that we have a government that sees the value of what we do, that recognises that the creative industries is an industry. It's not a hobby. We are actually an industry that drives an enormous amount of employment. We're a magnet to the city for other skilled workers, and they're prepared to invest in that you know, even when we're sort of in the grips of COVID and everything that's thrown at us.

So, yes, we're very aware that it's an unusual investment to be made at this time. But we're hoping it will provide the inspiration and courage for, you know, other funders, other governments who are maybe thinking about this kind of thing that this is the time to do it. This is when the world needs it.

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[MUSIC TRANSITION]

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Adrian Ellis: In a sense, part of the trajectory of post-war investment in cultural infrastructure has been to make more and more highly specified spaces. The acoustic



demands of concert halls, the environmental controls of museums... and we've a generation of highly specified, purpose-specific buildings at the same time!

What people - audiences appear to want is greater and greater informality, greater and greater porosity. So I'm really interested, because the thing about infrastructure is it lasts a long time - it's supposed to last a long time, about how we as a sector approach as it were our physical infrastructure. Given that this seems to be a sort of tension between what we as professionals think are appropriate spaces - which are highly specified, highly formal. And what people sort of want - which is often the opposite; which is informality, porosity, and not an enormous amount of attention to technical perfection. Is that anywhere in the, sort of the debate about the infrastructure in Melbourne?

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Claire Spencer: Yeah, look, it is absolutely. And it's tempting to try and be all things to all people isn't it? But you - I think you do have to, at some point decide what is your brand in terms of excellence in performance. And one of the things that we pride ourselves in is whatever the performance is, that comes to us into Melbourne.

You know, whether it's a community orchestra or the Berlin Philharmonic, the production values are really high.

Adrian Ellis: Yeah.

Claire Spencer: And part of that is through your facility. And part of that is through the skill of the team that work in your venue. So we are trying to absolutely have our cake and eat it in this space.

We certainly, as we contemplate the future of the building that I'm in now, which is where we have our three theatres that we use for opera, ballet, theatre, and small scale music works.

It's interesting. It's that flexibility - is also being built into the brief for the venues, but we're also thinking about it much more in those public spaces as well. And you know, what we want is a facility that can kind of morph itself depending on the audience that's in the show.

That assurance of quality is there. And that will always, I think, have to be part - we always want that to be part of Arts Centre Melbourne's brand that whatever you come and see here will be really beautifully staged and presented. And you may come into a venue one day and have one experience of one performance type, but the next day have a completely different experience.

Claire Spencer: And I think that's what performing arts centres need to be. I think if we're going to remain relevant, you've got to be a bit of a chameleon and your venues need to shift and change, and your team needs to shift and change depending on the company and the audience that's in for any kind of performance.



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Adrian Ellis: So are you saying that there is a new destination, or a changed destination in terms of the mission of the Melbourne Arts Centre?

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Claire Spencer: That's a very provocative question. I actually think there is. I think that, you know, perhaps in the past, we've been very focused on, you know, the programs we were delivering, the projects we wanted to complete and the buildings we wanted to do. And all of those things, they're still important.

We're not going to stop doing them, but I think the destination has changed. I think it's much more iterative. It's not - you know, it's not binary. It's not you're there, or you're not. It's hard to articulate, but I think if you were to - if you were to push me, I would say we are aiming for positive relevance.

And, you know, I think about the role of the arts, I think about what it means to people and the gap that it's left in people's lives not having it there. And then I think about, well, what does that mean? What does that mean if you're running an arts centre?

Is it just about putting shows back on the stage? Is it just about, you know, making sure that the galleries get built? And it's not. It's about how are we a positive and relevant force and presence in the community that we're here to serve.

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Adrian Ellis: So you suggested that one of the drivers of this reflection has been simply having to sit on your hands for a while, to reflect on ultimate things.

There's a strong argument for saying that pre-COVID - the normal, hyperactivity was the rigor. The sheer volume of things that we tried to do was implausibly large. Is there a case for "more considered and less hyperactive" programming, or is that not possible because of the underlying business model - where you've got to use all these assets you have constantly?

[00:31:00]

Claire Spencer: Pace and output is something we have been pondering a lot, particularly as we start to gear up, you know, for the venues being open again. And one of the things that we're actually not very good at here at Arts Centre Melbourne is saying "no", or saying "not now". So there are skills that we're trying to develop.

I mean, ideally we want to find a pace that is appropriate that allows us to, you know, create opportunities, create work, put great shows on. But not in such a way that it's such a frantic pace, that you can't provide the best program that wraps around a show, or you can't provide the best experience for your audience, or an artist may feel, you know, rushed or, you know, through a process.

Claire Spencer: It's something, there is a - there's a happy balance to be had. And I think for us, we've got to pull back a bit to get closer to that happy balance and to really listen to what the - you know, what the artist experience is, what the employee experience is,



what the company experience is, what the audience experience is. And to reflect, well, how do we really hear that?

And not just race on to the next thing, but really stop and reflect about: What went well? What could we have done better? How can we deepen that relationship? How can we really start thinking about what we want to be doing in two or three years time? And really engage in those conversations now, rather than sort of galloping through them when they were upon us.

So that - If anyone out there has that silver bullet to finding that right pace for a performing arts centre, please let me know. It feels like will-o'-the-wisp at the moment. But it's something we as a - both at board level and a senior leadership level are very committed to because we feel that, you know, if COVID has taught us anything - is to slow down, it's to listen. It's to engage, it's to look out, it's to, you know, work on those partnerships and all of those things take time. And if you're racing through everything, it's difficult to create that time. So there will be changes.

Our business model is quite complex. But there - I'm convinced there is a way to do it well, if it's done with the right intent and the right choices are made. So it's something that's very - we're incredibly focused on at the moment. It's hard though, I'll be honest with you because there is such a - there is such a need in the sector for support to get works back onto stage and you know, we're gonna have to be really careful that we don't over commit, but also that we're doing our part to get the sector firing again down here in Melbourne. So yeah, it's complex to navigate, but absolutely necessary.

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Adrian Ellis: You are emerging from COVID. You're ahead of much of the globe. You spent 17 traumatic weeks in stage 4 lockdown over the last year. And this has been a completely unprecedented experience for everybody. What do you think has changed forever for the cultural sector? Either good or bad, as a result of this experience?

What will never be the same?

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Claire Spencer: Somedays it feels like nothing would ever be the same. It's a year ago next week, we went into our first lockdown and we, you know, we took that terrible decision that many organisations around the world were forced to make: to actually close your venues and cancel shows.

And I think that is so counterintuitive to do that. You know, every fiber of our being is about getting artists on stages, and getting audiences in, and connecting them with those artists and with each other. And with COVID, all of that was obviously taken away and literally switched off overnight.

Claire Spencer: So I think that yearning, that sort of calling, that vocation of getting artists back onto stages, audiences back into auditoriums and connecting them with each other. I think that won't ever change. I think that has, if anything, has become



stronger during this period. We've realised for ourselves what it means to be separated from that purpose.

And we've realised because people have told us what it has meant for artists not to be able to be on the stage for audiences, not to be able to experience live performance. And it's made us - It made us really determined as soon as we went into lockdown that we weren't going to just shut up shop and wait until we could open up again.

And it's made us really determined now to get audiences back safely, to build their confidence that they can come back into, you know, into a live entertainment environment and be safe. So I think that has definitely amplified over this period.

I think perhaps what has gone forever is a confidence that the show will always go on. And that's been really hard. It took the wind. It really did take the wind out of our sails. And, you know, we had the experience when we first closed in March. We then - we were on the cusp of reopening again in early July when the state experienced its second wave. And that's when we had our very long, you know, stage 4 lockdown. And then we had a third short, sharp one just a few weeks ago. So it's just that - there is a fragility. I think about that now that you know, we feel confident, but we know that everything is still very fragile.

We also know that many companies won't necessarily make it through COVID, so that the sector, I think the sector is gonna look different. We've certainly taken an approach that's based on partnership and collaboration, probably in a way we never have done before.

I mean, that's always been part of how we like to work. Whereas now, that's absolutely our operating norm. I don't think that will shift back to how it was. And I think, you know, I think the other thing is perhaps more compassion towards each other and kindness. You know, one of the things that I have just felt so, you know, fortunate to witness over this last year, particularly with my own team, is just the support that they've given each other and the kindness that they've offered each other.

And it has kind of - because it was kind of always there, but it's been really, really front of mind and absolutely there in the, you know, the middle of the virtual table has been that desire to support as many people as we can through this crisis. We were kind of unashamed about that. And I think that has become part now, of certainly who we are. And hopefully that will leak out into the sector as well.

I think, I think kindness is really underrated. And I don't know, some people probably rolling their eyes and going on what she talking about, but I genuinely do think it has - certainly for my organisation, it's brought people together in a way that I've not seen before. And that sort of shared empathy, that compassion for others and that determination to do our business is really fierce. Did that answer your question?

[00:38:23]

Adrian Ellis: That did. It answered it magnificently. And it also sort of took us to full circle in a sense in that, I started off by asking about leadership. And I think that what you're



describing is a set of values that I'm sure your organisation has. But I'm also sure that in large part, they are a reflection of the way in which you have led - which is with empathy and kindness, being a legitimate and divert part of the organisational culture, and an explicit part.

And I think that is an increasingly important part of the overt language of leadership in the cultural sector. So I'm incredibly grateful for your observations and of your tolerance to a very wide range of questions.

[00:39:05]

[MUSIC TRANSITION]

Adrian Ellis: Thank you, Claire.

[00:39:10]

Claire Spencer: Such a pleasure. Thank you for the conversation.

[00:39:19]

Adrian Ellis: I'm joined now by Criena Gehrke, CEO of HOTA Home of The Arts in the Gold Coast in Australia, and an active member of GCDN.

Criena, welcome to The Three Bells Podcast.

This is the second bit of it, and our plan is to discuss some of the themes that emerged from my conversation with Claire, and see what sort of insights we can derive from it. So I'm delighted that you will join me for this conversation.

[00:39:48]

Criena Gehrke: Adrian, thank you so much for inviting me to be part of this recap. It was wonderful to hear just how passionate Claire is - how considered, how eloquent, and how smart she is too, in the way that she has managed to navigate through COVID.

And it really made me reflect a lot on where we find ourselves, and how I am in the situation being a CEO of a cultural precinct as well.

[00:40:20]

Adrian Ellis: So I was fascinated by Claire's career advice because it seemed very much the same sort of career advice that I tend to give, and that I think probably others of our generation give. And I think that she made the point and I made the point that it may not apply as well to the current generation as it did to her generation and my generation, who had probably an easier time setting out in their professional lives.

Do you agree?

[00:40:50]

Criena Gehrke: I absolutely agree with that. It made me smile because I thought back to my early career where it was very much mirroring Claire's; that I tried a whole lot of different things, particularly her experience at the Opera House, and the sum of the parts ended up as a career, as a CEO for a cultural precinct.



And thank you, Adrian. You make me feel nostalgic, but also an elder these days in terms of leaders. And I guess the other thing I was thoughtful about was: What's my responsibility with younger leaders and potential leaders in supporting them to have that - not meandering, but varied experiences to get a taste of things, to not be locked in and defined as one thing?

Because that's the nature of creativity in the arts as well. You want to have that free ranging experience, particularly in your early and mid career, I think.

[00:41:45]

Adrian Ellis: Right. And I think that Claire expressed a certain amount of nostalgia for that freedom. But I just feel that we should probably be more realistic in the advice we give, but I'm not sure what that realism is. Is that realism to say, just suck it up, you know, understand that life is difficult, and that you need to focus early because - you're right, if you focus early then you often focus on the wrong things.

I know I came through the UK education system which encourages people to specialise very early compared with the American system. And I used to be always quite dismissive of the American system.

I used to tease my daughter that she was studying ballroom dancing and exorcism at university. In other words, you could do pretty well what you like. On the other hand, what that did do compared with my other specialised education was to leave options open a little longer. So, I think it's, you know, I think it's a really difficult dilemma.

My other question related to it is: How well equipped we are as a result of this education training which we enjoyed so much for the jobs that we do today? Or are we in fact wildly deficient because of the roots we followed to get here?

[00:42:51]

Criena Gehrke: (laughs) I think that's such a great question. I'd argue that I still don't know what I'm doing some days and I'm still not equipped with any sort of skill in certain situations. And if there's one thing that maybe we can advise others that are starting off on this magical journey, I still think that advice stands the test of time:

Do what you love, do what you're passionate about. Try not to get too worried about it. It will take care of itself. If you do all of those things and understand that when you graduate from university, you don't know very much, you might have a whole bank of knowledge that you've learnt that actually, in terms of the adventure that you're about to have, you know very little. And I can 100 percent guarantee that when you get into more senior positions, you're still going to have days where you know very, very little. Is that too Pollyanna? Do you think Adrian?

[00:43:51]

Adrian Ellis: Not at all, but I think that the disposition that we are continuously learning is really important.

[00:43:59]

Criena Gehrke: It's that notion of curiosity, which then links back to a values-based



approach to management and leadership, doesn't it? Keep an open mind, know what you don't know and often learn how to ask better questions.

[00:44:15]

Adrian Ellis: Right. Infused with humility. And I thought that's one of the interesting things that I got from Claire, because Claire is clearly in many ways, a strong leader, an inspiring leader, but the strength doesn't come from hubris. It seems to come from a form of humility, and a deep sense of responsibility for the community that she leads, which includes her staff.

But it's broader than her staff and that's deeply impressive. And I think you made this point, it seems to come from something - a disposition and a values-based approach that preceded her, you know, current engagement by a long way.

[00:44:52]

Criena Gehrke: And then she knows how to put that into action.

[00:44:57]

Adrian Ellis: Yeah.

[00:44:58]

Criena Gehrke: You know, when you think about The Wellbeing Collective, when you think about the way that she's led, the way she's been thoughtful about how you can shift and expand the remit of a large well-established institution - it all comes back to her deep commitment, her values, and then how she translates that to action strategy and motivates those around her to do that.

[00:45:25]

Adrian Ellis:

And there's an extension of that, which I think is worth maybe exploring a bit, which is responsibilities of an anchor institution. Are they to your staff? Are they to the wider community? And how do you actually make allocative decisions in the light of that?

[00:45:39]

Criena Gehrke: Maybe a better question that I'm thoughtful about is the business of arts, and can the business of arts and culture support this re-imagining and this realignment that is much more values-based? That's around deep, not wide, that is around true collaboration and partnerships and has refocused our attention on community.

[00:46:02]

Adrian Ellis: That's a great question. So Claire talked about an extended sense of mission and that the destination has changed. I thought that was quite a sort of evocative expression.

Adrian Ellis: In other words that where, as an organisation, we are trying to go has been changed by COVID. And it has been expanded because, whereas if we're honest, our primary preoccupation was with serving audiences.



Our primary occupation now is with a wider social role. That seemed to be what she was saying. And it seems to be what a lot of cultural leaders are saying. That we, in order to survive, must demonstrate relevance in the broader sense to a broader community than we currently do. Otherwise we will lose as it were, our licence to trade if you like. We lose our mandate, we lose our legitimacy.

And the question is, I think, for larger cultural institutions with extensive overheads, with lots of financial obligations - whether they have the agility, the maneuverability, and the skills base to do that. And the permission too, including the fiduciary permission. In other words, there are boards saying, that's all very well.

[00:47:17]

Criena Gehrke: That's right.

[00:47:18]

Adrian Ellis: It's good to hear your bleeding heart, but if you look at our memorandum and articles, and if you look at our mission, our primary obligation is to keep the show on the road. So please remember that.

And I think that tension, and Claire alluded to it - I think that tension is very deep at the moment and we'll grow deeper.

[00:47:34]

Criena Gehrke: I agree.

[00:47:35]

Adrian Ellis: Because the expansion of the mandate doesn't have with it a ready-made business model to underpin it. It is red ink, not black ink. So that seems a very, very acute dilemma. And it may be that another generation of more maneuverable, smaller, less overhead heavy, more sensitised organisations take that mandate and run with it.

[00:47:57]

Criena Gehrke: Which would be disappointing because that has always been thus. You know, the role of small to medium arts organisations in terms of innovation, new work not being steeped in tradition, more likely to be your focus on community cultural development and rich community engagement, representing the communities in which they exist. Whereas the large institutions haven't necessarily had a rich tradition of that.

[00:48:28]

Adrian Ellis: Yes. It's interesting.

[00:48:29]

Criena Gehrke: And so you're right. It's like expanding and deepening your extended mission, but that does require resources, financial support. Because you're right, it's a red number. But it's only a red number if you look at it in a traditional arts centre or precinct model. Actually, the benefit is then again, how you measure that success around wellbeing, social outcomes, sense of civic pride, belonging - rather than the ticket revenue that's being driven into those larger institutions.



[00:49:06]

Adrian Ellis: That is true, but that doesn't help much in that those benefits are very real. But it's difficult to translate them into the fuel for the program. In other words, they're what economists call externalities. They are public benefits and the organisation delivering those benefits isn't the financial beneficiary of them.

And therefore can't, as it were, capture the rocket fuel to drive the program. You need either public or philanthropic funding to underpin that. And that is, you know, that's clearly a dilemma.

I think in a sense COVID is putting that rhetoric very much to the test because it's saying - it's presenting in a very stark form the dilemma is: What are your institutional priorities? And you know, version one of it is, we have broader institutional priorities than our staff and our audiences. And it requires us to revisit how we think about those.

And version two is, you know, being an anchor is okay in good times, but it's much tougher in these times. And if we don't exist, we can't be an anchor in the good times. And I think that's the dilemma that many leaders are currently navigating.

And I think what you're saying, is that if they take the latter, rather than the former, then they are losing the opportunity to be truly relevant, and have a mission that engages the sort of public that they need to survive and thrive.

[00:50:34]

Criena Gehrke: Yeah. Ignore your community at your peril.

[00:50:37]

Adrian Ellis: Yeah. So should we talk about the capital project?

[00:50:40]

Criena Gehrke: It was wonderful the way that Claire spoke about the vision for that precinct. But then I was really thoughtful about measures of success, and whether we're still stuck in a world - whether it's because of government or for whatever reason, where success still sometimes looks like cultural tourism, economic benefit, employment, rather than the way that Claire spoke about that expansion of the mission and the deep community engagement.

And being that true anchor for the community in which she's based. And I'm just curious about that. Like, what does that mean for cultural precincts? And what does that mean for us in COVID land?

[00:51:22]

Adrian Ellis: I was really curious. That struck me too. And I don't know, maybe we just tie ourselves in knots about this.

Adrian Ellis: The overwhelming rationale for capital expenditure particularly, but expenditure generally has tended in - throughout the world to be on economic impact.



And reputable economists tend to be fairly dismissive about the methodologies that are usually used because the multipliers have been sort of invented, and they don't take into account displacement effects. In other words, what would happen if you spent the money on something else? So economists tend to be quite sniffy about those arguments. On the other hand, they seem to be the arguments that generate the resources.

We, generally the arts community, have regarded them as a sort of necessary evil. And we've slightly held on to those because we believe that the real impact of the arts and the real value of expenditure on the arts is broader than that.

It is social, it's cultural, it's artistic, it's environmental.

There are a whole series around health and wellbeing. And although Claire alluded to those arguments, it was clear that, or at least it appeared clear that the argument that had triggered a - this is just phase one, mind you, 1.5 billion dollars in the 2021 budget, had been primarily around economic impact.

So, maybe we're just overthinking this. If those are the arguments that engage politicians and therefore trigger resources, maybe those are the arguments that we should be using and focusing on.

[00:52:58]

Criena Gehrke: I'd absolutely agree with that. It's whatever gets us where we need to go, is what we need to do. But I think we need to be mindful about what that looks like in 10, 20 years after that infrastructure has been delivered. What are the operating costs? What subsidy is required ongoing to even maintain those cultural assets?

And sometimes I do wonder - and don't get me wrong, I am the proud custodian of a major infrastructure project myself at the moment, but I do sometimes wonder, are we over cooking the infrastructure? Do our community actually require that level of buildings and assets to have a rich cultural life and a sense of engagement? I don't have the answer to that.

[00:53:46]

Adrian Ellis: So I thought Claire was very interesting on what really, we take away from the COVID experience, what will be different irrevocably as a result.

And I thought some of the things she said were about positive, potentially silver linings, and some of them were really quite disconcertingly, I thought, honest and insightful. Clearly, an extended sense of mission seemed to be central. The idea that the role and mission of cultural organisations has been expanded by the experience of COVID.

What she described it as is: Aiming for positive relevance, that the destination in terms of mission has changed.

Adrian Ellis: That - secondly, that part of it is about giving back. That the obligation to give back to the city joy, compassion and kindness, that these are now, or should be integral to the DNA of cultural organisations.



She also said that the time to reflect had, potentially underscored the tendency towards hyperactivity. And the need to look at the business model and find one that is sustainable without as it were, 24/7 programming so that one can be more deliberative. But the thing that was slightly disconcerting was she said that the confidence that the show will always go on has gone forever.

And that sounded quite profound, but also chilling. That the idea that this - that the sheer unexpected drama of the whole of the arts sector grinding to a halt was something that would not easily be unlearned. Do you agree with that? Do you think that we are sort of - that changed sensibility changes everything?

[00:55:21]

Criena Gehrke: I think it does change many things. I agree I enjoyed that idea of positive relevance and somewhere like the Arts Centre Melbourne really thinking about that expanded mission, and the commitment and the role of an anchor institution. I was very thoughtful about the notion of what is lost is the idea that the show must go on.

And I know that Claire - well, I don't know, but I suspect that was... almost a shorthand way of, as you said, talking about the grief and just the absolute unexpected fall that happened when we all had to close down almost overnight.

But I was really thoughtful about maybe it's a positive that's come out of this. We're a sector and institutions and artists and a passionate group that believed the show will go on no matter what personal toll, no matter how little we're being paid, no matter against all odds. It's actually mythology that's built up around the sector that we will do this no matter what. And I wonder whether this moment of pause and reflection is "What do we require"?

You know, does it always need to go on? What have we learnt from not being able to perform on those stages? And Claire sort of spoke really eloquently about that too, about doing less, and about being more considered and providing not just her team and artists, but audiences with that time and not being so overwhelmed by programming and offer.

And yet, she was so honest and I - I feel what she's going through. She still didn't have the answers about how to achieve that.

[00:57:12]

Adrian Ellis: I think there's a sort of iron lore at work here, and it's an iron lore of higher hyperactivity and it works something like this: that you don't get to the top of a cultural organisation or any not-for-profit by saying I don't think we can do that. No, you tend to get to the top by saying yes. So that's one set of things that leads to increasing activity.

Another is the funding system where in order to secure funding, you have to promise to do things. And often that money covers the marginal, but not the full cost of those activities. So that what happens over time is that, you do more and more on a thinner and thinner base.



And the third is, if you have a dollar to spend, and you've got a choice between putting that dollar or pound or whatever currency on stage, or in the exhibition, or you've got a choice of investing it in somebody's long-term development - they're training the next photocopier or whatever else, you tend to put it at the sharp end over time, rather than at the narrow end.

So systematically what you tend to do as an organisation for those - with those three drivers is end up doing more for less. And indeed, you feel, that is actually great because it just shows how incredibly productive you are as an organisation.

But over time, when you look at it, you realise, wow, we've sort of hollowed out the organisation and so, a thing like COVID is an opportunity at least to sort of have some form of reckoning and say, how do we adjust?

Not necessarily less activity, but a changed ratio of investment in infrastructure and support for - versus programming. So that what we do, we can do better.

And so, I think what Claire was alluding to in the sort of coming out of COVID is: Is there a way in which we have got the discipline - we've got the discipline and the mandate to do fewer things better because the underlying forces and logic are to do more and more things, on less and less until eventually you sort of hollow yourself out.

Does that ring at all true?

[00:59:17]

Criena Gehrke: (laughs) I think that rings very true. The twist in the Scorpion's tail is ensuring that you can make that work when it comes to the bottom line financially.

[00:59:30]

Adrian Ellis: Yeah.

[00:59:31]

Criena Gehrke: And it's interesting, isn't it? Because I think you're spot on that you end up doing more and more with less, whereas what if we did less and created more?

And it sounds so simple when you say it. But that's not necessarily the reality of the business or the expectations, or the tendency to want to say yes.

[00:59:52]

Adrian Ellis: Yeah, in fact, it keeps me - there is a fourth driver too. Usually things come in threes, but there is a fourth driver too. And that is a change over the last 15, 20 years in the funding environment in which funders have switched the question that they ask of arts organisations. They used to ask, "What can we do for you?"

Adrian Ellis: Funders now ask a different question. They ask, "What can you do for us?" A fundamentally different question. How can your organisation fulfill our strategic objectives? Whatever those objectives are, social welfare, access... doesn't matter.

In other words, funders discovered strategy. And when funders discovered strategy, they turned arts organisations into means rather than ends. And in doing that, they



therefore judge you on a set of criteria which may or may not be aligned to your programmatic agenda, but they certainly force you into - they certainly force you into action.

There is a sort of reaction to it. And what it's about is about moving away from program funding back to basically institutional funding and saying: We embrace your mission. We think you're important. Here, here is funding for your organisation.

We're not saying you spend it on X rather than Y. That is your judgment. We are going to judge you by your output as aligned to your strategy. And that's a sort of profound reversion to the sort of pre-strategy days of funding.

[01:01:24]

Criena Gehrke: Yes please. That sounds totally liberating. And I would be in raging agreement that you know, not, not everywhere, but it is the same in the Australian context that the funders are very interested in almost approving your strategic plan, and providing you with what their key strategies are that they'd like for you to deliver on at a government level usually.

And it often dilutes the very reason that that organisation exists because you end up being spread too thinly, or we've all seen organisations lean into an area that isn't really in their DNA or to attract the funding that then turns a little bit wobbly, because you're not the expert in what you've been funded in. So I'm in raging agreement.

[01:02:17]

Adrian Ellis: Thank you so much. That was really interesting. And I hope it's the first of a series of similar conversations that we're able to have as we pick through interviews that you do, and I do, and that others do over the months to come.

[01:02:32]

Criena Gehrke: Thanks Adrian. It's been an absolute pleasure.

[01:02:35]

Adrian Ellis: And I'm also deeply grateful to Claire for being our first victim. I'd like also to thank our listeners for tuning into this, which is the inaugural episode of The Three Bells - a GCDN podcast produced by AEA Consulting and supported by The Binnacle Foundation.

If you want more information and some ancillary materials and links, they can be found online at <https://www.thethreebells.net/>. And if you haven't already done so, please subscribe to our feed on your podcast listening platform of choice.

[01:03:08]

[THEME MUSIC]

Adrian Ellis: This is Adrian Ellis, and I look forward to seeing you next time. Bye-bye.

