



## S2:E3 Beyond physical infrastructure

### Vilma Jurkute in conversation with Adrian Ellis

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[THEME MUSIC]

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**Adrian Ellis:** Hello, and welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of a series brought to you by AEA Consulting and The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network, in which we explore what's happening around the world on those busy and sometimes congested intersections of cultural and urban life. The series and supporting materials can be found at [www.thethreebells.net](http://www.thethreebells.net). And if you like our content, please subscribe and give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice.

I'm Adrian Ellis, Chair of GCDN and I'm thrilled that our guests this week is Vilma Jurkute. Vilma is the Executive Director of Alserkal Avenue in Dubai and has been really the executive leader of Alserkal since, I think around 2011. Is that, is that right, Vilma?

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**Vilma Jurkute:** Sounds about right. Almost a decade of my life. (laughs) A bit scary, too.

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**Adrian Ellis:** And it's been a remarkable period, because Alserkal has become really quite a significant cultural and urban development, not just in Dubai, not just in the UAE, not just in the middle east, but I think that internationally you have uh, managed to create a real resonance for the agenda and the way in which that agenda has been pursued.

But I'd love to start off with you. How did you uh, how did you arrive in Dubai?

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**Vilma Jurkute:** Well, I've, it all began actually, it was a personal story. I moved here due to family reasons. And I never was, you know, I was not sure if Dubai really would become my home and it has in the past decade and it's uh, been a phenomenal journey. As a city, I think it allowed me for the first time, to really kind of triangulate my knowledge, my research, my practice uh, which is situated between urbanism, culture and community, and at the same time business management. And I think my kind of work allowed me to pursue this uh, within Alserkal avenue at the very beginning. Uh, because of its very kind of polyphonic and plural nature as an organisation, I was able to voice and practice all these three areas that I'm educated in and I'm passionate about.



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**Vilma Jurkute:** So it's been a, it's been a remarkable journey in that sense. Um, it allowed me to connect my sustainable urban development uh, knowledge through my master's at Oxford but then also, um, my business knowledge which was my bachelor's back in the day. And even during my tenure in London at the Institute of Arts and Ideas, it just allowed me to create this kind of continuity in a very kind of different context and region of GCC.

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**Adrian Ellis:** So tell me a little bit more about what that experience was before, before Alserkal, before moving to Dubai uh, the Institute of Arts and Ideas in London. What were you doing there?

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**Vilma Jurkute:** Again, it was a quite a plural institution actually, because it has its own galleries, its own festivals, its own TV station. So I was quite involved in two aspects of their moving image gallery work, and their open prize uh, which they use to stage back then in early 2000s and also their festival Hay, which was a philosophy three-day festival and mostly debate-focused, really future-focused and quite multidisciplinary that involved thinkers and philosophers and game changers in different industries globally.

And it was really quite a phenomenal experience, which then they relocated Dubai allowed me to kind of take that experience with me and those connections that we built back then and try to connect different cities. Because before that, I was also in New York uh, involved in creative business sites, I had my own business in cinematography and photography.

Not as closely related to what they do today, but there was always this connection between creative economy and working with creative minds. That's still obviously I apply today.

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**Adrian Ellis:** So you arrived in Dubai in 2011 and Alserkal Avenue, I believe, had begun its journey as a cultural district uh, in about 2008 or nine. Tell me a little bit about its origins and the trajectory up until your arrival.

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**Vilma Jurkute:** Well, I think one must imagine this kind of industrial area that perhaps most urban peripheries have, and it might surprise you that Dubai has one also. And, uh, I remember when I discovered it for the first time I got lost in the taxi. I wasn't sure if I'm in the right place and there were a few galleries opening on the same night.

And it was extremely powerful and moving because they felt something was happening. Some sort of movement was beginning to take shape because it reminded me of Berlin or London in different ways. And I felt that it could be amplified. And at that time, of course, I didn't know the kind of journey that lies ahead of me. Um, but there was that stimulation, there was inspiration or some sort of artistic movement that was taking shape and it evolved in the past decade quite significantly, I think, in a very kind of plural and polyphonic nature.



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**Vilma Jurkute:** Because it's began as a district that was kind of held synonymous at the at the beginning to the built environment, but there's been a significant departure from the kind of physical uh, space.

But maybe just to structure what Alserkal is. So Alserkal is the cultural uh, socially-led enterprise, privately owned, and lives in those plural forms of Alserkal Avenue. Which is our kind of cultural district, our physical space, lives in the form of a foundation, which is our not-for-profit.

And then recently we've also introduced Alserkal advisory, which is where our public programming, our collaborations with different stakeholders also lie in the form of cultural production. And finally we also have our digital space on <https://alserkal.online>, which began as a kind of editorial arm for content production online, so to connect with our global audiences, but also we'll continue to evolve in the future. We have some ambitious plans for that.

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**Adrian Ellis:** I want to come on to that expansion from a physical place to a broader agenda. But first, just tell me a little more about that physical space. As you say, it's not one might instinctively associate with Dubai, which is usually associated with, uh, modern, architectural, new build development. This is an area, I think, initially of about 40 and now probably near a hundred warehouses. Is that right?

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**Vilma Jurkute:** As an area it's quite big. So it's called Al Quoz. And a lot of times it gets compared to like the meatpacking on Shoreditch in London, for example, or meatpacking in New York. But I remember AMO from Office of Metropolitan Architecture, they did a study and Al Quoz is a quiet, a significantly large space in the context of Dubai and situated actually, very close to the centre of Dubai, an industrial area which could fit about 53 and a half meatpacking districts from New York.

**Adrian Ellis:** (laughs)

**Vilma Jurkute:** Well, it's a, it's huge. And then we get compared on the same scale, it's kind of, uh, inaccurate. It's quite big. And Alserkal is a bit kind of like a drop in the ocean in Al Quoz area. So we house about uh, 70 pioneers and entrepreneurs and of course, when we began, there were only a few galleries, mostly were industrial concepts, which we also collaborated with them.

I think that kind of contrast where cement and glass and the ideas were made simultaneously was something refreshing, it's not perfect. And in the city where everything can feel slightly, you know, sometimes too perfect or sanitised, I think for creative minds it was um, a place of escape and a place where you can freely create. And really that's how it started.

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MUSIC TRANSITION



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**Adrian Ellis:** So one of the things that you appear to have done very successfully with great judgment is get that right. That balance between being a landlord curating the sorts of activities that you want to be a landlord of and then strategic interventions, either as a partner or as an entity in your own in programming and therefore curating the overall identity, but keeping a balance between as it were, spontaneous organic growth and a clear vision as to the way in which you wanted to see the area developed.

So can you tell us a little bit about how you made those judgments, and how you balance supply and demand, the underlying demand for space with um, curating the right balance of usages to create a really fertile environment with lots of synergies between the tenants.

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**Vilma Jurkute:** I think at the beginning in general when we started out we didn't really have some sort of model and the West really didn't know what to do with us. Because we didn't fit any of the boxes. We always viewed ourselves as a self-editing organisation that would be moulded to our specific history, culture, and geography. And I always applied Lefebvre's approach to urbanism, which was really viewing a place as a process. And I think it's really important because if you've fit yourself into some sort of myopic paradigm, it becomes very difficult to remain agile and change with times or respond to the new environment, to the changing environment, kind of actively lead with that change.

Uh, landlord role, we always viewed it as a secondary, not as a primary. I mean, we are business partners of our community, our creative community. And that was always really key in terms of our mandate and how we think the idea was, how do we create this collective wisdom that can act and activism within placemaking? What does that mean in our context?

And I remember we received more than a thousand submissions for 40 spaces we had for the expansion, which we pursued in 2015. And it was clear to us that there was a lot of demand, but that we will have to be very diligent in creating this kind of new discourse. And that's where founders come in.

You know, it's not a, this is why we say we're not synonymous with the built environment because it's the people, it's their artistic minds. It's their passion. It's their commitment. That creates this difference. And this is really what this was our key logic and the approach when beginning to shape this community, which then later grew into the civic network.

Of course we are still a place, but now we live in multiple forms in this organisation by way of uh, foundation, digital platform, and ultimately only a neighbourhood or a cultural district.

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**Adrian Ellis:** So tell me a little bit more about the way in which that community now operates. Because you are of course a physical place, but you have also now I think extended into areas, advisory – let's start with the arts foundation and the programming of the foundation. Tell me more about how that is structured and what the ambitions are for it.



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**Vilma Jurkute:** Well, going back to, again, our work is grounded in an ethic of care and shared authority and collective learning. And it's through that kind of open dialogue and long-term cooperation with artists or district practitioners uh, actually in various disciplines, locally, regionally and globally that the foundation kind of came about.

And we started this work in a very informal way back in 2015, when we introduced our own homegrown programme, then in 2017, we opened Alserkal residency. So, um, this is where we kind of formalised the residency programme that again is open to uh, various practitioners from all over the world and different disciplines to allow them to reconnect with their practice, but also support alternative research, scholarship, and practice that produces new form of knowledge.

And that is pertinent to our region, but not limited to our geography. And from that, that the foundation was formalised back in 2019 uh, that allowed us to connect these three pillars of supporting artistic production, scholarship, and research. Various modes of support and we are not um, we are non-collecting foundation and we don't really have a collection, physical collection that we are looking after. The idea that we are building this repository of knowledge all throughout the years for the future generations and always kind of resort back to Chakrabarty's publication on provincialising Europe, which he wrote, I think in the nineties uh, where he was discussing scholarship from the Indian point of view in the West. And he said, it always feels like we're in the waiting room of history. And uh, that all kind of really stayed with me.

And I think today you have this new generation of thinkers and practitioners who've claimed that ownership and they are no longer in the waiting room and the kind of knowledge and practice they produce, the kind of knowledge that they challenge is extremely interesting and usually situated between formal scholarship and artistic practice.

And this is the kind of alternative aspect that we are looking for when we select research grantees or residents that come and engage with our community and the city at large or the foundation that we are interested in supporting, because that really is what remaps geographies of knowledge, we believe.

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**Adrian Ellis:** So your residency programme and your grant programme are informed by an agenda which extends well beyond conventional artistic residences. It embraces thinkers, it embraces theoreticians and therefore there is a sort of pedagogic impetus behind it, to create uh, an intellectual and cultural community. Is that, is that what you're describing?

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**Vilma Jurkute:** Correct. I mean, I think this multidisciplinary aspect was always key to us since we began. I think many practitioners today are working or exploring different disciplines. But also that dialogue, that departure of borders between disciplines was really important for us, that we kind of continue to break those boundaries and see where they meet rather than separate.



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**Vilma Jurkute:** And so those kinds of dialogues and debates that also take place during the cycles when you have, you know, a writer, a curator, an artist, a historian sharing the same residency, the kind of knowledge and critique uh, that occur is doing their tenure is extremely powerful and really impacts their practice and future research trajectory of their work. And it's been very rewarding to be part of that process and to support that through the residency programme research grants, but also now we've launched Common Room, which is a kind of a physical space to allow this process to always continue and engage with local practitioners, just as much as we engage with kind of global thinkers as well.

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**Adrian Ellis:** I'm sure listeners are wondering about the governance and business model and how it is that you have managed to push forward such a comprehensive agenda that has both the physical dimension in the district and an intellectual and programmatic dimension in, in the work of the foundation.

Can you tell us a little bit more about how you have managed to create a sustainable model, which embraces both the physical and the programmatic.

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**Vilma Jurkute:** I think I still don't see it as something in the past tense. I don't think we managed, I feel like we were always trying to manage. So that's really important that there is no finish line because we are a process that continues to change. So like Lefebvre said, you know, he viewed urbanism as a process, but also something that you produce, something that you are a producer of, but then you also reproduce.

And I think allowing for that it's a luxury when you're a privately funded organisation, because they're able to structure and restructure accordingly as you continue to evolve or grow. And when they began, it was really in ways filling the gaps. We grew together with the city of Dubai. So it was always identifying what is needed for our community.

And then you could respond accordingly. And like I described the journey of the foundation, it wasn't something that we just opened in 2019. Our work began way before that. And same was with milestones, like Concrete where we commissioned OMA Office for Metropolitan Architecture led by Rem Koolhaas has to reimagine what used to be four warehouses to become an exhibition space for the city of Dubai. Yeah, because there were no museums at the time. And so we always kind of responded to what is needed for the overall ecosystem. Because it's not easy to be a first. When you're a pioneer, you're kind of developing yourself as the infrastructure is developing around you. So I wouldn't ignore the parameters of the kind of urban periphery that we are surrounded by. So really the structure is the fact that we are privately owned, I think allowed us to be flexible when moulding the organisation as the city, as the region continue to change, and as we evolved as an institution as well in the past decade.

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**Adrian Ellis:** And privately-owned with an owner in Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal who clearly shares and embraces and indeed has been your sort of thought partner in much of this. Can you tell us a little bit more about the role in which uh, his vision has played in the development of this extraordinary entity.





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**Vilma Jurkute:** Well yes, Alserkal, is called Alserkal because of the Alserkal family. Who's been incredibly important historically when shaping the city of Dubai and are known as pioneers in their involvement from bringing the very first car to the UAE or founding the first telephone network, like Etisalat, to being involved in the finance industry here. So, uh, there was a natural step for arts and culture that came with the new generation and they've been extremely fortunate to have a founder like Abdelmonem Alserkal and his entire family who have been extremely involved uh, supportive donors, but also visionaries. Especially at the time then Al Quoz industrial area was just really, uh, was very different from what it is today. And that support allowed us to continue to grow and evolve. And this is the reason why we were able to introduce Alserkal Advisory just the last year. So that was kind of our newest addition to Alserkal's structure as we continue to, to evolve.

**Adrian Ellis:** What are the ambitions for Alserkal Advisory?

**Vilma Jurkute:** Uh, the idea was to kind of challenge some of the extractive traditional consultancy and agency practice, that has become very prominent in our part of the world. So we are big supporters of knowledge exchange, but we are wary that when it comes to importing certain knowledge that is one sided. I think the fact that we were able to build something in Dubai, in the UAE, in the region for the region and allowed our partners whom we've nourished and supported for that very decade, and who supported us to now involve us in different cultural projects that are taking place well in the region, which is very exciting because there's this continuous vision and many viewed Alserkal as the blueprint for creating cultural, uh, space and the community, which is a huge compliment to us.

And it's that trust that then perhaps allowed us to be involved in some of the new projects, and visions that are being moulded for different cities. And it's been a huge honour to be part of it. And that's really how it began. It was through that interest. And then we felt that there was a need to formalise this ambition. And seeing ways that we can be more intelligently involved and through collaborative practice, again, through collaborative approach, but we come from a place where we give advice from operational point of view.

So it's something that we've done or continue to do. But we also depart from Alserkal because we value the new contacts, different kinds of geographical and historical framework and cultural framework then envisioning something together with a client. And one of the most exciting projects uh, still is in continuation was the one with the Expo 2020, which, uh, kicked off last year called Cultures in Conversation, which really allowed us to um, create a six months programme that is very multidisciplinary across 10 thematic weeks. But anywhere from climate and biodiversity to urbanism to space, allowed us to really think in multidisciplinary ways and challenge that conventional by commissioning artists, practitioners, some of the world's leading thinkers to come together on the global stage at expo.

And not only address urgent issues, but reimagine those issues for the future. And it's been, it's been a huge honour to be able to be part of it and challenge those conventional business practices and being kind of given that chance to craft audience-specific public programmes such as cultures in conversation.



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MUSIC TRANSITION

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**Adrian Ellis:** Certainly from my experience of working in the Middle East, there is definitely a preoccupation with the physical side of things, with buildings and physical infrastructure. And one of the most powerful lessons of what you have achieved is I think, a general theme of a lot of the discussion in the Global Cultural Districts Network, which is that that physical infrastructure is a means to an end and ultimately a secondary to what you might call software, which is ideas, creativity, organisations.

The creative genesis of, of what makes um, culture's most valuable contribution to urban contexts. And it seems to me that that seems very near the centre of the philosophy that you are um, you are disseminating if you'd like, through Alserkal advisory. Does that meet with resistance or does it resonate?

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**Vilma Jurkute:** I think it's beginning to resonate. Like you mentioned, I mean, I think that there's been a departure, especially considering the past two years of COVID. There's been many appraisal and self-audit, many of us had to conduct. Of course, it's still, you know, you still have projects that are agenda driven.

You still have this kind of focus on physical infrastructure. It really depends on the city or specific region, but I think it's definitely changing at least for the UAE. Or the city of Dubai, which kind of has undergone already that kind of infrastructure development and the key focus is now on social community development, sense of belonging.

So, there's been that shift that they think it's important to recognise and articulate. I mean, for us, the idea was always how, you know, how can we link art to social transformation without instrumentalising our work or their practice and in all the ways, I mean, we believe that cooperative dialogue based participatory art can reappraise some of those current issues and invite critical engagement, which as a result then creates empowering space that can then lead to social transformation. And I think we've learned that responsibility is not arbitrary and it is particularly important when shaping a cultural discourse or when re-envisioning our own models that, that may be, you know, like in ways expired. I think they do have expiry dates.

The times are changing and we are presented with new challenges. Not only due to COVID but, by the kind of anthropocene that we live in today. And so we cannot ignore these issues, I think that's the biggest challenge going forward is how can we respond to these challenges? That the world has changed. How do we recalibrate? How do we cast new patterns through experimentation that can help us then uh, shape a new discourse as a result. And that's probably the challenge we face globally. I mean, it's not regional.

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**Adrian Ellis:** So you seem to be describing a disposition in which we are, entering a fundamentally new chapter in the evolution of both the role of culture and our responsibilities as cultural agencies.





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**Adrian Ellis:** Whether it's vis-à-vis social justice and equity, whether it's vis-à-vis anthropocene and climate change, whether it's vis-à-vis the responsibilities for culture both to remain authentic in its own terms, but make a material contribution to the larger urban environment.

This is an agenda that a whole generation of cultural leaders grew up you know, with it on the periphery of their consciousness and maybe, you know, in their more discussive moments, but their central agenda was basically getting institutions up, running them and programming them uh, and trying to establish a viable underpinning business model. How well equipped do you think leaders are today to take on this, these fundamentally more challenging agendas?

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**Vilma Jurkute:** Ah well I think we all feel illiterate to a certain extent in some of these issues. I think they are extremely challenging. They can feel quite gigantic, but by no means it's also an excuse then to not do anything about it. I think the kind of communities and publics that we serve expect change from us. And especially then we are faced with humanitarian crisis that cultural institutions cannot just continue to operate in their own realm, in their own definition. They have to permeate those borders and engage those communities and social transformation by actually conducting self-audit.

And that's kind of what we began doing at Alserkal. We just completed our solar power infrastructure. We are revisiting our community behaviour and assessing our own output of waste. And how can we reduce it and rethinking what does it mean to producing art content today? What is the execution process, what are the materials that we are using? Uh, we cannot ignore the current situation. We have to utilise the tools that are within our domain to respond. So I kind of feel like anything is better than nothing. So I think focusing on the economies of repair is key and yes, that departure from this old logic, this addiction to growth or building more buildings instead of repairing the current infrastructure is really important. And as leaders we need to continuously to challenge our ways doing things, our ways of practice. I think it's really, really important. Um, so embracing smallness, collaboration, collectivism, recycling, that kind of repair aspect going forward is really, really important as we conduct our programmes and as we plan our future.

[00:31:03]

**Adrian Ellis:** Vilma, you are an inspiration, and happy inspiration to the Cultural Districts Network, to myself personally and I know to the membership. And I want to thank you and also wish you very well for what I believe is imminent, maternity leave. And I am, I'm thrilled to have had the opportunity to talk to you before you leave on it. So, thank you very much.

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**Vilma Jurkute:** I am blushing as you say these words, I don't know if I deserve them because it's really collective effort and there is authorship of ideas that is due to my team, to my colleagues uh, to our community, but also important guiding mentors like yourself and Global Cultural Districts Network played an enormous role in Alserkal's evolution.



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**Vilma Jurkute:** And I just cannot praise enough this kind of collectivism and support we receive just by having colleagues all over the world, sharing our challenges and our lessons, but also some of the attempts that we are making or experiments that we are conducting to find solutions, is then, it's just such an incredibly powerful civic network for cultural entities globally. And um, a lot is due in terms of our depth of gratitude to you and, and our GCDN colleagues in terms of our own evolution in the past decade. So thank you for having me.

[00:32:38]

**Adrian Ellis:** Thank you.

Listeners, if you want more, check out [www.thethreebells.net](http://www.thethreebells.net) to find external references and other resources linked to this episode, but stick around first for a conversation between Stephanie Fortunato and myself, as we explore the key takeaways and actionable ideas from this conversation.

[00:33:00]

MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:33:10]

**Adrian Ellis:** Hi Stephanie, how are you? How's Providence. What's happening?

[00:33:14]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** (laughs) Hi Adrian, it's great to talk to you. Providence, it's chilly here. It's a 22 degree morning, but the sun is shining, which always makes me feel great and optimistic.

**Adrian Ellis:** So what did you make of Vilma?

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Oh, my gosh. Vilma is such a fierce thinker, Adrian. Um, it was so wonderful to hear her talk about her motivation and what drives her. And I am so interested in how that shapes her approach to the work and her values, which are so clearly communicated through all of the different programmes and initiatives that she has taken on in her role in Dubai.

But certainly it's something that seems to be a theme throughout her career. I was so impressed with the way that she is able to weave philosophy, which is not an easy thing. I don't think to weave into your everyday creative practice, but, you know, philosophy and sustainable development and creative practice, the way that she uses them as a springboard for so much just fertile thinking.

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**Adrian Ellis:** Absolutely. She has a, I think a very considered philosophy, which is manifest in the approach of the development of Alserkal, and the relationship between the world of ideas and the physical infrastructure, the wider agenda, which is around, clearly it's around the arts and urban development. But it's also broader than that. It is a sort of humanistic philosophy.



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**Adrian Ellis:** She is very concerned about ensuring uh, that it's a philosophy that's not centred on the West or on America. It is centred on the Middle East and it reaches out into- she is as strong in her relationships with North Africa and with Asia, particularly Southeast Asia, as she is with, with Europe or America.

When you look at their programming and there's now quite a volume of online programming dating back, you know, five years or so. It's a really rich programme of talks around urban development, around sustainability, around the visual arts, around the performing arts, around architecture and uh, she's absolutely taken to heart the relationship between a physical location and a set of ideas. And I know it's a, you know, it's a drum we beat, but that looking at infrastructure as a means to an end and not an end in itself. Wow. You know, she's absolutely the you know, the poster child of that philosophy.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** Yeah. You know, what I was really struck by was that her first encounter with the city, she recognised and could see the artistic movement that was sort of already present in the city.

And so it seemed to me, which was talking about a lot in all of the conceits behind the programmes themselves was that creative community and bringing together that creative community, such fertile ground for new ideas and creativity and innovation. And I think the way that she structures the programme to bring together diverse people, you know, people from different places and with different disciplinary backgrounds and perspectives it really speaks to the need to really engage the individuals who live in our communities, not just the ideas behind it.

Like there's a relationship between the learning that happens in community and with a community of practitioners from your own discipline or, and beyond. Um, and there's a set of ideas that come out of that, that really seems to be driving a lot of the work that Vilma has taken on and I think it speaks to the reason why cultural institutions, you know, there's a responsibility to be part of community, but there's also great value in engaging with the creative practitioners, the thinkers who live in our communities, because then there's the opportunity to grow and develop and amplify and to innovate and make the changes that I think cultural institutions so often have at the heart of their missions.

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**Adrian Ellis:** Uh, you're right. When you go to Alserkal, Alserkal is not what you immediately associate with the iconography of Dubai, which is, you know, slightly science fiction. You know, a contemporary city made of whole cloth.

This is an industrial area of warehouses. And although they have one fairly modest contemporary building, which is the, what's known as Concrete – which is a flexible performance and an exhibition space designed by OMA by Rem Koolhaas's practice and it's a sort of jewel in the crown if you'd like. It's an impressive building. It's a fairly modest scale. And the overall fabric of Alserkal is you know, repurpose warehouses, it's very, very tastefully repurposed. But, you know, incrementally repurposed. So some are, some aren't. And as, uh, you know, it was a great juxtaposition between uses overall, but you're right.



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**Adrian Ellis:** That's all developed hand in hand with a larger philosophy around the importance of informal scholarship around the juxtaposition of thinking and making. And I mean, obviously she's being helped tremendously by the fact that this is, all enabled by the philanthropy of the founder of Alserkal. And it's difficult to imagine something as coherent as this being pushed forward so sort of single-mindedly if you like, if there weren't a very coherent ownership structure that allows it and I think you know, what's replicable and what's not replicable, there is much to be learned, but it's very difficult to conjure up those exact circumstances if you're thinking about how to, how to progress the project. Because the project is extremely fortunate in having a single inspired patron, if you'd like.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** Who trusts her, right.

**Adrian Ellis:** Clearly.

**Stephanie Fortunato:** I think it's, it's the trust that she's built up that really has allowed her to take some of these risks and to be such a nimble, flexible, responsive organisation there. I know it is interesting to think about that because there's not a lot of peers to have that kind of private support for their endeavours.

It made me think actually about family foundations and how that can be a great source of artistic freedom or, you know, allows people to often imagine new ways to take on different endeavours. However, family foundations can also be a little tricky for cultural institutions because they can often be very niche interests and, you know, giving and when one generation of the family sort of leaves the, the active roles of, of charitable giving can be quite disruptive for the institutions that they've supported over the years.

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**Adrian Ellis:** This is a slight side turn. But if you've ever read the book, *The Golden Donors* by Waldemar Nielsen, it's an account of the founding of what when it was written, probably about 20 years ago, the 20 largest private foundations in the states. And in almost every case, it took it, you know, it took a generation of family turmoil before they develop anything like a sort of coherence, philanthropic philosophy. The first few years where, you know, family disputes about pet projects and so forth. But I have had the privilege of spending a bit of time uh, with Abdelmonem Alserkal. And I have to say, I don't know anything about the larger family politics of that situation, but he is a extremely smart and perspicacious, wise I think, probably, rather than smart person. And in my encounters with him, especially when he hosted the GCDN convening a few years ago, he really, you know, immediately inspires a sense of confidence that he has, he knows what enabling philanthropy is as opposed to coercive philanthropy.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** I wonder if some of the work that's being done there by the foundation to build a body of knowledge, you know, how that will influence the field in the future, not just the city itself, but you know, the interest of engaging both local practitioners and global thinkers in this work. It seems like Vilma is setting out to catalyse a change that will have ripple effects beyond the borders of the avenue, certainly. And I'm wondering, you know, what the long-term legacy is of that work.



[00:42:00]

**Adrian Ellis:** Well, I think it's potentially quite profound, the idea of developing a programmatic element uh, that can extend beyond Alserkal Avenue, has been something that Vilma has talked about for some time and now has launched.

And I think the idea is that there is in Alserkal and its approach to programming and its approach to urban development, there are replicable lessons, notwithstanding what I said about the ownership structure. There are replicable lessons and she wants to make sure that those lessons are, people have an opportunity to benefit from them – both, I think in the gulf, in the Middle East, but also beyond. So, and she is a formidable advocate for them. So I think that we will see much more over, over the years to come of that philosophy and of uh, those insights, I think, particularly in areas where there is rapid development.

So, you know, clearly the Middle East but also probably in Asia where there are, there is still a great deal of investment, which isn't necessarily as strategic as it might be. Uh, I think that the Alserkal, that the larger lessons of Alserkal are definitely relevant and replicable and we will see them in evidence.

[00:43:16]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Yeah, she is certainly a thought leader, but it's actually her actions that are the most, I think inspirational for those of us working in different settings around the world, because she has definitely created some programmes and structures that we can imagine, you know, replicating and making more responsive to our own local communities.

But there's definitely lessons there in the programmes as she's put it together. I think, you know, for me to sort of summarise what some of those things I want to take away um, it's use a multidisciplinary approach to all challenges, but particularly those that might be more complex and need more perspectives to really unpack and understand.

I'm hearing Criena's words here of – ignore your local community at your own peril. But you know, this idea of following the artists and creatives and being not afraid to engage fully the ideas and movements that are underway in our communities, learn from them. I think broadly she's saying that we need, we need a community of practice.

We need a community of people who are willing to learn, grow and develop together. And it's important for cultural institutions and cultural leaders to really find ways to bring those people together, to catalyse and convene those ideas. And then in terms of the support system, I think what I'm hearing from you is, we must think about trust-based philanthropy in new ways, because it does allow for risk and innovation in a way that I think we really need, if we are going to face some of the crisis on the horizon.

[00:44:50]

**Adrian Ellis:** One of the, I think, very um, distinctive element of the intellectual menu that she's created is the role of informal scholarship. She has managed to create a sort of a group of um, interlinked practitioners who are synthesising and codifying their practice in a very intellectually courageous way outside of the context of a formal education and I think that is very interesting and quite healthy.



[00:45:21]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Absolutely. I think there's that culture of creative exchange, you know, that's why you join even peer membership groups like this, right, tuned into a podcast like The Three Bells, because you want to have the opportunity to get a slightly different perspective on what you're seeing about the world. And I think that salon culture is, seems to be really a vibrant source of ideas and innovations that she's pioneering there in Dubai. It's amazing.

**Adrian Ellis:** Stephanie, thank you and I look forward to talking to you again.

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Thank you so much, Adrian.

[00:45:53]

**Adrian Ellis:** The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting, and supported by The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network. The podcasts and supporting materials can be found at [www.thethreebells.net](http://www.thethreebells.net). And if you haven't already done so, please subscribe to our feed and rate us on your podcast listening platform of choice. My name's Adrian Ellis. Thank you so much for being with us today. And I look forward to joining you again soon.

[00:46:18]

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