



## S2:E4 Knocking on doors

### Lisa Havilah in conversation with Criena Gehrke

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[THEME MUSIC]

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**Criena Gehrke:** 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, tell your friends, subscribe and give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice.

Today, I'm speaking to you from the land of the Kombumerri people of the Yugambah language region. And I pay my respects to the elders past, present and emerging, and to all first nations people of the many lands on which we are listening from today.

I'm Criena Gehrke, and for those who regularly listen to The Three Bells, you know that my day job is CEO of HOTA, Home of the Arts on the Gold Coast in Australia. You'll also know that I have a growing reputation amongst my Three Bells colleagues for my unapologetic and frankly, brazen use of this platform to promote Gold Coast tourism and unapologetically brag about our 300 days of sunshine each year.

However, as I speak, here in south east Queensland, we have experienced some of the worst weather events and floods in our history. Lives have been lost, houses and businesses gone. Many of my colleagues in the arts have experienced flooded venues, gallery collections have been washed away, shows cancelled. This, on top of COVID is heart breaking. And I just wanted to acknowledge the resilience and fierce optimism of my community against all odds. And in fact, artists and cultural workers everywhere in this crazy world we're living in, may there be sunnier days ahead.

Now on a brighter note and speaking of resilience and fierce optimism, today, I am joined by Lisa Havilah, the CEO of the Powerhouse in Sydney. In this role, Lisa has taken on the challenge and ambition of not one, but two significant capital projects and trust me, I know a capital project and she is a brave woman. She's overseeing the refurbishment of the Powerhouse Ultimo and development of Powerhouse Parramatta, which is the largest investment in cultural infrastructure since the Sydney Opera House and the first major New South Wales cultural institution to be established in Western Sydney.



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

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[00:02:38]

**Criena Gehrke:** Before moving to Powerhouse, Lisa was the CEO of Carriageworks, an old railway yard in Sydney's inner suburbs, which under her leadership became one of Australia's most celebrated contemporary precincts, growing visitation from 110,000 in 2012 to a whopping 1.3 million in 2017. Her innovative programming and talent for developing commercial models that are integrated into an artistic vision is something that I personally admire.

And I am not going to lie, at times I have blatantly emulated. After my conversation with Lisa, I'll be joined by the erudite, Adrian Ellis, for our usual key takeaway segment. So stay tuned. But for now, after that very long introduction, welcome Lisa!

[00:03:28]

**Lisa Havilah:** Oh, Criena. Thank you for that very kind introduction. So pleased to be talking to you today and I'm very lucky to be on the land of the Gadigal people in Sydney. And I just really support your comments about how resilient our community is, and we're all thinking of all of you up there. Very sad to hear what's happening.

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**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah. It's, it is an extraordinary world in which we live. When you think about just the last couple of years with COVID, then the, you know, what's happening with Russia and Ukraine, the floods, you know, and I do reflect, Lisa, and I, and I'm genuine when, during the introduction, you are incredibly optimistic and resilient yourself.

You know, I know that about you, but the fact that we just keep going don't we, you know, cause there's stories to tell, and there are communities to bring together to celebrate the achievements, to be together, to understand the world in which we live in a meaningful way.

[00:04:27]

**Lisa Havilah:** Absolutely. And I think you know, as cultural institutions, as precincts, as places, we have a role to play in investing in our communities as well. So that's some, keeps me going anyway.

[00:04:41]

**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, and I suspect that much without pre-empting this conversation that we're having today, I suspect that there will be a focus on that sense of responsibility and community, because I want to go back in time to your early career and you studied in Wollongong. And as a young art student, you opened the Project Contemporary Artspace with your now husband. Is that correct?

[00:05:08]

**Lisa Havilah:** That's true. I was a painting major. I was an artist and growing up in, you know, a student in regional New South Wales, I grew up in the country and um, as a student, I was desperate to show my work and um, I went to the local Wollongong regional gallery, knocked on the door, asked for an opportunity and was knocked back and thought well, I had to work it out myself.



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**Lisa Havilah:** And so we actually, my partner and I, and a couple of other artists, we found this incredible kitchen warehouse in the middle of the CBD. And it was owned by a local bus company. And we asked them if we could take on the lease of it and they ended up redeveloping it for us, and then we didn't have any money.

So I went down and knocked on the door of the local mayor of the council and that we need some money. We've got this plan and he ended up, the council ended up investing in the project and then he said, oh, you go down the roads and talk to this guy who runs BHP, which is a steel manufacturing company.

And they gave us some money. And then he said, go down to this person and this bottle shop, he'll look after your opening. So I really developed, I developed my practice definitely within the context of a community. And I felt, I feel a regional community. I feel very lucky to have been able to knock on those doors and ask those questions and get that support and feel as a young person to have those opportunities.

And they always meant so much to me, that always been at the front of my own consciousness to pass that on.

[00:06:45]

**Criena Gehrke:** And, you know, without jumping forward too far, you have an absolute reputation and you back it up with still knocking on those doors to secure support partnerships for these places and these communities. I guess, what would you say to those young creatives and people starting off in their career?

Like, is that as easy as it sounds?

[00:07:13]

**Lisa Havilah:** Yeah.

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs)

**Lisa Havilah:** Yeah, it totally is. And I think people don't realise that this whole industry of people wanting, you know, wanting to help and support. And in most cases, that's their actual job to do that. And I think uh, as a, a young person starting out, you should have that expectation of others and you should have high expectations of others in terms of their investment into you.

And um, I think that's incredibly important because not that many people knock on my door, but I would always like return that email. I would always take the time. And I think I'm not special in that regard. I think you would do that. You know, it's a very generous, collaborative industry and community that we work in.

So, I don't think young people get told that enough. The actual knocking on the door is the easy thing. It's the actual getting to the door sometimes, or having the confidence to knock on the door.



[00:08:13]

**Criena Gehrke:** And I wonder whether that's it. There is no doubt that there are numerous gatekeepers sometimes, but it is about having the confidence to knock on the door. Cause I agree with you, you know, like I don't see myself as a gatekeeper. I see myself as an enabler and I also remember what it's like to be that person knocking on the door.

And it's like, some of my favourite moments are when early career artists or even some of the fantastic team that we've got here at HOTA. They're in my office and they're saying, hey, I've got this idea. What do you think? And I'm like, fantastic. Let's do that. Like say yes, because people are going to say yes more than not. And when they say, no, you just keep going. Can you remember what your pitch was in those early days to the mayor and BHP?

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**Lisa Havilah:** Hmm, I think, well it was that we were just going to create this great place. We wanted a place to show our work and we wanted the opportunity. And um, I think we didn't make it too complicated.

I think that is also part of the problem is sometimes people overthink these things and, um, sometimes, you know, collaboration and, you know, working together and that type of support it, it's pretty easy.

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**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah. I'm not trying to create, you know, the arts version of shark tank, if you ever seen that reality TV show. I guess, you know, part of what we love to do during these podcasts is to try and provide actions and strategies. So not just a talk fest, but to say, okay, so if you are a young artist and Lisa Havilah has built a career around knocking on doors and those doors open, that's not always easy, but you have built a career and had huge success around these interesting partnerships and opportunities that you brought to these places and these precincts.

And I guess I've had a similar experience. So, you know, the senior cultural leaders say to the young folk, knock on the door, have a very clear pitch for one of the better word, and don't overcomplicate it.

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**Lisa Havilah:** And also, I think, just like you were saying earlier, the story is everything. So being able to say I'm a young person with ambition, I think, sometimes that's as much as you need to say.

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**Criena Gehrke:** And that if we ask CEOs or uh, senior in these organisations, can I a hundred percent say we're not scary? Cause I even remember when I was young, sometimes I go, oh, I can't go and talk to – I'm going to say her name out loud, but Kate Brennan is on my board and she's an incredibly, highly regarded cultural leader who's done a lot of work in national and international cultural precinct development. And I still remember when I was much younger and she was then CEO of Federation Square and I was really scared to talk to her. And now she's like Criena, you know? (laughs) So we're not scary. Come talk to us.



[00:11:04]

**Lisa Havilah:** I think, I think we're not scary, we're scared.

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs) Yeah.

**Lisa Havilah:** They always say that you're not doing your job unless you're actually scared.

[00:11:13]

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs) That's another bit of a salient advice. I feel like we've started off really well Lisa. It's like, okay, don't be scared, come see us, we're the ones that are scared. But I agree. And you know, the other insight for what it's worth, those that are listening, is I get up every single day and I've actually said this publicly, when I do sessions with university students, or I did the address to the arts graduates for Griffith at the end of last year.

And I go, the more senior you become, a hundred percent the less you would know and the more terrified you become.

**Lisa Havilah:** Yeah, absolutely. And that's a healthy place today.

**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, that's right.

[00:11:53]

MUSIC TRANSITION

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**Criena Gehrke:** So there you are with your partner who, you know, you're young university students and you go knocking on the doors. You obviously learn how to, um, be convincing and compelling and to get people on board. What happened next?

[00:12:18]

**Lisa Havilah:** Well, we set up this space, this Contemporary Artspace, which we ran for about three years. So I was like working nights in a seafood restaurant to pay for it all. So he didn't pay for everything, but we definitely learned a lot cause we had to do everything. It was that sort of on the ground experience of working directly with artists. We'd make two new shows every three weeks.

It was actual hands-on cultural production which I absolutely fell in love with and decided, you know, that's really what I wanted to do. And um, the area where I thought that I could really make a contribution. So I was there for three years and um, it was actually the first regional contemporary art space in New South Wales to get funding for a position. So when that happened, we were able to pass it on. And at that point I went and worked for Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, which is this amazing regional contemporary arts centre in Western Sydney.

**Criena Gehrke:** And then...



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**Lisa Havilah:** And then I was there for about six years. Absolutely love the experience of working in that centre because it was so embedded within the community and really started that whole practice of working with new models to produce projects where the hierarchy of the institution was really up-ended and the community really led it.

So setting up models of curatoriums, leading projects where it was really acknowledged that the knowledge holder um, within the creation of a project really sat within the community. And we as an institution were in the service of that, which really built up these large scale projects that were very community engaged and had you know, huge responses from audiences and communities, because they was so culturally distinctive.

And I think that's where I really learnt that community-engaged practice, but learnt in a very hands-on way to create projects of scale that were collaborative and reflective of the community.

And then from there I went and I was the, I became the director of Campbelltown Arts Centre, another multi-disciplinary contemporary centre also based in Western Sydney. And when I started there, there wasn't a lot of community engagement and I really established, I suppose, a new model of working within the Campbelltown community in terms of a community engaged practice. So when I arrived in Campbelltown, it was going through a lot of change. So there was a lot of public housing that was changing.

So there's a lot of community change. So moving from a very strong First Nations and Pacific community, there was a lot of new east Asian communities were moving in. So there's a lot of cultural tension and change. And actually I remember the day that I started at Campbelltown was, there was a major community riot that happened.

And so, with the programmes that we developed at Campbelltown, we really focused on looking at what the issues were within the community, and then brought on board partners from across government and the community, like the department of health, the department of housing who funded and invested in these major projects that supported artists to make work in partnership with communities in a very embedded way. So that was a really, I suppose, expanded from the experience that I had at Casula, but also showed that in terms of collaboration, the way to support artistic practice or cultural practice, it's a whole of community responsibility. Not just coming from arts funding or coming from particularly one part of government that you can actually expand practice by thinking expansively about who your partners, and investors are.

**Criena Gehrke:** So then you find yourself at Carriageworks. Is that right?

**Lisa Havilah:** Yes!

[00:16:02]

**Criena Gehrke:** You know, it's interesting because it's such a magnificent architectural place, isn't it? You know, and the space itself is so wonderful. It was a place of high expectations and under your stewardship, really started to hit some incredible artistic and commercial goals.



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**Criena Gehrke:** And I sort of wonder, this, this wealth of experience to that point that really is passionate about community-engaged practice, about the place and keeping it real. How did it feel when you entered Carriageworks? Was it a different proposition once you kind of upscaled, and you've got this magnificent architecture and a whole lot of expectation?

[00:16:49]

**Lisa Havilah:** Yeah, well, it was funny because when I got that job, they said, you've got a year to fix it, or we're shutting it down.

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs) No pressure.

**Lisa Havilah:** (laughs) But I really believe that to engage a community and audience with an institution, you have to find its story. And then you have to tell its story over and over again. So the story of Carriageworks is actually a really incredible one. The building was built to build train carriages over 150 years ago.

And it was the first place that actually employed um, First Nations people on an equal basis. It was the place that new migrants coming into Sydney got their first job. And it was a place that was really about you know, equality and equity, you know, a very strong ethos to it.

And that story, the story of the history of the place really became the story of Carriageworks in terms of our curatorial approach and the approach to creating a cultural precinct and creating a cultural institution. So we really focused on cultural diversity, we really focused on really telling First Nation stories, but really doing it in a way that was consistent with the ethos of its history.

And then I suppose the other element of that, of telling the story was really um, because we absolutely had not one dollar, was thinking of a way to, you know, create that ethos and hold true to that. But to think of a way to expand its capacity. And so we really developed this model, which was um, it was a utilisation model where it was 70% cultural programming, 30% commercial programming, but the way that we looked at how we integrated that commercial or entrepreneur that commercial programme, was really about culturalising the commercial. So we looked at how we bought in major events like Australian Fashion Week, we had a partnership where we established an Australian art fair called Sydney Contemporary, and we really structured this more expanded, large scale programmes that really then we could use the income from that to invest back into artists and building and commissioning and, building an artistic programme.

And so part of a big component of that as well was food, which was um, quite a large scale farmers market, which we grew and from that grew like a whole series of food programmes that we integrated into our artistic programme. So it really became very broadly multidisciplinary across contemporary practice, creative industries, food, arts, culture and really was successful in entrepreneuring our own expansion, really.

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**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, it was incredibly successful and this isn't supposed to be controversial in any way a criticism of what happened after you left Carriageworks.



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**Criena Gehrke:** But I guess, it was a fantastic model. And it was, as I said, during the intro, one that I think many of us aspire to, but also have taken components of. But what happened when COVID hit was – and this is my reflection, was that model created some havoc in terms of sustainability because they'd been such a good job on not relying as heavily on government funding, for example, and that diversification of the revenue. And as you said yourself, this commercial driver, which was very much embedded in culture, no doubt about it in the broadest view of culture.

I guess my question is, and those assumptions may be incorrect, so correct me if I'm making wrong assumptions, I guess I'm just interested on in-reflection. Is there something you'd do differently? Is there some way that we can de-risk our own organisations from global pandemics?

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**Lisa Havilah:** There's nothing I would do differently. Because I have reflected on that. No, I was in, it wasn't me. It was like our whole team were like so proud of that, you know, that we entrepreneur that income and we use that income back to invest into, you know, commissioning and presenting contemporary work.

We invested it back into artists. And we were, like, we went hard. Like we sweated that asset as hard as we could. Of course that model didn't survive at all a global pandemic. But I think those things that you just can't anticipate and also um, yeah, I think there'll be new models that come out of that. I don't think people will go that hard again in that way.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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**Criena Gehrke:** So, fast forward to the Powerhouse. Can you give us a bit of an insight into what it is the community, in which it is located because it's a number of campuses um, and there's some real ambition around what happens next. Uh, so tell me more.

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**Lisa Havilah:** It is so interesting. I'll talk about the renewal of the Powerhouse more broadly, but about a while ago, five years ago, the government decided to establish our new flagship Powerhouse Parramatta and invest in a sort of, I won't go into – there's been ups and downs and roundabouts, but where we've landed is a renewal project, which is the establishment of our flagship in Paramatta, which is the, I think, fastest growing, most culturally diverse part of Australia actually.

And I think no better place to build a new museum or to take that sort of very philosophical investment decision that's been made by government to really place a major institution within the community and give those communities direct access to, you know, world-class arts and culture essentially.



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**Lisa Havilah:** We're really using that opportunity to rethink what a museum can and should be for its communities. And so that's Powerhouse Paramatta, and then we're also renewing Ultimo, which is our museum here. Overall, our institution is over 140 years old, but we've been here on this site now in central Sydney uh, for over 30 years.

And as part of that renewal, we're also taking the opportunity to rethink what our museum is here. And we're embedding the museum into a new creative industries precinct that will include both subsidised and commercial space for creative industries. But we're also thinking about how we embed industry into the programming and the operation of the museum.

So overall it's very significant investments, \$1.4 billion. It also includes the relocation of, and digitisation of our collection and the expansion of our storage facility in Castle Hill. And what our job is, what the Powerhouse job is at the moment is through this infrastructure investment is to actually redefine what a museum is. And I suppose we're trying to think about that, you know, whole range of different ways in terms of, from an infrastructure perspective, but also from how we operate, what we do, how we programme, who tells the story perspective as well.

We're also thinking about you know, really how we integrate or collaborate across industry, community, and education, and really look at creating networks, not hierarchies, in terms of really inverting. And I think that is something that is a particular type of practice, which I suppose I referred to a little bit earlier is really seeing the community as the knowledge holders and how we can actually not be a museum that is there to educate or tell stories to a community, but be a space to hold and tell stories for the community to hold and tell stories.

And so I don't know if we've broken the museum or if we're redefining a museum, but we're really trying and testing everything. And I think that comes from a place of responsibility that if we're going to do this work, if we're going to renew this institution which is 140 years old, then we really need to take very seriously the impact of that investment and the contribution that that investment will make to its community, to its state, to you know, how does it help the visitor economy? How does it help in the night time economy? How does it actually show a young person living in Liverpool what it's like to be, I don't know, a scientist? How does it, you know, how can museums be something else and you know, why should there be something else? I think there should be. I think there's like a whole range of ways that museums can be better.

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**Criena Gehrke:** How do you keep everyone signed up to that vision and that dream? Cause you know, you run large institutions now. So what does that look like? Cause it feels like you're always one team, one vision, shared goals.

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**Lisa Havilah:** Hmm, we talk about this thing recently at the Powerhouse. It's like identity as practice. So, we establish our brand or who we are through our daily practice of doing. And so I've always believed in showing, not telling. And my practice is very much about the detailed, every day consistency of delivering the outcomes that an institution deliver.



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**Lisa Havilah:** But for me, it is in those details. And I always try to communicate that through showing that I care about the details. Sometimes, that gets too much. And then it's in this scale and I think, I'm not doing this the right way right now. But – (laughs)

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs)

**Lisa Havilah:** But I still am not going to let go of it because I believe that you do your best work when you're caring about the actual details. And you know, sometimes that's not sustainable, but I like to work alongside people that also care deeply about those details.

And I think I'm talking a little about exhibition making, but it's not just exhibition making. It's like, if you are going to, you know, to partner with someone, you partner with someone for a long time. Yes. And you care about that relationship and you, when you care about a relationship and you care about a partnership or collaboration, you care about making sure that you're covering all the details that you're communicating.

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**Criena Gehrke:** Tell me about the power of the partnership because you live in what I would call an unlikely partnership. You know, you talked about previous experiences where you're partnering with a whole range of different government portfolios, for example, because that wide ranging view of what culture is, but also community engagement and that active engagement and participation of people participating in arts, not just being bystanders, because it's their stories, you know, and these places belong to the community, but you know, you then like to get a bit of space going on, and a bit of science, and... (laughs), you know, so how do you focus yourself?

Are you just this random kind of ideas generator that you go, oh, wow, that seems like really unlikely, we should do that. Like, tell me the strategy behind that.

[00:28:21]

**Lisa Havilah:** Well, I think it's like sometimes opportunities come to you and sometimes you just chase them down to their end point and in chasing down an opportunity, it can sometimes open out into these things that you would never expect it to open out to. And now I'm not going to be able to think of a good example of that, but I like to pursue every opportunity to its endpoint. And I also think the other part of that is I've always believed that arts and culture, or an artistic experience or a cultural experience is so much richer within its context and also so much more impactful in its context. So the types of projects that I've done that might sit within, you know, a suburb have required a level of resourcing, that's absolutely necessitated expansive thinking about who needs to get involved, whether it's the local police or the local housing supplier, the local mall, or just people that are interested and believe in something that you're trying to deliver.

And so I suppose I've just been, always been very inclusive and expansive in that, in terms of developing cultural programmes.

**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, and I think it's an interesting reflection. I'm not suggesting that you are random in those partnerships because –



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**Lisa Havilah:** (laughs) I am sometimes random!

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**Criena Gehrke:** You are sometimes random as we all are. Let's call it opportunistic. Um, but I do think it's being open to those partnerships and exploring that shared vision and ideas and thinking outside the box.

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**Lisa Havilah:** I think you're right. I think, it's the, it's the openness of like, just being open to every opportunity of like not saying no, I think what happens is when you get into roles, like this role, it's like, a watershed of constant incoming. And I think it would be easy to move into a space where you're saying no to things.

It's harder to actually make space, to say yes or to be open to opportunities. And I think that's what I don't want to do in my practice is to close down, close down to things. But I think sometimes institutions of scale, start to do that because of the structures and hierarchies around them.

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**Criena Gehrke:** And the pressures of key stakeholders and investors. And there's a range of things that can start to drive that. I'm not trying to do uh, management coaching, Lisa.

**Lisa Havilah:** (laughs)

**Criena Gehrke:** So, how much time do you spend a week just being and thinking? Cause I'm really struggling with that at the moment. It's like constantly putting out spot fires, whether it's – sorry, wrong terminology.

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**Lisa Havilah:** Oh, I've got a really good book that you should read.

**Criena Gehrke:** Okay. So what, what is that book? What would you recommend?

**Lisa Havilah:** It's called Stolen Focus. And it's about how to actually think creatively. You need to do nothing to be able to have space to think. And I think this is one of the biggest issues with cultural institutions around the world.

Well, with the world, everyone in the world, is that we constantly deluged with our phones, with our emails, with our meetings. Like every day, I have like a deck of like 10 hours of meetings. And I think I should have more discipline about making space to think more creatively or in a more open way to actually find more opportunity. But I think it is a very serious issue. I think that is a very serious issue for just creative practice generally, but people in leadership roles that are locked into meeting schedules and answering questions.



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**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, and I know that you're deeply committed as I am to artists and to creative practice. And you know, one of the things that I always try and enable is time, you know, for artists and for creative thinking and for failing too, you know, for that iterative process that things take. And yet I do think it's the salient warning to the world as you do, but also us as those that are the custodians of these places that we need to have a think about it because that's where success lies, you know, and we talk about innovation, but you can't be innovative if you just on the daily grind and not really thinking and spending that time because it's a huge investment.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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**Criena Gehrke:** Um, If I pop forward 15 years, tell me about Powerhouse Paramatta, what does success look like?

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**Lisa Havilah:** Well, I think um, successful Powerhouse Paramatta is an institution that the community feels total ownership of. And that it actually reflects its community, it's internationally engaged, it has over 10 million people a year visiting it. It is actually contributing to original research and thinking it is providing pathways for young people into amazing new STEM jobs that they can get in their local area.

It's a place that you can just go to, to be in as well. It's a place that it's not necessarily just an active programme place. Yeah, I think for me, success is the community owning and feeling really proud that their powerhouse is um, within their own community. And um, they use it. They don't use it like once or twice a year. They use it once or twice a week.

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**Criena Gehrke:** As you lead us and, you know, 15 years is a long time, but as you lead that project towards that major moment for that community and the broader community of Sydney, what wouldn't you let go off?

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**Lisa Havilah:** I think one thing that's really important is that as we sort of propelling, like pushing ourselves into the future and imagining this future with our future communities that we're making sure that we're staying true to the ethos of the institution as it was established, you know, 140 years ago that we, that we take forward that history with us, and that we sort of expand that legacy. So I think that is a really important thing is, in the process of redefining that there is almost like a folding of time where the institution stays coherent.

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**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah. I think my version of that is that I speak about the DNA of the place and that you have to be very respectful of it and constantly thinking about that as you build and develop. But the reality is that you are leading an organisation that needs to continue to deliver certain things, particularly through the campuses that are up and operating whilst delivering a significant infrastructure project.



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**Criena Gehrke:** How do you balance those two things? Because infrastructure is tricky, you know, and it takes up a lot of resources.

[00:35:38]

**Lisa Havilah:** I think we've been quite iterative because we began our renewal as an institution in step with the conceiving of the briefs for the infrastructure.

So I've tried to integrate them as one thing, almost like the infrastructure and institutional renewal as completely embedded with each other. So I try not to, well, I don't see them as separate things, even though they are in some way siloed because the concrete is a particular thing, but the concrete is a particular thing because our brief or our ambition for our space or the experience of walking through the Powerhouse at Paramatta is this level of consistency. So it almost recedes and what we're presenting comes forward. So we've tried to embed those things with each other. So they are completely, yeah, the same thing.

[00:36:36]

**Criena Gehrke:** I want to go back to the beginning, you know, so there you are in Wollongong, knocking on the mayor's door being led to BHP and then the local bottle shop, which I love that, so extreme. Is there anything that you miss about those days of that beginning or do you feel as though you've managed to be an iterative process yourself, like you've held onto some of those core values and those things that you, you do defend no matter what and that you value and it's led you to this point.

[00:37:13]

**Lisa Havilah:** Yeah, I think when I think back to my practice at that time starting out, I feel like, I took, I suppose, innate, you know, you have values that you have from your family and the things that you learn, you know, I grew up in a regional area that whole ethos of community I just naturally carried into that first project that I did and hopefully carry into everything that I do. Um, maybe I'm more disciplined. No, I was I was pretty into the details then as well. Cause I used to paint the walls. I don't paint the walls anymore –

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs)

**Lisa Havilah:** (laughs) But we do talk about wall colour a lot.

But um, I think what I didn't do then, which I try to do more now is create more space for others. I try to retain my um, I suppose, strident position, but I give space for other positions maybe, more than I used to. So I think I probably let go of some things, which is good.

[00:38:15]

**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, I feel like you retained all of those fantastic values probably left, uh let go of a few things, but your eye for detail, I'd need to talk to your team about that. But I suspect I've got the same, same issue going on here.



[00:38:33]

**Criena Gehrke:** Lisa, it has been an absolute delight. I'm so sorry that I missed you for a glass of champagne at the opening of the HOTA gallery because every time I have the opportunity to speak with you, I learn new things. I get new insights. It makes me better in the world and really think so. I just thoroughly enjoyed this conversation. Thank you so much for your time.

**Lisa Havilah:** I really enjoyed it too, Criena. Thanks so much.

**Criena Gehrke:** 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 and to the wonderful Lisa Havilah's work. But first, stick around for a conversation between myself and Adrian Ellis as we explore the key takeaways and actionable ideas from this conversation.

[00:39:19]

MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:39:28]

**Criena Gehrke:** Hi Adrian!

**Adrian Ellis:** Hi, how are you.

**Criena Gehrke:** I'm actually not too bad, thank you. The storm waters have gone down and the skies are blue again here on the Gold Coast. So I'm very grateful.

[00:39:43]

**Adrian Ellis:** Well, I thought that was a fascinating interview. I thought Lisa was sort of had a deeply impressive underlying philosophy of leadership in life. So, I really enjoyed it.

[00:39:55]

**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, what I loved about the conversation apart from the fact that it felt, you know, so wonderful, particularly the week that we were having to spend time with such a trusted and incredibly intelligent colleague, was precisely that philosophy that she takes obviously into every role. And it felt like, if not a new way of thinking about place, a new way of articulating it, like I loved the stuff that she talked about in Carriageworks – of getting to know the building and the community and the history and taking that story and absolutely embedding it.

Not just in the past, but in the present and the future of Carriageworks and then really leaning into that, not just in the building, but in the way that she was programming and thinking about the place and the engagement with community.

[00:40:48]

**Adrian Ellis:** Yeah. And her ambitions for the new project in Paramatta and her ambitions for the current side of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences. I thought a vision of what a museum needs to be, or a cultural institution needs to be in the future – more participative, more um, plural and holding on to certain values around scholarship and others.



[00:41:11]

**Adrian Ellis:** And in trying to sort of navigate a new constitutional settlement almost, for a cultural institution. I thought that was great. But also just, you know, besides being open to inquiries from people who are very early on in their careers and considering a career in the cultural sector, it's incredibly important that leaders are open to that and make the time for it because we need the best people we can recruit, and we need to recruit people from the widest background. And so anything that leaders can do to make that time and make themselves accessible. And of course the temptation is to say, it's to look at the, you know, the unsolicited email and bounce it off to somebody.

And she clearly doesn't. She clearly makes time. I thought that was great. I thought her, I thought her observation that you're not doing your job well as a leader, unless you're scared. I'm not sure if that's always true, but I think it's mostly true and uh –

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs) That was like confessional. Wasn't it? Lisa, are you scared? Yeah. Criena, are you scared? Yeah.

**Adrian Ellis:** Yeah.

And I think being able to say that is, is also incredibly important. And having uh, having the courage to say that, which is, yeah, of course I'm scared, you know, bravery is not about not being scared. It's about being scared and still being brave. If you know what I mean?

[00:42:21]

**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah. I walked away from the conversation, hoping that people listening, it's okay, to be honest with your colleagues, and it's okay for you to sometimes admit that there's these thoughts or these feelings or that you're dealing with these issues of leadership. And I, you know, what I loved about talking to Lisa was that it felt really refreshing to be speaking to a colleague and we were able to be totally honest to each other in front of a crowd, you know, and I think that we need more of those honest, transparent conversations now, and we need them more than ever.

[00:42:57]

**Adrian Ellis:** She's also very interesting about brand and identity and the difference between showing and telling. I think she captured as saying identity is practice. The way in which you assert or communicate the identity of something maybe through graphics or whatever else, but it's basically through what you do and how you do it.

And in a period when cultural institutions are deeply preoccupied with brand and deeply preoccupied with identity, that's a lesson worth remembering, which is, the most powerful way in which you can communicate your message is to be that message.

[00:43:33]

**Criena Gehrke:** Which links back to her strong sense of philosophy and values. And what I also really appreciated was that I think it's sometimes easy to lose sight of, or yet again, be scared when you're running really big institutions and you're trying to secure their future and imagine their future, to move away from that deep purpose that she has, which is around community-engaged practice.



[00:44:03]

**Criena Gehrke:** And that the institution that she's responsible for is a place of storytelling, but they're not the keepers of the stories. They're the enablers of the stories and the stories belong to everyone and to the community. And she's got a really clear sense of that. And then when she starts to talk about brand and walking the walk, it's still comes back to that value statement and that philosophy that she has.

You know, it feels really simple when she says it. And I also loved that when I even kind of prodded a little bit saying, is it as simple as what you make it sound, for example, making the ask or holding tight to that vision and really motivating your whole team to hold tight to that vision. She's a bit like, yeah, it actually is that simple. And I love that.

**Adrian Ellis:** Yeah. Profound.

**Criena Gehrke:** Believe it. And you can make it so.

[00:44:59]

**Adrian Ellis:** She had some other great, you know, entirely sort of congruent asides. Uh, one was uh, on uh, trying to make sure that you've got time to reflect and be uh, be mindful when you're bombarded by Zoom and by uh, firefighting and by the dailiness of life that you need to stand back. I haven't read the book *Stolen Focus*, but I ordered it. It sounds an extremely useful antidote to the pressures that every leader feels to just never stand back and take a longer view.

**Criena Gehrke:** Isn't that funny because I immediately ordered it as well. So may Three Bells also have led to a spike in that particular book's sales.

**Adrian Ellis:** (laughs) Yeah. Uh, and I thought her observations about Carriageworks during COVID was absolutely spot on. The lessons not to take away from COVID is earned income is dangerous cause it makes you vulnerable. Carriageworks, she did an amazing job of Carriageworks at pluralising the earned income base, you know, Sydney Contemporary, the fashion shows, farmer's market, et cetera.

Of course, that dried up during COVID and led to a period of financial extreme difficulty. But to take away from that, that there was something wrong with the strategy would be, I think a fundamental mistake would be to overlearn the lessons of COVID. But I think the identity and reputation she built up also uh, led to the help that it got during that period. Is that right?

[00:46:21]

**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, absolutely. So there ended up being additional support provided to Carriageworks and a high degree of donations and philanthropic support for that much loved institution. And that is around it being of its place and it's strong brand, so full credit to, to her and to the team that followed in her footsteps.

**Adrian Ellis:** Deeply impressive.



[00:46:48]

**Criena Gehrke:** So, it was such a wonderful conversation, Adrian.

And I think we both reflected in similar ways, you know, strong, great leadership that's really honest and it's okay to be afraid sometimes, but also be fearless in that space. Have a strong sense of your place and your community, know that you're there to serve your community and go into it with a philosophical view that you hold dear.

And that if you're going to make these places successful, then yeah. Brand is so important. But in order to establish that strong brand, then you've got to walk the walk. It is about the everyday practice, it is about the detail, but it also loops back to that philosophy and the values that you hold dear as a leader and as a place.

[00:47:40]

**Adrian Ellis:** Beautifully summarised. And she has taken on a project that was when she arrived, immensely controversial. I think aspects of it are still controversial, but she, if there's anybody who can secure the legitimacy of that project uh, in Paramatta and the long-term success of the multi-site institution, for which she's responsible, I think it's Lisa.

**Criena Gehrke:** I'm in raging agreement. Thanks for that chat.

**Adrian Ellis:** Take care. See ya.

**Criena Gehrke:** You too.

The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting and The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network, of which I believe Powerhouse with Lisa have just become members. We welcome them with open arms. The podcast 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 and tell your friends. My name's Criena Gehrke, thank you so much for being with us today. And I look forward to joining you again very soon.

[00:48:45]

[THEME MUSIC]

