



S2:E5 What's in a name?

Linda C. Harrison 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. 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 today our guest on this podcast is Linda Harrison, director and CEO of The Newark Museum of Art. And I'm thrilled, Linda, that you've agreed to both join the Global Cultural Districts Network or for the Museum of Art to join. And also, the privilege of exploring the very interesting agenda that you are developing for the institution.

So Linda, thank you for coming in, welcome.

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Linda Harrison: Well, thank you, Adrian, for having me. I'm very excited to not only be a part of this network but I'm honoured that you wanted to talk with me on a couple of issues today. So, this is wonderful.

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Adrian Ellis: So, let me start with you, because if you listen to any other of our podcasts, we often explore the route by which people have reached the jobs that they're in. Because I think it's fascinating, particularly for people in your position who are running cultural institutions, but also have a civic agenda for those institutions as well as a cultural one, because they are extremely challenging organisations to run at all, and they are even more challenging to run well. The skills that are required have an enormous range from the financial to the political, to the cultural, to the urban. And you have quite an unusual background and one which may in the event, be uniquely suited to the agenda for the institution.

Can you tell me a little bit about your route to the top?



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Linda Harrison: (laughs) Well, I can tell you, Adrian, I could not and did not imagine myself here as the CEO of a cultural institution. It just wasn't uh, in my world or thinking. I actually came from the corporate, the for-profit corporate world running uh, divisions, um with Eastman Kodak company – that of course now is a case study on perhaps hanging on to a particular area of business too long and then you look around and you've lost that business. Of course, in that case, it was, it was film.

But in, in my business background, I always worked on or volunteered for, or was recruited for being on different boards. So my connection to boards were uh, to the arts was really being on a particular board, in my case uh, film, because I love films. So I was a very active board member with the San Francisco International Film Festival, uh, the LGBTQ+ Film Festival which was pretty large film festival.

But fast-forward and, um, although I had observed cultural organisations as a visitor, as a member, it was not in my realm to actually run one until in San Francisco, when one of the museums there – the Museum of the African Diaspora uh, they were a young museum, maybe eight years old, looking for a new director because they had gone through six directors in eight years. It was at that point that I was asked to consider talking with their board.

And I thought that maybe this would be a good time for me to just share with the board what the real deal is in terms of their organisation, who they were not reaching, how they were running the board. And it ultimately led to them selecting me, a totally out of the box candidate, because I had left with them a 100 day plan that if you do not hire me, that's fine because historically organisations – cultural organisations, hired curators.

And I have nothing against curators, but in the case of this particular organisation and unfortunately quite a few, the rest of the business skillsets are not there and the organisation quickly finds itself in trouble. And so this became a set of skillsets that my bringing my business background to a cultural organisation allowed me to turn around that organisation.

And then ultimately I'm at now um, another museum in Newark. I moved from San Francisco to Newark, New Jersey, to really transform and do the same thing with the Newark Museum of Art. And I believe this type of pathway is unusual, because I do not have a degree in art history or curatorial or the traditional art background.

And so it kind of, um, begs the question of having a pretty brave board of trustees that decides on the talent that is coming from outside of the cultural space. And I think we are quickly finding out – or the industry is, that for this time it is probably an advantage being an outsider.

It has for me, because I'm looking at the landscape of the institution differently and how it sits um, in the community. And I find myself now being a successful leader in this cultural space, bringing with me all of that for-profit best practices, if you will. And so I wind up the CEO and director of the Newark Museum of Art.



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Adrian Ellis: And the questions usually asked, on the occasions when its cultural institutions are led by somebody who hasn't had that sort of core professional, I don't know, musicology, curatorship, whatever, the, the substantive core of the institution is – is whether they feel vulnerable around programmatic questions. And the answer is usually well, not necessarily if I have the right relationship with the curatorial team. Can you tell us a little bit about how that works.

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Linda Harrison: That, that's a very good question because I have entered into the cultural world looking at exhibitions, public programming for adults, family programming, the intersection of learning, um, learning and engagement and the exhibitions as products. Now, I think that's because I, I just come from a background that looked at, these are the products now.

The products happen to be art and culture. And you ultimately learn as a leader. Um, I look at who are the players in this field? Who should I put together to run uh, the organisation or run the curatorial where the learning and engagement, uh, looking at the landscape, there may be people who did not have an opportunity.

And now I'm pretty good at uh, sussing out the talent to surround me, particularly in this area of curatorial. And I took that approach with both museums that I have run and ultimately looking at curators who are forward thinking, and not so much embedded in, I studied John Cotton Dana, this is what I'm supposed to do. This is how I'm to present it. And it's the audience fault if they didn't get it.

I now look at more than just the skillset of that curatorial director, understanding whether it was the arts of Asia or Africa or the Americas. When I look at how they may approach really telling these contemporary stories that traditionally have missed a large segment of the audience.

So it's that mindset that I'm also looking at um, so that they can reimagine, what uh, um, our curatorial offerings uh, look like, particularly when you have large collections like, like we do.

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Adrian Ellis: So this sounds like a marriage made in heaven because the founding director, as I remember John Cotton Dana, you mentioned, had for the time an extraordinarily progressive philosophy, which was quite controversial. Both with respect to what objects to collect, what stories to tell about them, and for whom. And was in a lot of the things that you've just described of what you're looking for in a curator, he also was looking for, is that right?

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Linda Harrison: Well, that, that is what's so wild. The museum, 112 years old and we, we look around, and I'm the director of the 21st century. And only the eighth director. So it's a very, uh, solid institution. And that really I, I shared with the trustees and with the staff what really my vision for us to be the destination museum and, and to be an anti-racist organisation. Here, John Cotton Dana, we're going back to his fundamental principles of being a museum of the people.



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Linda Harrison: He insisted on not collecting European art. He focused on African art, globe contemporary and traditionally focused on the arts of Asia - from Japan to Southeast Asia. He focused on the Americas and wanted to have the presentations, the viewing, how it was presented in this very straightforward way to deal with, so that the people of Newark actually had a museum that they could relate to.

So, uh, we fast forward and I'm really going back to having a museum of the community, not just sitting in the community. And this is something that is, one could say we talk about it, but it, it takes some work and education of our stakeholders that we must really be of the community.

And in looking at Newark, the community now that we sit in, um, black and brown community and here, this is the largest fine arts museum in the state of New Jersey and traditionally look more white than the BIPOC communities and, and what I mean by that is that this, the stories over time did not really include the people of colour.

And so, we look at these fantastic collections that we have. And in going back to John Cotton Dana's view of if we're going to be a museum of the people, and now we are a museum when I say of the community, not just in the community, then we have to look at the various communities and look at their stories.

And how do we take the collections that we have, and now tell these new stories.

Adrian Ellis: And just so listeners know, Newark, I think is, the second most diverse city in New Jersey.

Linda Harrison: Yes, yes. It's a really diverse city that has also these other entities when you talk about the intersection of the urbanism and cultural. It also has like four universities here. It is a quite robust area of artists, whether they're performing artists or visual artists, poets.

And so you look at that and now then, museum, our museum and um, museums and other cities, we have to now be more than just the place that has one point of view. And that sometimes often is the point of view of a curator on what you will see in that gallery. We have to fast forward and now talk to our communities, actually have listening sessions with our communities and find out what is it that the community is looking for.

In fact, we have created advisory councils that offer their input on curatorial or sometimes it can be the programming or even on just access. We have now community advisory community council on just access. And what does that mean? When we talk about how do you get around if you are in a wheelchair or if you are hearing or sight impaired. So this is something that museums did not think was part of their responsibility. And now, we really have to hear our community so that they uh, feel that this is their museum and they ultimately then will support their museum.

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MUSIC TRANSITION



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Adrian Ellis: When you came to the museum, you gave yourself a sort of a hundred days to put together a strategy. And that strategy was quite radical in elements, not least the changing of the name or the addition of, of art to the name.

Can you just tell us a bit about the informing principles of the strategy? Clearly, it is engagement and a deeper and less transactional relationship with the community in Newark. Tell us about the other elements that you're drawing on from both the original John Cotton Dana philosophy and of course your experience in the Museum of African Diaspora.

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Linda Harrison: Well, I'm glad you mentioned that word transactional, because that's what uh, I'm really underlying trying to move from being a transactional organisation to one of really deep engagement and relating, uh, being a relevant organisation. And so when I arrived at the Newark museum, that's been its name for over a hundred years.

And so this was quite a departure for the stakeholders, whether they were trustees or donors, um to embrace a name change. It was a little controversial. Like how, how can we do that? And I said, well, we are a museum with major art collections. We're considered by scholars across the world that say we have the best African uh, global African art collection in the world. And Sotheby's says that, not us. Or we have the eighth-best jewellery collection in the world, Victoria and Albert being number one. We don't say that, New York Times says that. And so, I think that there was a disconnect on the Newark museum and our general audience.

And we did some data, gathered some data around this and surveys. We were confused. Well, what is the Newark museum, even though they've been here over a hundred years. And so, because we have these great collections and we have the reputation of these good collections, and what we need to let people know that we are a fine arts museum.

That's number one, that would be very helpful. Um, as audiences are figuring out, you know, where do they go and not just fine art. We're on a four and a half acre campus in the middle of downtown Newark and it's inclusive of historic homes that are on the national register. So that name change, adding those two words was really critical just in terms of our exposure.

We want to be the destination museum, well, we need to tell people who we are. Though it was a challenging journey, we got there and now of course the results are really great. We're on the other side of it. And the Newark Museum of Art sets a tone, people have been responding to it positively and responding to it positively also means um, supporting us and investing in us.

And once we set that tone – this was one of the underlying strategies, is to really leverage our brand and leverage our assets. And then another pillar - internal culture change, internal culture shift. And so, you know, we're continuously looking at those because we want to be a better organisation internally.



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Linda Harrison: Which meant, you know, we're sitting in a city that's quite diverse. We need to be diverse within our staff. And we need to have our staff be aware of what that diversity and the advantages of having a diverse staff. And that other pillar of leveraging our assets and that's, that's ultimately what led to, really a business decision on if we want financial stability now and through the long-term, maybe there's a better use of our parking lot than just a parking lot and that ultimately led to a redevelopment strategy that we have put together and has now since been approved.

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Adrian Ellis: I want to talk more about that. I'm fascinated by that. But I'm also fascinated by culture change and the challenges of culture change. There is a great quote, which I overused from the management theorist, Peter Drucker, which is that organisational culture eats organisational strategy for breakfast by which, it's obvious what he means, which is you can dream up the most ambitious strategy, but when you're dealing with the ingrained DNA of an organisation, it's extremely difficult to shift that. But if you cut, if you don't shift that, then all your strategies will just sit on the shelf. You are clearly, highly sensitised.

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Linda Harrison: I, I love them. I love Peter Drucker. Uh, see, I'm old enough to know, uh be a fan of Peter Drucker. And this is something that I share with my trustees: that we can have these foundation pillars, but if we don't actually put the internal culture as a pillar, which means then we have to invest in it, we have to find money for it, and we have to find time for it. Because it's one of those things that is pushed off to the side, Oh, somehow that'll happen.

No, it has to be quite intentional, particularly when you have culture embedded in say practices that are outdated. And so, I spent a lot of time and actually said, we must get this culture shift happening first.

And because that um, the internal culture shift is going to lead to then the innovation and all of the great bright ideas for our external work. So coming back to that, it meant we really had to do a SWOT analysis and in our case, of every job in the organisation and also in the training involved, not just the one-time training and creating um, a DEAL task force.

But we, we really had to embed this in our every day because um, you created a DEAL task force and people think the general staff, well, it's their job to do all that stuff, it doesn't involve us. But it does. And that's where we started embedding talking about well, before the unfortunate murder of George Floyd back in 2019, 2018-19, when I came on board, we had to start talking about what it means for the organisation and that we have other voices that are not being heard. BIPOC voices on the staff, and what are we going to do about that?

And the minute we started talking about equality, racial, gender equity, creating a racial gender equity framework, there were staff members who said, oh, Linda has come here to fire all the white people and hire black people. I mean, literally, these were the kinds of discussions happening at the water cooler.



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Linda Harrison: So we had to really break all of that down and say, no, you've just traditionally, um, if you look around, the only people that you were hiring, were perhaps from the white community. Now, so we're not cancelling that out, but we're being very aggressive about bringing more voices to the table. More voices to the table allows us to have different ideas. And so we went through practices of design thinking and ideation for everyone in the organisation. Which was almost unheard of uh, to do this, to show that look, you can have someone from our maintenance team or our security team may have the real breakthrough idea on how we can engage more with our audiences.

Why? Because they're seeing them every day. So, I think it just makes for a really robust culture if we can get first, the staff talking to each other and talking to their colleagues who do not look like them. And these were discussions that uh, I like to call them the listening sessions that now we have every month and embed in our all-staff meetings.

It's surprising for a colleague to see that, Oh, my black counterpart in this department who happens to be the only person in this department, I didn't know that they felt that they really weren't included. So we, we leaned into inclusivity, um, and what that looks like, and then, and having these kinds of conversations each year and we fast forward, and we really are able to have different discussions uh, more deeper discussions around just what the culture feels like and looks like. And using these words, we can say oh, we're going to have a black artist uh, program XYZ, whatever the conversation might be. But the minute we say words like white or white privilege or, it starts getting difficult and it starts getting challenging and people get uncomfortable.

And so that's what we're trying to do. If we can handle these kinds of difficult conversations amongst each other in the culture, and then um, see how we can actually be even more creative with these different voices from these different points of view. Now we start having an organisation that is um, really robust and can maintain and sustain, really responding and being part of the community as opposed to, Oh the community wants us to do this.

And we don't know, we'll just check the box off in that uh, Portuguese programme. That that's really not systematically breaking down racism and being best in class in our programmatic offerings. So it's a long journey. It's hard work. It's not over, but it ultimately uh, makes us be a much more relevant museum to our various audiences. Because if we don't, they're not going to come to the museum.

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Adrian Ellis: That's deeply impressive. One question that I'm interested in because it extends beyond the individual institution into the whole sort of assumptions about career paths, et cetera – which is how difficult do you find it to recruit more diverse staff into more senior positions and into areas of curatorial expertise, conservation, et cetera. In other words, what about the supply line?

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Linda Harrison: Well, various museums across the country or universities, um, and I'll switch over to the universities who have these programmes and who say, well, we're putting students through museum studies.



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Linda Harrison: And that's been happening for the last, say 20 years. But then we look around and why don't we see more persons of colour in the curatorial and exhibitions departments?

Well, I think I said, well we can't find them. Well, where did they go? This is where that, I think that difference between, Oh, diversity will check off the box. Well, we have these students that are going through these university programmes, but then you're not really hiring them.

And this is where we're going. That's a part of the disconnect. And so we've had to go deeper and look at not having less of talent, but opening our window to what should that curatorial talent look like? Do they always have to come from this university, work at this particular museum, and then you wind up just rotating the same small group as opposed to expanding and having accepting some different types of experience on curatorial. Maybe they have worked at the galleries. Maybe they have a different degree, but understand this one area in the arts and they can grow.

And so I think that's where we have to really look at giving more opportunities to the talent that happened to be BIPOC because we have given those opportunities to the non-BIPOC talent by taking them under our wing, teaching them all of these different things, and they may not have had all of the credentials as well, but they were allowed to learn along the way.

And I think we don't do that enough, not only in curatorial, but in marketing, in finance, as well these other areas. So we do have to open up the window of opportunity to let new talent in, so that we're not just on this uh, what I call the 20th century version of, if you do not have the specific degree combination, you will not get even the most junior job in the curatorial or exhibitions department.

And I would like to think that as an organisation, we are not only responsible to do this work internally, but to impact it externally. So someone like a Sotheby's or Christie's – both auction houses we work with, we are now challenging them. I personally have challenged the group that works with us, how can you work with us on some of our auction deaccessioning work and your team look like it's 1965, meaning, code word for all white, because that is also an area that could be a feeder.

Someone could work too with the Sotheby's and Christie's, Phillips, and ultimately that talent could uh, switch over and join the curatorial team. But if you're not doing that, we have to then challenge even our vendors, if you will, if we're going to have uh, this breadth of talent to call on.

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Adrian Ellis: I think what you're saying is profound, extremely important. And there has to be a willingness to use one's convening power to use your power over the supply line, to engage across every opportunity to reinforce the agenda.



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Linda Harrison: Right. I can tell you the moment I did this in a meeting in front of my team members, then we had another meeting because we have to train our staff members to feel fearless in moving this agenda forward, because then that's how we do it. But now, they need the training because it's like, well we can't, we can't tell a Sotheby's to, uh, change their teams.

Yes, we can, and still have a good business relationship. So it's a continuous learning up and down the ladder, if you will, with our staff on – how you do this on a day to day, not just coming within our organisation to do it. That's one of the areas, the metrics that we look at internally, but now we also look at how do we impact the industry. That should be a metrics as well.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Adrian Ellis: So you have many arrows to your, in your quiver. Another one is, uh, experience of property. And you have a real estate strategy, which is extremely ambitious. You referenced the car park earlier. The car park will be metamorphosed into what, 90 um, apartments plus, is that right?

Linda Harrison: Yeah, I think its uh, 250 apartments.

Adrian Ellis: 250? Ok. Alright. 250 apartments and a couple of six story buildings and then retail and what have you on, on the ground floor. And I've written about and talked about the idea that what has conventionally regarded as unrelated business income, an earned income beyond the traditional areas of, you know, merchant coffee shop and so forth, are probably going to become increasingly important for the cultural sector.

And one needs to have the skills, the structures, the access to capital to be able to sort of spread one's wings and undertake strategies that allow you to gain from the, catch some of the externalities that as a cultural institution you generate for the surrounding area. That is what you are doing.

Tell us how you manage to structure it, find partners for it, persuade the board to do it, and what you believe the long-term impact will be for the institution.

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Linda Harrison: One of the reasons why I took this assignment, of course uh, to run the prestigious Newark Museum of Art, but also that the city of Newark itself, it's mayor, Mayor Ras Baraka, on record as a progressive mayor, just committed to transforming the city of Newark.

And I said, well, what would that look like? Transforming the museum and knowing that the museum as a cultural space is a key anchor institution in lockstep uh, with the city. And so, I was very excited about what that might look like. And then I see that um, there's this opportunity, we've got this little parking lot, it's not as profitable as, as it could be. And what really could we do?



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Linda Harrison: When I stepped back and look at, um, really uh, fundamentally looking for financial stability, long term. What could that look like? And as you mentioned uh, other than some of the traditional things and uh, the concept of development, um, was not one that the trustees had thought about or was even in their world uh, or was even comfortable with, because um, the comfort level in the museum world is: we just expand our museum.

We make a prettier gallery uh, it all is around the art. And this was another piece of the transformation of the museum. Yes. I changed the name. We also revamped the mission. We have been totally focused. And this is no fault of the museum/museums.

This is what they do. We are here for the art objects. Well, I said, you know what? We need to be here for the people. The art is important, but we can't make it more important than the people. That's what's been happening, and that's why we've been losing across the museum cultural space, our audiences, because it's like, you know what? Okay. You can keep your art. We don't care. And then nobody is looking at this stuff.

So, the fast-forward to me presenting to the trustees, the opportunity to really support this transformation of the city of Newark in particular downtown, housing is a key element in looking at transformation of the city, along with the culture.

And so we had an opportunity, I presented to them. I'm going to look at whom are the developers and the investors that may be interested in doing this as our partner. But I want them to come up with the majority of the funding. And not just any developer, uh, the development team, our investment team had to be one that had to me, demonstrated a social consciousness.

The ability to really look at, Yes, you are a developer and your job is to build a housing, but how are you really impacting the community? What are you doing for the community that you just have to say, I'm going to step in and really be of value to that community.

We ultimately wound up with a partner who agreed to do both the, my trustees and even the developers. So, so you were asking us to do the majority of this funding? Yes. And even go that extra mile and do things for the community, ongoing. So we talked and ultimately I created a team that was willing to do this financially um, could do this, and also had a solid reputation of being engaged in the community from putting libraries in buildings that they really didn't have to do, restoring low to moderate income housing uh, where they didn't have to do this. And so this was the mindset that I wanted and we went in and were able to also then talk with the city, on this is what we want to do. And the city will actually receive income – well, taxes, from this project as well. And so this is a combination of not only um, our partners who are going to actually help us build this thing, but also then the city, how we then engage the community.

And this is how we can help this corridor not only become a more engaged cultural space that was relevant, but also a lived space. And for some people even working, that this vibrancy of walking downtown and coming out of your apartment and being able to be part of the museum scene or walk a block or so, and you're at the performing arts centre.



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Linda Harrison: So just creating uh, that type of vibrancy for the city. I thought this is the new world for museums, not to just be, um, make a shiny object for a very limited amount of people and we walk around, feel good about it and have our wine and cheese and our openings, but we haven't done anything for the community around us.

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Adrian Ellis: So, what are the targets for um, a protected housing within the overall development?

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Linda Harrison: Well, uh, this is a um, 80% market rate and 20% below market rate. And, this was very important to me that we have that uh, that mix in terms of the housing, in that availability and access to at least 20%. And the average maybe is more like 5%, sometimes it's 10.

But we said, this is what we're going to do, because this is equally important in revitalising the neighbourhood that we are in.

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Adrian Ellis: Is there any provision for uh, housing for artists or live-work spaces?

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Linda Harrison: What we did in the 20%, we also in terms of a design area – and this for affordability, there are several units, though not all of them – any, any unit could be like this, but we have developed a town, that will be town homes that are live-work spaces, for, that, artists will have that first shot at them. That they can do their art as well as um, this is their studio. And they can live there. And so we really wanted uh, this, this mix of the economic and the cultural mix and the audience mix from a professor could be living next to an artist who could be living next to someone who works for Audible.

Adrian Ellis: Hey, of course, Audible is based in New York. Is that right?

Linda Harrison: Yes, in fact, and this was one of the commitments. I know that overall this uh, is a calculated risk that here a museum doing a real estate development, but we're in an area that downtown zoned for redevelopment and Audible, one of the companies that moved their headquarters, literally they are a block from us, on the same side of the street.

And so this also was part of the thinking for an Audible to move their headquarters here. They completely renovated an old church. That they call the cathedral. Companies like Prudential, four blocks away, their corporate headquarters are here. Panasonic actually moved their headquarters here to Newark.

So there is this renaissance of um, not only the corporations but also then the university. Rutgers has a major presence here. And then us as a cultural entity. Putting all of this together and getting the feedback and the buy-in from these different uh, organisations, I think this is really what has made this a successful opportunity that the trustees could get aligned behind because this was different for them.



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Linda Harrison: And I have to applaud them for first letting me present it. And then it being successful in that now the mayor talks about this programme and there are a number of other projects, but not a project driven by a museum that is looking at how the culture connects with housing we know is important. And with housing, we know that um, all of these basic services are important, but the cultural can be, be part of this uh, wellness and revitalisation of a neighbourhood as well, an integral part of it.

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Adrian Ellis: Linda, that's a fascinating story. And in a period when I think many leaders are profoundly challenged about mapping out a way forward that is well-grounded financially and well-grounded morally, I think that what you're doing is utterly remarkable and will be fascinating to our listeners.

Thank you very, very much. Thank you for your time. Thank you for your openness. And I very much look forward to uh, seeing you in Lugano.

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Linda Harrison: Well Adrian, this, this has been delightful. I could talk with you for another hour or so. (laughs) Because then I get excited all over again about what we're doing and the role that museums must play, must be engaged and not just for internal facing. And so I appreciate this conversation.

Adrian Ellis: Thank you so much.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

Adrian Ellis: Listeners, if you want more, check out 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.

[00:41:47]

Adrian Ellis: Hi, Stephanie. How are you?

[00:41:49]

Stephanie Fortunato: Hey Adrian, I'm doing well. Thanks. Oh my God, what a great interview that you had with Linda as both a former museum professional and a city person, I was just fascinated by your conversation.

[00:42:02]

Adrian Ellis: Well, Linda is very much, I think one of these people who can more or less interview herself. She has such an orderly mind and a sense of you know, the structure of what she's involved with that she, you only have to say a word or two and out comes seamless, continuous prose. It was a pleasure to interview her. And I haven't met her before. I've read about her but I haven't met her. So I'm very much looking forward to meeting her in person.



[00:42:25]

Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah, me too. Yeah, no it's interesting what you say about her orderly mind. You know, I think one of the top takeaways that I had from the conversation was that by creating strategy with clearly articulated goals, you really are able to make progress in a way that sometimes chasing, you know, an opportunity or, you know, whatever the idea that passes through your head is just doesn't allow in the same way.

And in so many ways, Linda's plan was really like a management textbook. But you know, well, I know that some of the outcomes are really yet to be determined because being of the community – I love that phrase that she used, you know, being of the community and that's a process as dynamic as the city itself, but she was really grounding that vision, that plan, in the museum's history and the strength of the collection.

So she kind of developed that three pronged strategy that she spoke about of leveraging the brand, leveraging the assets, and then creating a cultural change. So I appreciated the way she talked about leveraging the brands, that early action item to make it clear what the Newark Museum is.

It's a museum of art. And by adding that, you know, she was really able to articulate what the institution, what its purpose was in a way that I think probably tested the assumptions of some of the long-term champions of the institution who had ideas I assume, I'm making assumptions here, which is always a risk. It's not good being of the community mindset there, but you know, the long-time champions must've held ideas about the institution and its prestige or place in the community that even raising the issue that Newark Museum didn't speak to the institution's purpose must have been a flag for them in some ways.

[00:44:17]

Adrian Ellis: Yes. And she spoke a lot about uh, being less transactional and more engaged. What I thought was very interesting, I entirely agree, she had a naturally strategic bent. She spoke a bit about what, you know, about the pros and cons of being somebody who comes from, with outside, from outside the sector. And she spoke quite a lot about how she brought private sector experience. They're also interesting. She brought prior private sector language too.

She talked about products, markets and suppliers, and I suppose we would talk about programmes, audiences, and partners, but the idea that, you know, renaming mission, programmatic priorities uh, then organisational culture. All sort of addressed in a very systematic fashion. I mean, clearly that's partly because she is a remarkably strong and cogent leader, but how important, what's your line on leaders uh, from outside the sector running cultural institutions?

[00:45:15]

Stephanie Fortunato: Actually, I was thinking a bit about that. You know, her approach is different than I think a traditional arts management programme. I mean, no, it's not different actually. It's parallel. But I was thinking that we could use perhaps a little bit more of this expansive thinking at the top to really be able to move an agenda forward.



[00:45:36]

Stephanie Fortunato: In some ways I imagine that her corporate background and developing a product at the end has helped her to really articulate the outcomes in a way that I'm not sure all arts leaders can. Even the way that she's, you know, again, thought this idea of leveraging the assets of looking at the institution and this very intentionally cultivated collection, seeing that as an opportunity, but also looking at the physical spaces, including the support facilities as an opportunity.

And so that often overlooked underperforming parking lot now is one of the platforms for future success that I'm not sure a traditional, uh traditionally trained arts leader might have recognised that opportunity in the same way.

[00:46:24]

Adrian Ellis: Nor would they probably have had the credibility required to persuade the board to take on a project like that. That is a commercial development of 120 residential units. I mean, that is a big project. And although I'm sure they're working with a development partner. It is still not risky per se, but there's a certain element of risk inevitably in property development and the significant financial commitment.

So she clearly brings a set of skills and a perspective that complements all the traditional skills one has from growing up or career progression within an institution.

The question is always whether one also has the affinity with the subject matter required to make you know, judgment calls, for example she has made, we didn't talk about it actually, but she's made some quite controversial decisions on deaccessioning during her period. And I'm sure that, you know, the comment was made, oh, well, you know, if you had to curate somebody with a curatorial background at the top, that wouldn't have happened, but that may well be the case, but that's not necessarily an argument against it happening.

So she is a very compelling case for leadership from outside the sector, reinvigorating this institution.

[00:47:42]

Stephanie Fortunato: Well, and I think it's allowed her to really be a leader in the civic realm in a way that I get, I think is different. She, you know, it's sort of her pathway has set her up and even as she approaches the city, she has a really innovative and bold approach for the museum to really take its anchor institution function seriously and become an active civic partner for the city of Newark and for the people who live there.

I can't think of another private museum that is having such an influence on the both physical and, um, social, cultural life of a city, you know.

[00:48:23]

Adrian Ellis: Another aspect I thought was very interesting is, um, her approach to culture change. Particularly in the context of uh, DEAI agenda, but I think more generally in that clearly she realises that you don't stop at strategy. Um, that culture change is integral to the sort of agenda that she had, and her observations on what it takes to implement cultural change.



[00:48:48]

Adrian Ellis: Which is stamina and determination around recruitment, around suppliers, around breaking down boundaries internally, around on what the skills are and qualifications are required for particular posts. I thought again, was extremely cogent and the sort of determination that you need to have to push through cultural change like that, um, I think clearly she demonstrates, and there's a useful lesson in there too.

[00:49:15]

Stephanie Fortunato: A hundred percent. I mean, I think it's frequently perceived as very hard to know where to start with that work. And what Linda and you spoke about throughout the conversation, I think were the, the multiple angles with which she is addressing white supremacy culture and the legacy of systemic racism. And the ways in which she's doing that at all four levels, right? Internally it's her leadership that is really making, making the anti-racist agenda a priority. Making space and time to really do the work that's needed to address that fully at the staff level, that interpersonal level, you know, she's clearly cultivating a shift in not only the composition of the staff, but their approach to all of the museum functions.

And then at the institutional level with those community advisory groups, I think it's really easy sometimes to set up community advisory groups as sort of a one-way exchange. But what it seems like she's done is created advisories that are really empowered to assist with the decision-making. So even as you're talking about deaccession and collections, I wonder if that came out of that work that they are doing with community, you know, that real intention to be of the community means that they have to listen when it's said.

And then I think, you know, at the structural level, the changing power dynamics of museum really leading change, leading a conversation about the housing needs and the changes that are clearly being seen in the neighbourhood where the museum is located. That's a real opportunity to influence the emerging conditions in Newark beyond the museum, and really think about how can more equitable policies and practices, you know, be in place to address both the housing system itself, but you know, all of the other ways in which inequity is present in a community and I was really impressed with that approach that really transcends beyond the institution to a real civic leadership position.

[00:51:18]

Adrian Ellis: Yeah. And I think, I think at New Jersey Performing Arts Centre, NJPAC, there are some similar moves. They seem to be philosophically complimentary institutions. The other similarity is that they are both experimenting with really quite significant commercial developments as ways of pluralising income. And uh, I'd been very interested for a while in, in what I think of as unrelated or tangentially related earned income strategies. And it strikes me that both of those developments strategically aligned with the broader mission that they have defined for their institutions, which is to play an integral part as urban anchors.

And, I can't help, but think that as those guys and a couple of others pioneer this, if these are successful, they will become a norm for both diversified income and for community commitments and they, represent a significant expansion of the social mission of these, these institutions.



[00:52:20]

Stephanie Fortunato: The other thing, Adrian, that I just wanted to touch upon was something that I was reminded of when I was listening to Linda talk about the cultural change that's underway at the Newark Museum of Art. And this is a concept that was introduced by a colleague recently, a concept called talent justice, which I think is really about, thinking about skill sets, not resumes, as we build the staff of cultural institutions.

It was a term coined by the Fund the People's president Rusty Stahl, and it's really seeking to transform organisational culture to maximise access and advancement and ascension and non-profit careers for people of colour, women, young people, other constituencies – that's how they defined it. But the Fund the People has developed a talent justice initiative that I think could help a lot of cultural institutions and funders think about how to make investments that advance intersectional racial equity in the non-profit workforce.

So there is a toolkit that they've developed and we can make sure to add to the show notes, but I thought that might be a good resource uh, to sort of enhance the conversation with Linda about how you might actually take some of these ideas and apply them at your institution, which I know is so important to many of our listeners.

Adrian Ellis: We will make sure that is in the show notes.

Stephanie Fortunato: Well, so what do we, we have a couple of actions here around creating strategy and clear goals, applying principles of anti-racism to all endeavours, thinking about leadership in the civic realm and looking at dormant assets, building the trust that we need to lead transformation by really building with the community.

Uh, we forgetting anything there?

[00:54:06]

Adrian Ellis: I don't think so. I think that's an exemplary summary of in term a very concentrated and both factful and analytical 40 minutes and a joy to speak to. So thank you, Stephanie. And thank you Linda, for a great interview.

Stephanie Fortunato: I appreciate that. Thank you so much.

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. 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.

[00:54:50]

[THEME MUSIC]

