



S4:E2 FROM CALGARY WITH LOVE...

Alex Sarian & Nicholas Bell in conversation with Criena Gehrke

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Criena Gehrke: Buckle up, folks. I'm coming in hot. It's early morning here. I've only had one coffee, and I'm making it up as I go along. But I am actually really excited about what this meandering and unstructured conversation might take us to with these two amazing guests.

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THEME MUSIC

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Criena Gehrke: Hello, I'm Criena Gehrke and welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of a series brought to you by AEA Consulting 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.

Today, I'm speaking to you from Brisbane, Australia, on the lands of the Jagera and Turrbal people. I pay my respects to Elders, past and present, and to all First Nations people of the many lands from which you are all listening today.

For those playing at home, you may know that Australia recently held a referendum where we asked our citizens to vote on whether our Indigenous people should have a voice to parliament enshrined in our constitution. Basically, did we think First Nations people should have agency and input into the decisions that deeply and directly affect them? The Australian people voted and it was a resounding no. And for that, I am truly, deeply sorry.

Now, in a complete change of gears, I also have a confession, and I suspect that our listeners may totally relate to this:

This week I have over committed to the extreme.

Two weeks back from Christmas holidays, my diary indicated that I had it all totally under control. But it didn't factor in the curveballs and random life moments. We had to relocate Queensland Theatre – yes, an entire theatre company, in seven days due to roof replacement works. I had an urgent government report pop up. My apartment was evacuated due to a burst water main – water seems to be a recurring theme here. Yes, there's a cyclone headed this way to Queensland and my dog literally vomited on me.



[00:02:10]

Criena Gehrke: And then I looked at my calendar and thought, what even the- it's podcast time already and it's at 6am tomorrow, which means buckle up, folks! I've only had one coffee and I'm making it up as I go along. But I am actually really excited about what this meandering and unstructured conversation might take us to with these two amazing guests.

Alex Sarian is President and CEO of Arts Commons and Nicholas Bell is President and CEO at Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Canada.

Both are responsible for key cultural institutions in a city that has been experiencing significant growth. Both institutions are undertaking disruptive and vital infrastructure projects, and both have a shared passion for reimagining what it means to be a cultural institution: how you open the doors to community, be innovative and responsive and deliver on the difference that the arts can make in the world.

I may have been caught short in terms of preparation time, but what I did read about you both absolutely sings to my soul and everything that I believe about the arts.

Nicholas and Alex, welcome to The Three Bells.

[00:03:22]

Alex Sarian: Thank you.

[00:03:23]

Nicholas Bell: Thank you so much, Criena.

[00:03:25]

Criena Gehrke: It's so lovely to speak to you and I'm genuine when I say the research and reading that I did got me very excited with that whole focus on city transformation with a community focus. So, set the scene for us.

Nicholas, I'm going to start with you. Give me the elevator pitch.

And I assume that isn't just an Australian term about the Glenbow Museum.

Nicholas Bell: (laughs)

Criena Gehrke: I don't know. You know, I'm assuming that you two get into elevators and you've got 30 seconds to pitch. (laughs)

[00:03:53]

Nicholas Bell: No, that has happened time to time, Criena, and, and both of our respective capital projects happen to be located a block away from City Hall, which helps us with the elevators.

Criena Gehrke: Yeah.



[00:04:02]

Nicholas Bell: I did want to begin by acknowledging that Alex and I are both coming to you from Treaty 7 territory here today, what's called Southern Alberta, and we're both honoured, and I know Alex well enough to know that we are equally humbled to, to be temporary stewards of this, these projects on these lands, and it's a great honour to be in a city that has such invigorating conversation at foot about our role in Indigenous reconciliation and truth. So thank you so much for your words at the beginning of this.

Glenbow in a nutshell. I actually want to begin slightly differently, Criena, by sharing the commonalities that Alex and I have in our mutual projects. So those of you who are not in Calgary or have not been to Calgary, wouldn't know that Arts Commons and Glenbow are in fact located across the street from each other on Calgary's Main Street, Stephen Avenue.

Those were decisions that were made in decades past in the 1970s and 80s, when these facilities were originally being built. Both of them were, I think, in, in desperate need of capital reconsideration given their age. And Alex and I sort of landed in Calgary almost at the same time, I think, maybe less than six months away from each other, as Canadian citizens, each of whom had been away for a long period of time.

And discovered in these projects the opportunity to come back and, and hopefully participate in and contribute to something really meaningful in, in one of Canada's most energetic cities. And I have a ton of respect for this man. I consider him a close friend and somebody who makes me smile and laugh every time I see him.

Criena Gehrke: (laughs)

[00:05:28]

Nicholas Bell: And I'm just so glad that you brought us together in this way today. I did also tell Alex it's a good thing we're not on video because I don't think I could stop from laughing through the whole recording.

Criena Gehrke: (laughs)

Nicholas Bell: So with that to get to uh, to Glenbow. Glenbow's a, a bit of an unusual institution in the Canadian context uh, in the sense that museums in Canada tend to be either focused sort of, on history and culture in a traditional sense or on, or in fine arts.

And so you have uh, most cities in Canada have an art gallery and a history museum and often those are separate institutions under separate governance and sometimes separate audiences. And Glenbow is unusual in that its founder, Eric Harvie, who was a prominent Albertan in the early and mid-twentieth century, really felt strongly that all of those aspects of our human creativity and expression should exist under one roof and so, he embarked really singlehandedly beginning in the 1940s on a major collecting campaign that ultimately brought together what is today nearly a quarter million artworks and artifacts from around the world. And that includes major collections of Canadian history, Indigenous cultures from across North America uh, European cultures, South American cultures, Asia, Africa.



[00:06:38]

Nicholas Bell: And he brought this together, really, with the idea that people who live in this region of the world should have the opportunity to understand, I think, and empathise with people around the world, recognising at the same time – and this is several decades ago, that they might not have the opportunity to make those trips themselves.

So he was really trying to bring the world to Calgary, to give people an opportunity to see some sense of it. Then he gifted very generously that collection to the province and ultimately to the people of Alberta in the 1960s. So our museum was built in the early 70s, really almost as a vault for this extraordinarily vast and deep collection on one of the busiest intersections in Calgary.

But I think one of the challenges of this organisation from the very beginning is that the building felt as if it was protecting the collection almost rather than being a welcoming place for its community. And so – and Alex knows this better than anybody, it had no front door, no windows, no natural light. You sort of had to find your way through the back of the building through a convention centre. Enter into a sort of a dark and cavernous place and then sort of wind your way around these various galleries that sort of gave you entry points into these collections.

It wasn't the most ideal or pleasant visitor experience. And the age of the building – buildings coming up on 50 years, presented us with an opportunity because there was some real urgency to renovation.

The exterior was starting to fail, all of the systems were well past usable life. And so we said several years ago, if we have to renovate, how could we potentially approach that in such a way that it could leverage us into a reconsidered programme and a reconsidered physical plant that actually serves what we recognise as a very different 21st century sensibility around the role of museums and contemporary society, and that's the role that we're in right now.

So we're currently perhaps two-thirds, three-quarters of a way through a capital project that renovates all three hundred and twelve thousand square feet of this eight story building that makes it eminently more accessible, more inviting that includes new aspects of seeing those collections, but also new aspects of inviting the community in. And the part of this that we're probably most proud of right now, is the fact that an eminent Calgary family, the Shaw family, has made it possible to become Canada's first major museum to offer free general admission to everyone in perpetuity.

And so it's, it's what we see as our role in helping to change the conversation around what it means to transform privileges into rights in this country, and to instil in this community the expectation that access to arts and culture is for everyone. And so that's the journey that we're on right now.

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Criena Gehrke: I love that so much, that notion of taking something that's a bunker that protects, and making it porous and democratic and accessible and inclusive.



[00:09:19]

Criena Gehrke: Alex, I'm going to move on to you.

Give me the speed date around your project that obviously is across the road from your esteemed colleague and friend.

[00:09:29]

Alex Sarian: An esteemed colleague and friend. So I just want to highlight also that when you asked Nicholas the question, he went rogue.

Criena Gehrke: (laughs)

Alex Sarian: He chose to answer a different question, which I think is so, uh, reflects so beautifully-

[00:09:41]

Nicholas Bell: I, I, I learned from watching politics. Alex, you answer the question you want to answer.

[00:09:45]

Criena Gehrke: Okay. And you two, just because I confessed to coming in hot and a little underprepared. Do you want me to step out? (laughs)

[00:09:50]

Nicholas Bell: Alex and I have casually discussed having our own podcast. Uh, I don't know what it would be called, but I don't think it would even have to be about culture, Alex, we could just talk about whatever we feel like.

[00:10:01]

Criena Gehrke: Oh, actually. Are you interested in talking about something else? No? Okay. (laughs)

Nicholas Bell: (laughs) No, we won't, we won't come in here and do our podcast.

Criena Gehrke: I can hear our producer in the background going, stick, stick to the theme.

Alex Sarian: Yeah, we're going to start a podcast called The Four Bells.

Criena Gehrke: (laughs) So, okay. Alex, go.

[00:10:21]

Alex Sarian: So, so I'll give a little bit about who we are today, who we were when started. And then over the course of this conversation, I imagine we'll talk about who we want to be when we grow up.



[00:10:30]

Alex Sarian: And I think this is also aligned beautifully with what Nicholas was saying that in honouring the legacy of our history as complicated as it is, and talking about where we are today and what we're building for tomorrow, it starts to portray the story of evolution.

And I think the evolution of who we are as people, who we are as institutions, is telling the story of how we are struggling with things like remaining relevant, how we are struggling with things like measuring the impact of what we do. And while we might be based in Calgary across the street from each other, I think these are things that everybody is either currently grappling with or honestly, probably should be grappling with.

So, Arts Commons today is the third largest performing arts centre in Canada, the largest in Western Canada. We occupy around 560,000 square feet in the core of downtown Calgary. We are home to six resident companies. So as a performing arts centre, we are no stranger to that sort of stewardship model where we have amazing organisations like the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra and Theatre Calgary and others that make use of these facilities.

But we're also home to over 200 community groups that access these facilities in and around our resident companies. So we do try to straddle the line between being a performing arts centre with a capital P, but also being a community hub for cultural activity. Just to give you a sense of scale, we welcome close to six to seven hundred thousand people a year to two thousand events within our building. And we're currently turning away 600 event requests per year.

Criena Gehrke: Oh wow.

Alex Sarian: And part of that has to be with Calgary's growth, which I hope we'll talk about.

Criena Gehrke: Yeah.

[00:12:05]

Alex Sarian: But who we were when we opened in 1985, and I think it's also worth noting that we opened in anticipation of the 1988 Winter Olympics so this idea that civic and our connection to civic discourse was also connected so beautifully with sports, but we opened in 1985 in our current size – 560,000 square feet, and the original mandate was to welcome 300,000 patrons a year. Which is less than half of what we or who we welcome now but what I find fascinating about the history of this is: we were designed to accommodate and welcome 300,000 patrons a year when the population of Calgary at that time was only 600,000.

Now I've never heard of the development of any art centre, any performing art centre, any museum whose mandate was to literally accommodate 50 percent of a city's population. That is bold and that's audacious. and I'd like to say the Calgary responded to that audacity by actually showing up.



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Alex Sarian: Not many people know that within one year of us being built, we were operating at capacity. So there's something so wonderful about arts and culture being able to be a catalyst for growth. You know, I came here, Nicholas mentioned that we came here from several decades working in the U.S. where we know that sometimes these capital infrastructure projects are instigators and creators of a ripple effect that can tear through a city in both good and bad ways. Let's be honest.

But it's interesting to note that the city of Calgary in anticipation of the 1988 Winter Olympics was truly getting its place on the map, and that arts and culture through the Glenbow and Arts Commons were ways of sort of calling up a flag and saying we are a world class city.

And I'd like to say that over the past 40 years we've delivered on that promise.

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Criena Gehrke: When I was researching you two and your wonderful institutions, the thing that popped up in the Google search first was the Calgary Stampede. So evidently there is a major event that happens in your city that even in a Google search actually trumps the arts and cultural investment and commitment by your community.

[00:14:25]

Alex Sarian: No, it's true. And Nicholas, I'd be curious to know what you say, but my immediate response to that is the Calgary Stampede is very much baked into the cultural DNA of who we are.

It is not, it's not a competing factor. I think. So, you know, when I came to Calgary or when I was even entertaining the notion of coming to Calgary, there were two proofs of concept.

The first one was the Calgary Stampede, and the second one was the Calgary downtown library. Um, the Calgary downtown library, it's been designed around a re-imagination of the value proposition of a library.

And I remember saying to my wife and friends, and I said, listen, if Calgary can do this around the stampede, and if Calgary can do this around the library system, then it sure as heck can do it around the performing arts.

Criena Gehrke: (laughs)

Alex Sarian: I don't see it as competing. I see it as, I see it as, sectors that are tangential to ours, really raising the bar in terms of what's possible.

[00:15:19]

Nicholas Bell: I would certainly agree with Alex, and I have a particular viewpoint on this. In fact, I was discussing last night, as Alex and I were actually in a sort of a salon type discussion last night about the future of Calgary. And he's right. And my particular perspective on this comes from having grown up in Vancouver, British Columbia.



[00:15:35]

Nicholas Bell: So just an hour's flight west of Calgary on the Pacific Coast, but being that far outside of Calgary and looking at it from the outside, you tend to take a very biased and simplistic view of what kind of city this is and the stampede in some ways leans into that – and not intentionally, but because it augments the idea or the perception outside of Calgary, but in the rest of Canada, that Calgary is a place of cowboys and Western events, and it has this sort of Western heritage, and that's very foot forward.

But I think Alex is absolutely right. What that overlooks – and this is nothing to do with the extraordinary value that the stampede brings to our culture, our economy, our tourism and everything else, but what it overlooks is the exceptional diversity of the city and the fact that it is a very participatory community that has many different facets to it.

And these are things that I didn't quite understand until I moved here several years ago. So Alex and I are both familiar with this because we talk about it a lot. But Calgary has one of the most diverse and young populations in Canada. It has a population that has grown several times over since, for example, the building of Glenbow or Arts Commons.

There are an uncountable number of languages that are spoken on our streets and we are in the midst without a lot of recognition outside of the city of one of the greatest cultural infrastructure projects in North America. And I don't just mean our two projects, we were talking about this a little bit last night.

If you gauge from, let's call it 2018 to 2030, so a 12 year span that we're in the middle of right now, you will have had open the National Music Centre, which is just a couple blocks away from us, the Central Library, which Alex just mentioned, Arts Commons, Glenbow and hopefully Contemporary Calgary, which is a Contemporary Arts Centre just several blocks to the east of us- to the west of us, sorry.

And so if you look at that all-inclusive, you're looking at well over a billion dollars in infrastructure spending that is specifically devoted to ensuring the increase of civic space for this community, which has grown in leaps and bounds over the last several decades.

And I think actually has a nuance to its social fabric that perhaps is lost when you do the Google search and you get the auto fields. Because, of course I think Calgary has still something of a lagging reputation where people are thinking of a Calgary from a bygone era, when in fact it is in many ways I think the most exciting place to be in Canada today.

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Alex Sarian: But Nicholas, I think that's part of the reason it's so exciting is because we have this stronghold around a certain type of reputation, which means that our ability to surprise and delight is so much more readily available to us than I think any other city. And you know, you mentioned that there's a, this cultural renaissance in terms of cultural infrastructure, but I think, yeah, I was just doing the math here on paper.

I think between our two projects alone, which are happening relatively in tandem, we're looking at really just shy of a billion dollars' worth of cultural infrastructure literally across the street from each other.



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Nicholas Bell: Yes.

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Criena Gehrke: So what's driving that? What's the strategy? Is it a government strategy around economic development? Is it a visionary mayor?

Like, what is the perfect storm that's been created there to lead to that billion dollar investment in the upgrade of infrastructure and new cultural infrastructure within the city?

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Alex Sarian: I mean, I think it's a little, it's all of the above in some ways and without meaning to be dismissive of one of those things you pulled out. I think it has to do very much with- I mean, it's so nuanced to the reality of Calgary. But I think there are certain things, so, you know, there is a very strong business community in Calgary and they've gone through a roller coaster, right?

Because we are very connected to the energy sector. And with that comes its own conversation, right? Around how do we, you know, what is the future of that sector look like? And are we leading that charge? Which I believe we are, but I also think it has to do with the post pandemic glory of what I call these mid-sized cities.

You had a lot of people that for three years were questioning, you know, why am I paying rent in Vancouver? Why am I paying rent in Toronto? When I can work from anywhere? And it became so tangible and it became so clear that we don't live in this dichotomy of either living in a major cosmopolitan city like New York or on a farm. And so what I think Calgary has benefited from over the last at least four years, five years since I've been here, is that the cost of living is very low compared to other major cosmopolitan cities and as a result, you have an influx of businesses.

You have an influx of residents, of talent. And with that, comes diversity of thought and diversity of skills and diversity of definitions of quality of life. And what I love about that is that with that diversity also comes, finally, the realisation that there's no silver bullet in terms of what's going to make Calgary relevant for the future.

So, you know, paired with that, I think our downtown has suffered through a lot of similar things that other downtowns are struggling with in terms of how do we get people back into the office building? How do we get people back downtown? We have a mayor and this has been in news all over the world.

And a city council, and they have fought very strong strongly to create what many consider to be one of the first office-to-residential conversion models in the downtown around the world post-pandemic. And the amenities, right, so if you think about it, how do you convert office spaces into residential buildings?

It's not that dissimilar from what Lower Manhattan did after 911 where, you know, you had to reinvent the brand of a downtown core and residential was part of it. So you create the incentives.



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Alex Sarian: And what we're finding is, unsurprisingly obviously, that once you have people that are spending more than just nine to five in a certain area, you create a ripple effect of demand.

All of a sudden, people want more restaurants, they want day-care, they want grocery shops, and they're going to want access to arts and culture. And so I think we are riding that wave. The one thing I like to say, and then I'll be quiet is, you know, when the mayor – and this was last mayor, so this might have been two and two and a half years ago when they were putting in front of the Calgary City Council, the first financial package for a vote on how they would re-envision Downtown Calgary.

I want to say it was a few hundred million dollars' worth of seed money for the development of projects. What I love to say is that the single largest line item in that downtown revitalisation package, the single largest line item was cultural infrastructure.

So you have a city that understands that, yes, you need office to residential conversion, but you also need to give people a reason to come downtown and to stay downtown. And that's us. I mean, Glenbow and Arts Commons and so many others are part of that solution.

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Nicholas Bell: There's something just to add on to Alex's excellent explanation of all of this, which is that the very particular – and you might call it the perfect storm of what occurred in Calgary over the last decade, in fact, I think gave it the upper hand in sort of getting in front of the wave of medium scaled cities, especially in North America that we're familiar with right now they're trying to reconsider their downtowns and that's that. It confronted a very real downturn in the energy sector beginning, I think it's in 2014, which meant that it's densely built office core emptied out at an alarming rate earlier than downtowns, for example, across the rest of the continent, were emptied out during COVID.

And so it meant that the city was facing a reckoning in its real estate market several years before COVID, that I think really planted the seeds of what Alex described as a plan of both office to residential conversion and arts and culture infrastructure, so that you do see this phenomenon right now where for example, American newspapers are writing about downtown Calgary as an example of how to fix their own downtowns because they're only maybe three years into a conversation of what do we do about the empty buildings.

[00:23:35]

Criena Gehrke: Yeah. How's that affected the way that you see your own institutions and your role, and I guess also your programming?

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Alex Sarian: Coming into a downtown core that is struggling with an identity crisis. The fluidity with which we have to ask questions is a practice that I don't think should ever go away. The nervousness with which we programme, the caution with which we engage in community and try to figure out what it is they want today as opposed to what they might have wanted yesterday.



[00:24:07]

Alex Sarian: The exercise of remaining relevant is a, is an exercise deeply ingrained that, that depends so deeply on curiosity and humility and which is hard for large institutions to embrace. And I think what the pandemic has done for organisations like ours, which are legacy institutions, people have come to appreciate us as, you know, certain kinds of institutions.

But we've had to start asking questions and we've had to start realising that we don't have the answer to everything. And in hindsight, we probably never should have had the answer to everything. But I think it's forced the current condition – whether it's downtown, whether it's COVID, whether it's, you know, just pick one of the Earth shattering things that's happened uh, in the past, you know, five years, at least here.

And it's, forced us into a very necessary position of humility and curiosity which I think is the perfect place to inhabit as we are not just trying to build the future of Calgary, but I think be a central gathering place where others can define it through us. And so I think – you know I heard Nicholas talk about this last night in terms of the future of the Glenbow and we talked about it at Arts Commons all the time, we need to stop asking the question, what is the impact of Arts Commons on Calgary?

And we need to start asking the question, what is the impact of Calgary on Arts Commons? And we need to start measuring our success through the lens of how people can activate their ambitions for the city through us. That alone requires us to unlearn decades of sort of quote unquote “leadership training in the arts”.

You know around programming, around funding, around community engagement. And so to Nicholas's point, we've been grappling this with a little, you know, for a little longer than the average city. But I think you're also going to find in Calgary, not only do we have a couple of years advantage, but we also have this mentality – there's an entrepreneurship in Calgary that I think is fascinating. It's probably the most American of Canadian cities in terms of the relationship to the business community.

And so we have all these mechanisms at our disposal but it requires us to think differently. And so, it's an exciting time. It's an exciting time of transformation, I think for everybody. And I think one of the takeaways for me is you can either let change happen to you and probably be out of business in a few years. Or you can just embrace the fact that we don't have the answers, try to figure out what the best question is and build community around it. And I think what Nicholas and I are finding is that when you position yourself as a legacy institution with privileges and legacies that are both exciting and complicated, Calgary shows up.

[00:26:46]

Nicholas Bell: I wholeheartedly agree with Alex and the context I know for his comments is also the same for mine, which is that he and I, for much of our careers were coming up through major legacy institutions in the United States with a lot of the privilege and colonial mindset baked in from the outset and frankly, from my experience – and this is probably more a reflection of the timing more than the location. Not a lot of self-questioning about whether or not our values were always the right values for the moment.



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Nicholas Bell: And I think what is so important about this particular moment in this particular city, is that we know that arts institutions – and I'm certainly speaking on behalf of museums globally, have been pummelled in recent years, rightfully so, for their legacy of colonialism and the fact that they have really been born from the idea that there is a right way for the West to objectify the world into a system of knowledge.

And we are confronting that right now, and we happen to be confronting that here in Calgary, in a city that Alex knows well, is very good at gut checks, and is very good at asking itself the question, what does it want to be when it grows up? How can it make people feel more welcome here? How can it be a place that attracts not only community, but also business?

And so you end up in this, and I was actually almost joking about this last night, you end up in a situation where Calgary has all of these committees and groups and clubs that are constantly saying, what is Calgary going to be now? How does it become better? How does it become a place that fulfils its promise and its purpose?

And I actually think that distinguishes it from a lot of other cities. I think Calgarians are very wrapped up in the idea that there is an opportunity to improve its sort of combined assets into a place that is in fact a greater community. And I applaud it for that, but it also makes it an extremely interesting place to challenge the status quo of what art, infrastructure and art institutions should be in the future, because as Alex recognises, and as do I, that the past isn't sufficient. We have to grow in ways that demonstrates our openness to change, but also our humility.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:29:03]

Criena Gehrke: So on a daily basis, as leaders of these incredible institutions that are legacy institutions that are running a transformation agenda both evidently through the vision, values, and infrastructure.

What does that look like for you? Because you know, turning the tide can sometimes be a challenge of leadership. So how do you bring both your teams, but also your city leadership, your key stakeholders along for that journey?

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Nicholas Bell: I do think that this is the place where we find that Calgary has the leg up and it's because there is a certain amount of receptivity within the community. And I mean in culture, I mean in business, I mean in politics, there's a receptivity to challenging whatever it is that we are doing yesterday.

And to say, well, why can't we improve upon that? And I think that feels different and it feels more open to ideation than you necessarily find baked into other communities. I was so floored when I arrived in Calgary in 2019. By my experience, I'd just driven from the East Coast of the United States all the way across the continent to Calgary, got out of my car, I didn't know anybody in the city other than the board that had hired me.



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Nicholas Bell: And I started just being inundated with invitations to go out for breakfast, lunch, and dinner from complete strangers, and these strangers were community leaders, business leaders, politicians, concerned citizens who frankly said, you're one of us now.

Criena Gehrke: (laughs)

Nicholas Bell: You're here, and we need to solve these problems together, and what do you think we should do? I think we could do this. And it was a completely alien experience to me as somebody who's lived in several other cities, where I've never felt so welcomed, and yet so on the inside at the same time, right?

I mean, there was no you're from away, you're an outsider, you're a stranger. It was immediate acceptance into the community. And the question of how are we going to solve these problems together? And I think that's part of what makes the city thrilling place to live.

[00:30:58]

Alex Sarian: I echo everything Nicholas said. Coming from New York to Calgary, it freaked me out how kind people were. And now I am one of them, happily.

Um, but you know, I didn't mention earlier in terms of the size and scope of our project. Arts Commons is embarking on the Arts Commons Transformation Project. That's a project that's been around in terms of people talking about it and thinking about it for well over a decade. And I think COVID and our recommitment to civic dialogue and civic discourse has given us new energy behind it. This is now the single largest cultural infrastructure project in Canadian history at over 650 million dollars.

And we've done two things as part of our commitment to reconciliation and the humility and curiosity. You know, there in my mind, there are two kinds of advocacy. There's the advocacy that will redesign the house, and then there's the advocacy that will burn down the house. And I'll be very honest, it's, you know, self-preservation. I choose to believe that as a, you know, white cis male with incredible privileges, many of which are unearned, I have a responsibility to make things better.

And so finding my entry point into this conversation around reconciliation is super important, as is finding the entry point for an organisation with our history. And so we've done two things: One of them is, we've started the process of what we're calling a reconciliation strategy. We're now in our fourth year working with the indigenous community, working with elders, with artists. And there are three topics that have emerged from the strategy that are our three pillars: The first one is this idea of sanctified kindness. And we know in many indigenous cultures, when there is a lighting of the smudge, you are calling a meeting to order and you are essentially officiating a sense of sanctified kindness in the space.

And when I hear the elders we work with talk about sanctified kindness, I think to myself, well, how is that different or why is that different from us as an arts organisation, wanting to bring people together?



[00:32:58]

Alex Sarian: And yes, the artwork might be challenging, it might be joyful, but we are sharing space around a shared commitment to sanctified kindness. And so that's one pillar where we're like, okay, we can grab onto that. And we can actually find that as a parallel.

The second one is this idea of building relatives. And you know, we are told all the time being an ally is important, being a partner is important, but sometimes it's not enough. What does it mean to build relatives? And so we are truly looking at that.

And then the third one is this idea of ethical space. If we can sanctify kindness in a space and if we can build relatives with others that might think differently than us, then we are creating together this concept of ethical space in which difficult conversations can happen. And I'm hearing these learnings from our elders and I'm like, you know, yes it's about reconciliation with the indigenous community, but it's also just about becoming better people and a better institution. And so our entire strategy is being built on those three pillars.

And then there's a fourth pillar, which is around social business. And I'm fascinated by how many indigenous communities operate their businesses out of uh, an oral tradition. And you know, our Western default is very much in the written. And what's fascinating to me, particularly in the performing arts that if you think about our work as a product, right – so a performance, a play, our work product is very much a social product.

Why is it that the way in which we develop it, behind the scenes, is not reflective of social business practices?

So we're just grappling with some of these big questions, and parallel to that, one of the architects on our project uh, her name is Wanda Dalla Costa. She's incredible. She's actually from Alberta, where Nicholas and I are located. She's the first Indigenous Canadian woman to become an architect, and she is working on our project with us. And what's fascinating is not only is she bringing to the table a sense of indigenous aesthetics, which I think is fascinating, but more importantly, she's bringing to the table a sense of indigenous consensus building.

And so we are so excited to be able to present something that has been informed by First Nations and indigenous communities, while at the same time being for everybody in the same way that the idea of sanctified kindness, building relatives, ethical space might come from indigenous learnings, but actually once applied, just really make us a better place for all. And so it's, yeah, it's fascinating and challenging and difficult, but it's really quite beautiful.

[00:35:32]

Criena Gehrke: Is there any sense from your community that that is a contested space, either of you? And I'll tell you why.

And you heard in my introduction about the referendum in Australia. And we're finding from the community, the arts and Queensland Theatre, who I'm currently working with as the Executive Director.



[00:35:54]

Criena Gehrke: We're deeply committed to First Nations and Indigenous community, and I agree with everything that you've just said Alex, like, you know in my experience, the learnings for me in terms of organisational culture and leadership have been extraordinary.

And that's the very fabric and DNA of the organisation that I want to adopt, and I want to encourage in consultation with that community. But what we're finding is, as I said, there was an overwhelming no vote in terms of acknowledging First Nations people in our constitution. We're now in a situation. So, we, across the performing arts, there's always an either a Welcome to Country or an Acknowledgement of Country at the beginning of performances, audience members are booing and refusing to come. Some of our philanthropists are suggesting that they don't want to support because of the focus on First Nations culture.

Alex Sarian: Geez.

Nicholas Bell: I am shocked by that actually.

Criena Gehrke: So, I'm shocked by it too. And I'm interested in what the difference is.

[00:36:59]

Nicholas Bell: I think it's several factors, Criena. And I think, it actually comes down to a lot of regional awareness as well.

Criena Gehrke: Yeah.

Nicholas Bell: And so I grew up in Western Canada, but I spent the bulk of my career in the Eastern United States where I'd say the awareness was extremely low. and I was really pleasantly surprised and humbled when I returned to Western Canada to see how much progress had been made, at least in the public awareness of these conversations over those couple of decades.

Not to say that there is an immense work in front of us, but the fact that I think, broadly speaking, the Canadian public has an understanding of the parameters of these conversations and their importance. Not to say that it's monolithic, but I think that there is a general societal acceptance here that these conversations matter.

I think the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Report in 2015 was a milestone. The tragic discovery of hundreds of children's graves at former residential schools across the country over the last few years has, I think, been something of a gut punch to the entire populace. That I think has underscored the severity and the intensity of that history for Indigenous peoples across the country.

And the fact that it is something that we will probably spend the rest of our natural lives confronting. I am pleased to say that I have not encountered really any kind of public resistance to those conversations in this community, although I am aware of it in other communities further afield.



[00:38:23]

Alex Sarian: You know, many, many years ago, 20 years ago, I had the incredible good fortune of being able to do some work with Augusto Boal in Brazil around Theatre of the Oppressed. And one of the things that I carry with me all the time is:

If times were peachy, then our role is easy. If times are hard, our roles are necessary.

And there's got to be a way for us as an arts community, to have difficult conversations without being able to push certain buttons. And what I mean by that is, so you know, in the example that you just gave, in terms of people booing the land acknowledgement.

There are times where I am in front of certain audiences that I know probably wouldn't respond so well to the perform, you know, quote unquote, "performative aspect" of a land acknowledgment. And I end up giving opening remarks that were essentially a land acknowledgment without the people realising it.

Criena Gehrke: Yeah.

[00:39:21]

Alex Sarian: And I find sometimes that what people are very eager to push up against, is the performative aspect of it. They hear a certain word, they hear a certain phrase and they automatically shut down.

And what they don't realise is that behind that word and behind that phrase, are actually really important conversations about welcoming, about who gets to claim space, who gets to feel comfortable, who gets to feel safe, conversations that for the most part people are wanting to have.

And so I think the pressure is on us as a community to say, okay, what is not working in the world? What are we uniquely positioned to do? And how do we engage people in a conversation that they probably don't want to have? And I think it just puts pressure on us to have, I mean, to right that wrong and to demonstrate and embody the values that may be lacking in other institutions. It's heart breaking, but I think it's what the arts world has always done well, which is to build conversations where they need to happen, and clearly that one needs to happen.

[00:40:31]

Nicholas Bell: And Criena, I mean, just to echo Alex, we have this moral obligation as arts institutions to serve as a place of understanding and empathy, right, regardless of which communities we're discussing that are involved, so that while I may not have confronted the same kind of tension that you're describing in Australia, I have had private conversations with individuals in our community where we've been challenged on our aspirations or our goals as it pertains to reconciliation, let's say.

I've been asked questions very pointedly. So for example, you know, what does all of this talk about decolonisation, what does that mean exactly? And they're looking for something that is perhaps threatening to the status quo.



[00:41:13]

Nicholas Bell: And to Alex's point, when you pivot that conversation and you describe what it means to meet people with respect and reciprocity, and to listen and to explore their values, and provide them the opportunity to share those values, you get to a place that I think is healthier for everyone.

And that takes a lot of the venom out of the conversation that we often see portrayed in the media.

[00:41:38]

Criena Gehrke: Can I ask both of you, as we close out this amazing discussion, if you project forward in time – let's say 20 years, what do you wish for your institutions, but also Calgary? What does it look like?

What difference have you made in the world?

[00:41:57]

Nicholas Bell: Criena, I would say that 20 years from now any citizen of Calgary, and especially any child that has grown up in this city, will intuitively understand that access to arts and culture, whether it be material or fine or performing is in fact a right that belongs to them as a part of their civic contract with this community.

And that they have the opportunity to participate and feel a sense of belonging in places like Glenbow, like Arts Commons, but also our libraries, our other theatres, our other art galleries and institutions. And that it, it is a seamless part of the fabric of the life of the city, because I think there is the opportunity for them to take those values out into the world and help provide leadership where it may be lacking elsewhere.

[00:42:40]

Alex Sarian: I will build on that. You mentioned earlier the idea of porosity and how are our institutions investing in porosity – not just physical, but programmatic, philosophical, operational, to the point where you don't know where Calgary ends and Arts Commons begins.

And so much of that is, you know, how do we design our indoor space versus our outdoor space? And what does that threshold look like? And do our community partners feel like they can cross it? This idea of porosity leading to dialogue, leading to influence.

And when our building is finally open, I want every single person in Calgary to be able to look at it and say, you know, I somehow had a role to play in designing that building.

And that building belongs to me.

It's not this high temple of arts and culture that, you know, the only way for you to have a cultural experience and is whether or not you bought a ticket, that you can come as you are, regardless of who you are, what you look like, who you love, what your household income is, and you can have one of the most amazing cultural experiences – not as defined by me or Arts Commons, but as defined by you.



[00:43:49]

Alex Sarian: And that I think is super important, and we're working towards it. So I know it's going to happen.

[00:43:44]

Criena Gehrke: Alex and Nicholas, it has been an absolute privilege and delight. Thank you so much for spending time with The Three Bells. Take care.

Nicholas Bell: Oh, it's our pleasure. Come visit us sometime.

Alex Sarian: Yeah, come to Calgary!

Criena Gehrke: I'll see you in Calgary. Most definitely. Thank you.

Nicholas Bell: Thank you.

[00:44:10]

MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:44:14]

Criena Gehrke: I am sad to say that this is my final podcast with The Three Bells. I've absolutely loved my time with you all, but life, career moves and time zones mean it's time for me to drop the mic. The privilege has been all mine as I was gifted the opportunity to speak with some of the world's leading experts on art, placemaking, precinct development, and cultural leadership.

I've been offered glimpses of communities and culture and projects as diverse as the world itself. I have been invited to dream of future states, dive deep into humanity, and contemplate a better world through culture. So as I say adieu, for what they're worth, here are some of my key takeaways from the wisdom and insights that have been gifted to me by colleagues across the globe through these conversations.

In the hundreds of discussions I've had during the Three Bells and with my peers across the Global Cultural Districts Network, in every report commissioned, evaluation completed, and impact study released, the common thread is that cultural precincts and arts organisations make a difference to our cities.

And our cities are our people. Culture and cultural precincts matter. We have a vital responsibility to champion them, defend them, celebrate them, inhabit them, and fund them. Cultural precinct and arts centre developments are complex. They have a myriad of stakeholders. Ambition usually outstrips funding. Government is often the instigator and priorities can be conflicted.

What I have come to believe, is that the most successful projects have a clear vision and sense of purpose and a fierce belief in, and understanding of their community well before there is even the sniff of a business case, design brief or concept design.



[00:46:07]

Criena Gehrke: Successful projects have passionate and multidisciplinary teams who all sign up to a collective goal and prioritise above all else: how the community will engage with these places and spaces. A successful project understands right from the get go, before the first sod is turned, how that infrastructure and public realm will be activated and programmed by those who will ultimately be responsible for their operation.

The infrastructure is not the thing. The way the community will engage with a space and the sense of place is the thing. And the vision is everything.

Porous, has become one of my favourite words. (laughs) Cultural infrastructure in the public realm should be porous and democratic. The era of cultural monuments and monoliths is dead.

And finally, Artists are at the heart of it all. They, are our storytellers, our mirrors, our truth tellers, our magic makers, our entertainers. They bring us together to dream, to imagine, to love and laugh, to feel deeply and to forget ourselves. They lead dangerous conversations while providing safe haven.

They can demand much of us. Mostly they demand that through art, we better understand ourselves and the world around us. They encourage us to be curious about difference and otherness. And to do better. Art and culture is our very humanity. Believe in it, and value it.

And finally, on a personal note, a sincere thank you to my fellow Three Bellers:

To Stephanie for your good humour and community spirit. To Gregorio for your fierce determination, boundless patience and commitment to excellence, and also, (laughs) for editing out my Australian tendency to swear, a lot. And finally to Adrian, our fearless leader and the force behind GCDN. I'm eternally grateful for your scorching intellect, left field provocations, love of jazz, and for inviting me to be part of The Three Bells.

I'm Criena Gehrke, signing off.

Be fierce, but be kind.

[00:48:13]

THEME MUSIC

