



S2:E6 Playful public spaces

Ilana Altman in conversation with Stephanie Fortunato

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[THEME MUSIC]

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Stephanie Fortunato: 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 culture and urban life.

The series and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net. If you like our content, please subscribe and give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice. I'm Stephanie Fortunato, Director of Special Projects for the GCDN, and I'm speaking to you from Providence, Rhode Island, the ancestral lands of the Narragansett.

Today, I'm speaking with Ilana Altman, cultural planner, designer, and Co-director of The Bentway in Toronto. After my conversation with Ilana, I'll be joined by Criena Gehrke for our usual key takeaways segment. So stay tuned, but for now, hello Ilana!

[00:01:00]

Ilana Altman: Hi, Stephanie.

Stephanie Fortunato: How are you today?

Ilana Altman: I'm great. I'm very excited for our conversation.

[00:01:07]

Stephanie Fortunato: Me too, me too. So I'd love to get started by having you tell us a little bit about your pathway. You have had an interesting career, and I wonder if you'll tell me a little bit of some of the, some of the journey.

[00:01:20]

Ilana Altman: Yeah. I always wondered, I find it really fascinating to listen to the podcast and to hear all of the different trajectories that got people into their roles in cultural planning and programming. I don't think anybody takes a straightforward path, but mine began in architecture. I studied architecture both in undergrad and then graduate school.



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[00:01:40]

Ilana Altman: And I worked in the field for over 10 years before shifting my focus. And during that time, I was really fortunate to work with some amazing international practices, Daniel Studio Libeskind, and Diller Scofidio + Renfro in New York, KPMB here in Toronto and um, was just really fortunate to have incredible mentors who offered me significant opportunities at a young age to test ideas and to work directly with clients and to work on ambitious projects that spanned residential work, educational work, cultural work.

But my time at Diller Scofidio + Renfro was particularly significant because it was actually one of their shows, which I saw in the Canadian Centre for Architecture when I first started studying in Montreal, that prompted me to think about architecture as a career. And the show was called The American Lawn.

It was a material study of this familiar landscape element and we all think we know. But the approach was wholly new. It was this forensic exploration of the familiar and it involved brilliant exhibition strategies that explored the lawn as a class symbol, a showplace and economic force and national icon.

And it was really like a thing I'd never experienced before. It was one of those moments that you kind of hear about where all of a sudden a light went off. And I felt like I understand this way of thinking, and this could be a vehicle that helps me to make sense of the world and potentially helps me to make an impact as well.

And for me, that's really how I found architecture as a tool. And it's been a tool throughout my career, regardless of whether I'm working on exhibitions or performances or building projects or public spaces. It's been my tool to understand history and social relationships and politics. And I guess I think that I practice, I continue to practice architecture, just not through buildings, but through spatial storytelling. Um, and through choreography and through community building, but it's all still stems back to my architectural training.

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Stephanie Fortunato: I love that it was sparked by this exhibition about the lawn too, because it seems like, you're now such an expert in the area of public spaces and the experience of bringing people together in public. And I love that you were sparked by this moment of looking at these very intimate, you know, uh, lawns as the springboard for this passion for architecture.

[00:04:02]

Ilana Altman: Yeah. I think, public space has been at the root of my interest and of my practice. You know, really since the very beginning.

And I think it's where architecture and the city is most excited. These, these spaces for communities come together where cultural experiences are shared and strengthened. They're often really complex spaces where I think the challenges and opportunities of a city play out in real time.



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Ilana Altman: And it's been interesting for me to have started my career on one side, thinking about the design of these spaces and kind of, projecting forward what they would be and how they would function and for whom. And now to be on the other side of that, to really be responsible for the day to day and the operations and the programming of these spaces.

And for me it's, it's been this moment where I see how the ideal gets tested in real time and in practice. Now, I think any designer who goes out to design a certain space is designing it with an ideal in mind. One of the things that I learned almost instantly in moving into my role at The Bentway is that there's no such thing as making a space once.

I mean you draw it and um, you go through the construction process, but, that's not an end point. That's absolutely a beginning point. These spaces are made over every single day and the decisions that we make about them in the way that people engage with them. So it's, I started to think about public spaces, really a constant creation model.

And that wasn't necessarily the way that I approached it when I was working as a designer.

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Stephanie Fortunato: That's funny, right? I mean, human beings can take anything and change the way you expect it's going to play out from what was on paper. Um, I feel like all of us have those plans that we thought were going to work beautifully, and then you introduce humans and you're like, well, that was a nice idea, (laughs) but this is actually how it's going to work.

[00:05:58]

Ilana Altman: Sometimes they get better though, right? Um, sometimes you put something into being and it functions in a totally different way than you would expect, but actually opens up a whole new range of possibilities and becomes full out in a different way. And so that's always encouraging to see as well.

[00:06:12]

Stephanie Fortunato: Absolutely. I feel like that's when you find that most things are possible when you have that moment of imagination from a place where you didn't even expect it could come from. I noticed that you're a bit of a serial entrepreneur um, and that you've founded and led several cultural organisations, several start-ups, in fact um, over the years. And I wondered, you know, what drives you to create some of those new platforms and structures for engagement? How have they been, how has your thinking and practice evolved in, in the development of these different organisations?

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Ilana Altman: You know, for me, it was genuinely born from a point of curiosity. I was interested in certain ideas. I was interested in certain opportunities. And so we started talking about them. And in particular, when I made the move back to Toronto, after being in New York for, for almost a decade, it was also for me a way of getting to know the city.



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Ilana Altman: Um, when I first moved back from New York, I returned in 2013 and I was absolutely kind of blown away by the city I had come back to. I mean, I had known that Toronto had been undergoing a major development boom for several years at that point, but the rate and volume of development here over the last 25, 30 years is completely unprecedented.

And what I didn't realise is that there was a by-product of this development boom – an associated public art boom. Like so many north American cities, Toronto has a percent for public art programme. And so alongside this investment and new residential and commercial spaces, we were starting to see a huge investment in the public realm and in public art uh, supported by both public and private resources.

But for me, there was a gap. There was both a gap in the way that we were talking about the relationship between these two associated developments across the city. And there was also a real gap in the commissioning processes that were in place, that were based on what I felt was a pretty limited definition of public art and it privileged a very select group of practitioners. So I got really excited about how we could broaden the dialogue about what public art was, who it could be, what it could be and for whom. And I thought that there was an opportunity to kind of capture and capitalise on this transformational moment in the city and introduce new mediums, new durational models, new interdisciplinary practices, new voices most importantly.

So I, uh, you know, essentially I started talking about those possibilities with people and realised that there was a community of people who were excited about the same ideas that I was and that's what led me to found The Artful City. Sometimes I think of that project as accidental advocacy. I started off, you know, genuinely asking questions and realising that people had different perspectives, but they weren't necessarily in dialogue with one another. So what can I do to bring those conversations together? And maybe I could start an editorial platform. And then I started thinking about where these projects were taking place and began creating maps.

And all of a sudden it was a mapping effort that was informing public policy and master planning work. So in that case, it was um, it was kind of an organic process that led to the development of the project. But for me, it was a really important way to get reintroduced to the city that I came from and to get introduced to the cultural community here.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah, I think that's such a great story about how your personal interest and what drives you, your own curiosity can sometimes lead you to a community of practice that you really need in order to understand the place where you live and work. And, you know, just to have better understanding. I wonder what advice you might give someone who is thinking about undertaking such an effort, someone who might've just returned to their own hometown and might be trying to find those people and practices that will help sustain them in these, in these places.

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Ilana Altman: Yeah, I think that it's important not to underestimate people's interest in, in generosity. Um, interest in new ideas and generosity with their time.



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Ilana Altman: Coming from a place like New York, you know, sometimes it can be intimidating. It feels like there's a lot of layers between you and the people who are making decisions.

And then coming back to Toronto, I began with a set of questions and every conversation led to another conversation. Everybody I met with suggested that I speak to somebody else and was happy to make that introduction. And for me, it's what you know, will allow me to build a network in a relatively short amount of time.

You know, I think you need to be willing to put yourself out there and trust in people's interest and generosity. You know, if they share your bigger values, if they share your, your ideas, to help you to put them into being or put them into action. Equally I think that it is really important to do your own independent work.

As much as you can learn through other institutions and other organisations or offices. I found that in taking on these independent projects, all of a sudden you become responsible for everything. You become responsible in thinking about communication strategies and thinking about curatorial directions, and thinking about fundraising and thinking about uh, collaborators and partnerships. And I got pieces of that uh, when I was working at other offices or other organisations, but having the responsibility for it, even if it's on a small scale project is a learning exercise that I don't think you can get any other way.

And I think it's incredibly valued, well, if you're going into, going on to do cultural work because knowing at least a little bit about all of the different facets that are necessary to bring that work to life is, is incredibly valuable. It will make you a better curator, it will make you a better communications lead, it will make you a better fundraiser. It's really important, even if you're starting small to, to try to do some work independently.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Stephanie Fortunato: You know, you spoke a little bit about the pace of redevelopment in Toronto, and I imagine that is some of the origin story of The Bentway itself, is embedded in the story of Toronto in recent years. Could you tell us a little bit about The Bentway?

[00:12:45]

Ilana Altman: So our story really starts with the Gardiner Expressway. And for those who aren't familiar with Toronto uh, the Gardiner Expressway is an elevated highway. It was built mid-century, fifties and sixties, at a time when the car was king and the objective was to link the city's centre to the suburbs.

And it was also a time when our waterfront was very industrial. And then, you know, building an elevated highway that created a little bit of a wall against that waterfront at the time wasn't nearly as controversial, but almost as soon as the project began construction, it came under critique.



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Ilana Altman: So much so that uh, there were certain advocacy groups that lobbied to have the routes changed in front of a national historic site where the Bentway is now situated.

Because the original plans for the highway would have actually taken out a portion of the Southern part of that national historic site. So it was, you know, it was a project of a certain era. It was very singular in its purpose. It was monumental in scale. And in many cases there was, you know, very little regard for the spaces that were constructed below the deck of the highway so much so that the city didn't even hold on to all the land, in some cases it was sold off to private developers. So, you know, as long as I can remember, the Gardiner has been one of those divisive structures in the city that has fuelled debates about the future of our waterfront, the future of downtown and its growth and what we value. And the debates were always very singular. Do we tear it down, do we keep it up, do we tear it down, do we keep it up?

I think when The Bentway was first announced, it immediately changed the debate. All of a sudden the question was, how can we ask our infrastructure to do more? How can we start to think about this space below the highway? Um, in the same way that we think about it above, how could it become a place where people and cyclists could move in the same way the cars moved above and did we have to make a choice? Do we have to wait until the highway came to its natural end of its functional life before we decided to reinvest and started to, to reconnect?

It was also an incredibly ambitious project for Toronto – uncharacteristically bold. And it was really an important time for a new discussion about infrastructure to be introduced as well as a new conversation about public space. Um, moving beyond these destination parks and postage stamp kind of public spaces, this was a whole new model.

It was a linear model that forced us to reconsider the ways in which we define public spaces, where we find them in a, in a dense fine city like Toronto. I don't think we have the luxury of solely thinking about tabula rasa. These sites where, you know, you find them kind of ready for transformation.

This represented a recognition that we needed to embrace all possibilities, to reconnect our public realm and to make space for the growing communities around it. So it was a project that, that moved forward really quickly. It was first introduced to the City by our founders... our founders, Judy and Wil Matthews and Ken Greenberg first introduced in mid-2015.

And uh, we opened the first part of the site in January, 2018. So it moved at an absolutely record pace and I often hear, you know, people often refer to these types of projects as multi-generational projects, which I sometimes feel is a nice way of saying you, you won't see that in your lifetime.

But this happened really, really quickly and, so much so that The Bentway Conservancy, the organisation that I run with my partner, Dave Carey, it was not yet formed. The project um, was designed and, and construction started just as the conservancy was being founded. So the two things really kind of happened and came up at the same time.



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Ilana Altman: But now, now we operate, uh, a growing site located underneath Toronto's elevated Gardiner expressway which we maintain as an open public space and have platform for creative practice and public art and connected urban life. And it's both a new model for public space in Toronto, as well as a new forum for, for social engagement.

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Stephanie Fortunato: And I wonder, you know, the speed of which infrastructure changes happened and you working at the same time to figure out what the conservancy was going to be, what the space was going to be able to do. And back there, that was a real opportunity actually, to integrate the two in a way that you don't often get in public space development, actually.

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Ilana Altman: Well, I should note that a big reason that the project happened as quickly as it did was because the Matthews Foundation who, who one of the founders, made a, what in Canada is a really unprecedented private gift towards the construction of this project. They really believed in the possibilities of the space and what it could do for Toronto and not just um, what it could do in its particular geography, but how it could become a catalyst for stimulating new thinking about public space and new growth all across the city.

And uh, because it was relatively unprecedented both in Toronto and in Canada, I think there was a real will and desire for partnership of this nature within the city. And so, the project was able to kind of cut across traditional city departmental divisions that can often slow these things down.

Um, I think that there was a clear and present goal and a real desire, not only to see the space transformed, but to see this new public and private model play out um, and succeed. That really helped us.

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Stephanie Fortunato: I know you said before that the city didn't even own all of the spaces below the highway. So there must have been also a period of negotiation there as well to get other private sector partners on board?

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Ilana Altman: We built out just under a kilometre of length underneath the highway, and we're currently located on the national historic site of Fort York. So just to the north of the Gardiner sits the Fort that was threatened by the construction of the highway that I mentioned earlier.

Um, and you can see the historic fort walls and the historic structures within it. But the highway itself actually cuts across a portion of the national historic site. So in the case where we are currently located, it was all municipal land. And as we look east and west, it becomes a whole host of different partners.



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Ilana Altman: And that's work that we're engaged in right now is we're working quite closely with the city on the development of a public realm plan for the larger extent of the elevated highway. And we recognise that it is, the desire is still the same, to create this network of public spaces that facilitate connection across the corridor, that supports active transportation, and public programming and access to the waterfront.

But it's going to take a series of different tactics because there are a mix of public and private landholders and another whole host of different operators with adjacencies to the site.

[00:20:05]

Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah. So, so tell us, so you had this area that was not much used. People were not used to going there. Tell me a little bit about the programming and how you enticed people to, to meet up at The Bentway.

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Ilana Altman: For me, when I, I began at The Bentway as the Director of Programming. And for me, it was really important when developing the programming mandate, to not separate the built project from the programming work that we were doing. I didn't see, as I, as I was saying before, I didn't see the architecture as the end goal and the programming as a means of animating it; I saw them both on this trajectory towards new conversations about public space, new ways of thinking about the city they were in, whether we were doing a three-day performance or creating um, a 30-year vision for a new structure.

I thought it was really important that all of that work was towards the same goal. And so we made a commitment that our programming was really designed to drive those, those conversations forward. How could we challenge the conventions of public space? How could we open up the dialogue by the changing nature of our city?

How is it changing and for whom? How did we invite the public in, not as witnesses to that conversation, but as, as active participants. And so regardless of what we do, whether it's cultural programming, artistic programming, recreational, educational programming, we're always working towards these series of questions about the city and what we try to do um, with all of our projects is also not necessarily see them as end projects in and of themselves.

But as ways of testing new ideas of, of demonstrating possibilities, of stimulating conversation and consultation and ensuring that we're doing that alongside our partners who, who are the public. So I, I think that our model is really both a new model for cultural and for civic institutions. It's a new way of having a conversation about the ways we build our city. And it's a new way of making those processes more tangible, more understandable to a general public.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah. And I think, you know, that there's something kind of wonderful about approaching an innovative project with that spirit of inquiry at the centre of it all. And it seems like, what you're doing is really, it's really playful!



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Stephanie Fortunato: And I know that that was the theme of your programming last summer – and you did a lot of work provoking people to play in public, in The Bentway.

Can you tell us a little bit about what you learned from that project?

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Ilana Altman: Well, it's a project a long time in the making. When we were developing The Bentway, the city was working on a series of guidelines to guide the development of these high-rise neighbourhoods that were emerging all around us. And in particular thinking about how new vertical communities were going to sustain children's health and wellbeing.

And that in turn led to the series of guidelines called the Growing Up guidelines which called for a new design thinking of promoting independent mobility, and access to parks and thinking about community facilities and central life. So we were really aware of the role that The Bentway needed to play for an increasing number of families and young children who were making their homes in these condos, in and around the space.

And at the same time, we recognise that The Bentway was not a traditional park. It was not going to contain soccer fields or basketball courts in the way that we traditionally find them or understand them. And yet we were seeing people come to the site and find it on their own terms and use it in, in new ways for play.

And so we were both watching what was happening in the space of policy and planning, and watching very directly what we were seeing on site and how we could learn from our community. And I think it led us to ask ourselves a couple of questions: What, how does new spaces like The Bentway change the rules at play, and how can these spaces teach us to play differently? And in, as we're playing differently, how can we play in a more accessible and inclusive way as well? And in turn, I think how can play actually influence our decisions about public space and how we design them in the future. So this was all happening in 2019 and early 2020, and we were working towards an incredible season of programmes.

We saw play as this important vehicle, not only to ask these questions about our transforming city and the future of public space, but also to really challenge the conventions of public art. This wasn't going to be a series of installations and programmes that you know, were sculptural in nature, and that sat on a pedestal and you looked at it from a distance.

These were going to be public art projects that kind of breached the conventions of public art and that demanded interaction in a different way. So they were highly tactile. They were inviting people to come together. And we were just starting to enter a fabrication in March 2020 when everything changed. And all of a sudden, you know, this highly tactile and interactive exhibition, it was impossible. For many reasons it was impossible. It was also, we felt irresponsible to go forward with it at that time.

But we were committed to seeing it through. And I think, you know, initially we were kind of assuming that we would come back to the exhibition as it was originally planned.



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Ilana Altman: But as COVID extended, the context changed. And all of a sudden the questions that we were asking felt like they needed to be revisited. During COVID, families reported significant increase in screen time and decrease in outdoor play and physical activities. And those shifts were even more pronounced in these dense urban communities like the communities surrounding The Bentway, where access to public space was more limited.

So we felt that it was important not only to ask the questions that we still felt were very relevant about how play informs city building and in turn how we can challenge our traditions of play, but equally how play had changed amidst COVID. And as we emerged from the pandemic, we were really interested in whether play could be used as a tool for re-engaging with the city and with each other. So a strategy for urban recovery.

We were really fortunate that all of the artists that we work with were willing and excited partners as we pushed our season from 2020 to 2021. And not only were they interested in continuing to see their projects through, but they were interested in re-evaluating it based on new learnings. And you know, I really can't state enough how grateful I am to our artistic partners and to our staff who continue to, to push forward with the planning in really challenging and unprecedented times.

And in my mind, I really think that we couldn't have offered the city something more meaningful than the play season in 2021. It was a time when people were re-emerging from what was a really extensive lockdown here in Toronto. One of the most extensive lockdowns in north America. People needed to uh, feel safe as they were re-engaging with public space, they needed to be with each other.

And it was amazing to see families and children and people of all ages come out and find joy in these structures to be kind of inspired by the work that they saw and to engage with it, you know, under these new circumstances. So for me, it was incredible. It was incredible process that got us to the play season. And we learned a lot about how play really could serve as that tool for during recovery in the process.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah. Tell me a little bit about some of the learnings that, that came out of this project. I mean, what an incredible, as you say, offering for the Toronto community and what fun, what joy to, you know, invite people to come back together in public to play. Tell me a little bit about what you learned.

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Ilana Altman: Well, one of the other benefits of having this extended planning process was that we actually got to think about how we wanted to learn from our projects. Often – and I'm sure this is something that you're familiar with, I think anybody who works in the space knows that you're often jumping from one project to the next, and you rarely have time to think forward about how to best evaluate the work that you've done.

But with a little bit of extra planning time, we had the benefit of thinking about how we would make best use of the time that we had with the installations on site. And when we were actively engaging in the programming, how would we begin to evaluate what we were, what we had put into being?



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Ilana Altman: And one of the collaborators that we were working on the season was a Montreal-based design studio called Daily tous les jours. They're an incredible creative practice who um, developed this brilliant project called Walk, Walk, Dance. They were one of the collaborators that we were working on that was, had a highly touch-based project in 2020.

And um, they completely converted it to be a project that you danced through. So it was touchless, it was completely stimulated by your feet. And it kind of prompted us to think about how we could create a dance strategy for, for a city and, and how it tends to be a way of bringing people together to play in public space.

But they also had a really great practice of integrating impact studies and toolkits and assessments in their work. So we asked them if they would partner with us on the development of an evaluation process and ultimately a report which we call it, Play Provocations um, where we could reflect and learn together. And together with Daily tous les jours, we conducted artist interviews, um, we looked at use patterns and attendance. We did a series of on-site surveys. And throughout what I think was really wonderful is that we use the language of play to prompt engagement and responses. So it felt very much, the evaluation process was very much of this season.

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Stephanie Fortunato: I just love it. Dance strategy for a city? That sounds like the city I want to develop and want to visit. Um, how have these play provocations helped to inspire your plans for the upcoming season?

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Ilana Altman: Well, I think that there was lots of learnings that we attempted to capture in that document. And I encourage everyone listening to, to take a look. It's a really fun document to look through.

But I think one of the things we learnt, and again, this was a bit of a pandemic necessity that turned into a really wonderful learning is that initially when we were planning the season, it was very concentrated on The Bentway site. You're trying to create a real destination at The Bentway.

And when we looked forward and decided to present this in 2021, it felt challenging to think about a single destination based project. We wanted to ensure that we were able to meet people where they were in the neighbourhood rather than asking them to come to us, that we were creating opportunities that they could find naturally on their daily walks.

And we also felt that uh, there was a real opportunity to just, to kind of build off the patterns of movement that we had seen in the city emerged during COVID, where people were navigating their neighbourhoods in new ways, to create a neighbourhood based exhibition. So we actually ended up moving out beyond The Bentway site to other properties in the local vicinity and, and our season became not only a series of installations that read in relationship to one another, but a series of installations that you could use to navigate your neighbourhood.



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Ilana Altman And I think that for us, it was really interesting to see play work as an ecosystem rather than a singular destination. And I think that each exhibition or each installation in the exhibition really played a very distinct role. Some were much more directly physical while others sparked conversations, others prompted participants to look at their surroundings in new ways and they stimulated different senses and they really work together to create a more complete environment that spans the neighbourhood.

And that's definitely something that we're trying to emulate in our new programming seasons, to think about the way that The Bentway not only acts as a destination but an anchor within a larger neighbourhood, and how our programming can be a main means of facilitating connections uh, so that we're not solely reliant on our multi-use paths but actually programming can help to create these, these critical links.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Stephanie Fortunato: What are some of the considerations that, that you give to developing relationships with neighbours and to making sure that The Bentway programme is inclusive for all ages? I, it sounds to me like the different installations must've attracted a broad audience of ages and other, um, identities to, to participate in them.

How do you approach those partnerships with community?

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Ilana Altman: Yeah. I get asked this question a lot and it's, it's hard to answer generally. I think because really each partnership is very different, and requires different strategies. But I think that we're not, we're really not afraid to put questions out there and to ask our community to help us to shape programming together.

We believe that co-creation is really important and sometimes that's directly alongside an artist, sometimes that's in feedback. You know, before we launch a season of programming, sometimes that's in the aftermath of, of large events. But it's really important to us that our community is, is feeding into the learnings.

And that's both through, you know, traditional strategies like questionnaires and surveys, but I think even more importantly, really watching what happens on site and engaging with the community. You learn a lot in observing the ways that people engage with the site. It can be a real cue as to what types of programming they're looking for.

And that became even more pronounced during the pandemic when all of a sudden, you know, our site wasn't just about coming for Bentway delivered programmes, for skate or for walking your dog, but became where the fitness community came out to host classes, and became an incredibly popular spot for dance classes and dance videos.



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Ilana Altman: You know, every time I walked through The Bentway in the warmer months, there's somebody doing something incredibly amazing from the dance community. And I see the site appear on social media now and all of these TikTok and Instagram clips which is really exciting. Equally, we saw people make use of the site for baby showers and birthday parties.

And so we try to, rather than try to replicate those efforts through our own programming, we tried to create possibilities um, where we could better support community events and work that was already being done. And I think that each time we do a new piece of programming, we take the time to really observe how the community is engaging to better understand how they want to use the space.

And that's, that's been our greatest prompt, I would say uh, in developing new seasons. Uh, one of the best examples of that is a couple of years ago, we heard from the skateboarding community that in the construction of The Bentway, our really beloved DIY skate park had been removed and the space had significance for them, and they wanted to ensure that they could come back.

And so we partnered with a group of skateboarders to create a series of skateable sculptures that took over our ice skating trail for a season. And alongside this group, we developed a whole host of programming including videography and skate sculpture building and designing your own skateboards and competitions.

And it really, it was amazing to see how the community kind of descended on the site and made it their own. And even though the sculptures have moved on after the end of the season came to completion, the community remains. And so with each one of these invitations for collaboration, each one of these new seasons, we build these new relationships and I think when we're successful, the relationships long outlive, you know, any single season or any single project.

[00:37:29]

Stephanie Fortunato: I love that example. I mean, I feel like that's truly at the heart of all good stewardship, is that invitation that extends beyond even the light of that, that project. And really, then you have an audience and not just an audience, but a group of advocates who are really invested in the space long-term and you must've made the skateboarders so happy with that project. (laughs)

[00:37:57]

Ilana Altman: It is a really special project to be part of. I think of that project often as one of those great moments of community-engaged, artistic practice. And I will never forget that when they were putting the finishing touches on the sculptures, at least 60 people descended on the site because they wanted to be there to be the one to put the final nail into the sculpture or put the final coat of paint on. It really became a community celebration and community moment.

And it was very organic and, uh, it was, it was amazing to be part of it. I learnt I'm not a skateboarder by any means, but I learnt enough about it that I really feel like I can appreciate the culture in a new way.



[00:38:43]

Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah. So, this season you will actually be taking a deeper look at the street. Can you tell us a little bit about the programming that you have planned for this summer?

[00:38:55]

Ilana Altman: Yeah. It's a really exciting collection of programmes. And for us, it also marks our return to live performance in a way that we haven't been able to support in recent years.

Stephanie Fortunato: Yay!

Ilana Altman: So we're all very excited about it. The Bentway, I think has a long history of questioning the role of the street very directly.

I mean, we are located below an active highway. It's our frame, it's our foundation. And it will long be a point of inquiry for us, but we also recognise that throughout the pandemic, so many different cities across the world have been reconsidering the roles of their streets.

And there's a real opportunity to think about the cultural and commercial opportunities that were proved out in short order during the course of the pandemic. Toronto has been a city that has been quite resistant to on-street dining and um, uh, different commercial practices kind of spilling out beyond the borders of their storefronts and in the pandemic, it became a necessity.

And all of a sudden, you know, just by moving out onto the sidewalks. This entirely new culture emerged in the warmer months. And so there was huge learnings there, there was also, you know, this wonderful and very much needed process of closing down major streets to make them more accessible for cyclists and people who were walking and people who needed space to go out and to be active especially during the more challenging periods of lockdown.

So we feel that there's this real moment within this city at this particular point in time, to be able to question the role that streets are going to play as public spaces going forward. How they're going to support activities that are both spontaneous and planned, how they're going to continue to support improvisation and innovation. And as a result, we have worked with a whole host of different creative partners to create a season, as I said, that is filled with inspiring installations, that question the way that we name streets, the ways in which streets become the space of theatre, the ways in which our bylaws can even be, street bylaws can be prompts for new creative ways of thinking.

But equally a set of roaming performances that take both the performer and audience quite literally into the street to help them see the city anew, and to help them map the city anew through sound, through dance. So it's a really exciting collection of programmes and beyond the programmes proper, I'm really excited about how the learnings that are going to come out of this season are going to inform our work on the public realm plan and the future development of the under Gardiner spaces.



[00:41:33]

Ilana Altman: I think that we never want to see those two exercises as, as separate part of a learning process um, that you can do alongside the community.

[00:41:43]

Stephanie Fortunato: Um, I think I'm going to have to plan a trip to Toronto this summer to come check that out. (laughs)

Ilana Altman: Oh you should, it's going to be pretty fantastic.

Stephanie Fortunato: So good. Well, I love that we're sort of coming to a close, thinking about people taking over the streets of Toronto. That's a far cry from the days in which the Gardiner was giving over all the space to private automobiles. Uh, but it feels right. It feels like this is where we should be headed as practitioners as well as what we should all expect from our own cities there.

And I wish you the best of luck with that programming. I look forward to seeing the evaluation that comes out of it. We'll have to have you back on the podcast next year to talk about that.

Ilana Altman: I'd be happy to do that.

Stephanie Fortunato: Ilana, is there anything else that you'd like us to be thinking about in this moment, or you think that we need to understand about The Bentway or about this work?

[00:42:38]

Ilana Altman: I think that uh, you know, one of the things that we talk about a lot at The Bentway is shifting the conversation away from industrial reuse to thinking about hybrid reuse. And it's relevant. I mean, part of it is semantics, but it's relevant because I think that we really can't wait for opportunities to present themselves because an idea came to a logical end or because a part of the city doesn't function the way it used to.

I think The Bentway is a really great example of how we can decide to continue to support an important transportation artery in the city and a highway structure as mobility artery. But that doesn't necessarily mean that we can't invest in, in public life as well. And you know, if it can be done in a city like Toronto, it, I think it can be done anywhere where, especially with a piece of aging infrastructure and freeze-thaw cycles.

I mean, we have every challenge of the book is, uh, thrown at this project, but the ways in which the city has embraced it and the ways in which it has the potential to even further connect the city is so important. And I think, you know, I'm so proud that Toronto decided to take a risk on a project like The Bentway, which I, you know, I often feel that sometimes Toronto waits for models to be proven out elsewhere before they decided to test it themselves, but The Bentway is really a uniquely Toronto proposition. And I hope that in, you know, a number of years' time, this structure that for so long has divided us and has been this point of division and debate in the city, I hope that it emerges as a, as a real icon of the city of Toronto and that we can come to find it as a relevant structure for, for a contemporary city.



[00:44:27]

Stephanie Fortunato: Ilana, I think that you have inspired many of us to take a fresh look at our own cities and the adaptive reuse plans uh, really thinking about the infrastructure and what could be, what might be, with a little bit of imagination and definitely with a whole lot of passion and hard work. Thank you so much for sharing this innovative model and for all the good work that you are doing at The Bentway.

I wish you the best of luck with the street this summer. And maybe you'll find me at your door, but thank you for joining us here on The Three Bells.

[00:45:01] **Ilana Altman:** Thank you for having me.

[00:45:03] **Stephanie Fortunato:** Well, thank you Ilana!

Listeners, if you want more, check out www.thethreebells.net to find the references and other resources that are linked to this episode, including Play Provocations and find out more about Ilana's work. But first stick around for a conversation between myself and Criena, as we explore the key takeaways and actionable ideas from this conversation.

[00:45:26]

MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:45:32]

Stephanie Fortunato: Hey Criena, how are you?

[00:45:34]

Criena Gehrke: Hello, Stephanie. I am so well, how are you going over there, at the other side of the world?

Stephanie Fortunato: Oh, I'm just back from holiday. So I'm feeling restored and ready for anything, you?

Criena Gehrke: I'm actually looking at over a new ocean. I'm on the Sunshine Coast, not the Gold Coast today. So I'm enjoying a beautiful sunrise as we speak.

Stephanie Fortunato: Ah, so lovely. You always do such wonderful visual images of where you are. (laughs)

Criena Gehrke: Well, also a note to everyone that's listening: health, wellbeing, and having a break is really important.

[00:46:06]

Stephanie Fortunato: It's an important moment here in our podcast. Thank you for saying that out loud. (laughs)

Criena Gehrke: (laughs)



[00:46:13]

Stephanie Fortunato: Holding true to our values. And speaking of values and purpose driven life, what'd you think of the conversation with Ilana?

[00:46:23]

Criena Gehrke: I thought it was such a lovely conversation and I really enjoyed hearing about the programming of The Bentway. And every time someone says to me "play", I get very excited because we've got a similar kind of philosophy at HOTA around, how do you bring that public realm in those places alive?

But the thing that I found most interesting was the fact that Ilana was an architect and what that background brings into her role at The Bentway and into her creative practice. Now, I thought that there were some really interesting reflections around architecture and these precincts in public realms.

[00:47:09]

Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah, I love the way she said that she sees architecture as a tool. And I think that's a really important perspective for us all to keep in mind as we think about what's possible in these public spaces. And I think it's interesting to think about it as only one element. You know, I think often we think about it as the end goal.

But here she made it so clear that architecture and the infrastructure with what she's working really are just contributing elements to what they are creating overall at The Bentway.

[00:47:39]

Criena Gehrke: And that those spaces and great public spaces and even infrastructure in its purest sense, I think are dynamic places. They're not static. And so they change every single day. And I think you, during the conversation yourself, Stephanie said, you can never predict the humans and how fabulous that is. But you know, you think of these structures in these places as set in stone or concrete because they literally are.

But the minute that you add humans to the mix, they're going to do things in a different way. They're going to respond to that environment in ways that you could never imagine. And I think that contemplating that at the very beginning of an infrastructure process leads to better outcomes in the end.

[00:48:25]

Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah, you've just come off of a big project there at HOTA. Haven't you?

[00:48:28]

Criena Gehrke: Yeah, we opened our new gallery nearly 12 months to the day, actually. And before that, a large outdoor amphitheatre. So I've opened two major piece of infrastructure in the last four years, which has been extraordinary. And in fact, Ilana talked about that a little bit as well, because I've been involved in bringing on infrastructure at a rapid pace because the Gold Coast is that kind of ambitious and bold city.



[00:48:59]

Criena Gehrke: But she talked about that herself, that with the philanthropic support and the good will of the community and some community leaders, they managed to cut the red tape and get on with the project faster than what you would have expected. And I think that was another key takeaway for me, anyone that's listening that is in a position of being able to give a green tick and cut through red tape and really support good outcomes at speed should be commended.

But we should all take up the mantle because there was that part of the conversation around, things don't need to be about generational shifts sometimes, there can be an immediate, nimble response to an opportunity or to a vision for a city.

[00:49:46]

Stephanie Fortunato: And I think, you know, getting back to the idea of play, I think you're a little mischievous, you know, you like to play a little bit... (laughs)

Criena Gehrke: (laughs)

Stephanie Fortunato: In your approach there. But you know like we got to ask people to play well together too, to make these projects happen right? It's not going to be just the private sector or the city, or, you know, the upstart artists who want to use the space. Everyone kind of has to work together to, to make it function and to have it be a place that is interesting and dynamic and that you want to come back to for new experiences and, you know, to, it, sort of encounter new ideas again and again, which I think The Bentway has done pretty successfully.

The other thing I wanted to say was I love this idea of asking infrastructure to do more?

Criena Gehrke: Yeah. (laughs)

Stephanie Fortunato: And, you know, I think there's that such an opening for all of us to really look around and say, okay, like, yep, we've got these challenges and we have these big projects on the horizon, but what can we do today to at least begin the process of opening up a dialogue?

And, you know, art is such a great way to introduce people to new places and new ideas, but it's also such a great way to experiment, right? I know you must work with artists all the time that are sort of pushing us along and how we use spaces.

[00:51:02]

Criena Gehrke: Yeah, and that's about the invitation and the vision. You're absolutely right. It's asking our infrastructure to do more. I mean, fundamentally, unless I'm mistaken, The Bentway is an underpass with a highway over the top and it happens to have community living around it. You know, what if right from the get-go, we demand and require that kind of thinking in new infrastructure as well? That when is a highway, not a highway? And often the response I think has been to put large scale public art, or uh – I have a personal aversion and forgive me, it's probably an Australian thing, but to murals that are along the road side?



[00:51:47]

Criena Gehrke: Because often they're of creepy children and weird stuff. I don't like them, but often that's the response.

Stephanie Fortunato: That's very particular. (laughs)

Criena Gehrke: It is very particular. (laughs) If you get lucky, I might do some research and we'll um, post some of them on our website because they freak me out. But you know, that, that response of going, oh, well, we're going to make those, you know, highways or transport corridors or hard infrastructure more engaging to our community by whacking some public art amongst it. Whereas The Bentway does that, but also really thinks about how the community is going to use it, what else can be provided that brings people into that space and that real sense of ownership. So I think that was probably the key thing that I took away: Ask our infrastructure to do more and to be a place that belongs to the people. Even if it's an underpass.

[00:52:45]

Stephanie Fortunato: And maybe, you know, the, also the lesson of looking not only above, but below and right and left should be the thing where you start, right.

[00:52:55]

Criena Gehrke: (laughs) Well, what did they say about always look to our children? Because they're the ones that look up, you know, and I think that's really important, particularly when, and it's off track, don't get me wrong. This might get edited but you know, we are such a "eyes down" society now.

Cause we're always on our screens and you know, these places, and Ilana talked a bit about that, about how engagement with each other with sense of play, with our connection to public realm and meeting and greeting places changed during the pandemic and how she's had to think long and hard about that moving forward and how you re-engage communities.

But, you know, we're an "eyes down" kind of society. And so when we think about these places, bringing them to life, creating these places, you know, I think you're right. Look up, look down, look left, look right. And really see it as the whole and the opportunity.

[00:53:53]

Stephanie Fortunato: Love that. Well Criena, it is a pleasure as always to speak with you. I hope you have a great day ahead.

Criena Gehrke: You too Stephanie, I'm now actually on holidays and I'm going to go and throw myself in the ocean. There you go. There's my infomercial. (laughs)

Stephanie Fortunato: (laughs) Wonderful, enjoy. Well, thank you, Criena. Thank you, Ilana. So good to talk to you to learn more about The Bentway in your work. Thank you for reminding us that architecture can be a tool.



[00:54:21]

Stephanie Fortunato: The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting and supported by The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network. The podcast and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net.

If you haven't already done so, please subscribe to our feed and rate us positively on your podcast listening platform of choice.

My name is Stephanie Fortunato. Thank you so much for being with us here today. And I look forward to joining you again soon.

[00:54:46]

THEME MUSIC

