



S2:E8 Creating unique spaces for culture in Copenhagen

Jesper Koefoed-Melson in conversation with Adrian Ellis

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THEME MUSIC

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Adrian Ellis: Hello and welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of a series brought to you by AEA Consulting and The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network, in which we explore what's happening around the world on those busy, and sometimes congested intersections of cultural and urban life.

The series and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net. And if you like our content, please subscribe and give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice. I'm Adrian Ellis, Director of AEA Consulting and the Chair of GCDN. And today I get to talk to Jesper Koefoed-Melson. Jesper is the Founding Director of a new cultural district in Copenhagen, in Denmark, that was summoned into existence in 2020, and I recently met him at the GCDN convening in Lugano. He's had a fascinating career as a festival producer, consultant, and urban strategist, and has brought all these to bear in his current role.

Hi Jesper, good morning and thank you for joining me. I'm delighted to have you as a guest and also delighted to receive you and your organisation into GCDN. This is a great opportunity for me and for the members of GCDN and other listeners to get to know a little bit about you and about the district that you have recently summoned into existence with your colleagues.

Thank you for joining me.

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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: Thank you so much for inviting me to this very interesting conversations and also for allowing me to be part of your Global Network of Cultural District, which is a huge inspiration for me and the cultural district I'm working with in Copenhagen.

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Adrian Ellis: So, Jesper, I'm guessing that when you were a child you weren't telling your parents, insistently, that you wanted to work in the interface of culture and urbanism. I suspect that's a passion that, that grew through your uh, experiences in your early profession life. But I may be wrong. Tell me a little bit about how your interests were inflamed.



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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: When I was a kid, I moved around a lot in different cities due to my father's job. He was a doctor. So, uh, this gave me kind of an interest in the city dynamics, the city culture, the city community that uh, became something that I was always very curious of when I landed in a new city.

So, that was kind of where my passion about the dynamics of the city started. And then when I moved to Copenhagen back in 2000, I just started biking around – that was before uh, Google Maps. So I had this map in my briefcase and you know, uh, starting to learn how the city was organised, how the city was designed and looking into how the different urban spaces could be uh, arenas for uh, for culture.

And um, when I was then uh, studying in Copenhagen – I was studying educational studies and performance design, but that was all this theory and the theory behind it was not interesting for me in itself, but interesting in relation to the practical context I experienced biking around, wandering around uh, in the city.

And then um, I learned that the way you can kind of design and activate urban spaces was really interesting also in a learning context. Uh, so I started creating different cultural events, festivals uh, et cetera. And was very intrigued by the city spaces, the urban spaces that was not predefined.

So you could actually create some really nice uh, spaces where you could let people meet each other through different cultural experiences. Uh, so this was uh, my, entering point into the, the whole cultural career of mine.

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Adrian Ellis: Tell me a little bit about the festivals. What sorts of festivals and under whose aegis: were you an impresario or did you work with the public authorities? How did you move into the presentation of festivals?

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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: I was part of a cultural environment in Copenhagen during the zeros where we were very focused on music and also different genres of music. So, we found it interesting also to create these events that was not in the institutions but in urban spaces. In that way, you can uh, let new audiences meet each other or audiences from different genres meet each other. And in that way, create new uh, stories, new experiences, new relationships. And we did this in an activist way.

You could say it was not like throwing bricks or very political, but in some way it was still ideologically uh, profound to us that we wanted to create something uh, new. And we did this by then throwing these events at different spaces that had not historically been uh, arenas for, cultural events.

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Adrian Ellis: How interesting. How has your involvement in festivals and how have festivals themselves with that sort of activist agenda, both been transformed and transformed the cultural landscape of Copenhagen?



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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: Oh, yeah, that's a big question. I think what, what has traditionally been the way to organise festivals in Copenhagen and Denmark and in many places actually, I think, has been to curate it quite uh, strongly? To create business models where there's an entrance fee, you know, where there's things you can buy and everything. And what we tried to do was to flip flop this kind of festival design and uh, make it user driven. So what I've tried to do with these festivals is to create an open platform where everyone can join. If they merely have an idea about how to use culture as a way to create communities.

So what the festivals I have created is trying to do is to gather as many of the cultural makers, the artists as possible, and then let them create the activities themselves. So that means we cannot define very strongly a specific genre. We also have to kind of adjust the term of quality because we are not a small curator group that sits and decides who are good enough to enter this space, you know?

It's more, who are willing to participate in this. And then we design the framework that allows people to, uh, be part of it.

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Adrian Ellis: So that co-creation, co-curation if you'd like, model has grown enormously in its sort of significance and in the seriousness with which cultural organisers take it. In other words, if you were to have described what you just described in 2020, I suspect that much of the cultural world would've regarded it suspiciously.

They would've said, where is the curatorial judgment being exercised that ensures that this, whatever the event is, is of an appropriate quality. You are early in saying we need to trust artists. We need to trust their taste and judgment, and we will, we will hand over, if you'd like, the curatorial gate-watching to others. When you look back on it, do you remain convinced that that is a compelling model for engaging? And it combines both um, artistic – standards is the wrong word, but artistic interest and popularity.

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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: I think this is a constant struggle because it's a balance. If you want to bring along everyone uh, having the framework of, for instance, a cultural district, I see it as my aim to involve everyone or as many as possible in the process. And if I narrow down the specific artistic approach, I will not allow everyone to contribute to this process. But still it's, it's very complex because it's uh, very difficult to communicate, but what makes me convinced that this is the model, at least I think will drive my cultural district to success is that I have seen different projects I have been involved with, and have started up, that has over time grown to huge successes. So an example of that is that back in 2010, when there was a financial crisis, there was a lot of empty buildings in Copenhagen that was certainly open for not so very commercial uses.

So, at that point I had an organisation that opened up these empty buildings through temporary – what is it called? Uh, contracts. So we had, for instance uh, in, in a building, a two year contract, or it was, it was actually four buildings and we, you know, if we had chosen to curate it very strictly, it would've been years before we had the tenants uh, or the users that would have fulfilled this narrow aim.



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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: Now what we did when we had the building was that we opened the doors from one day to another and everyone who saw an idea with this place who could contribute with something either with a social purpose or a cultural purpose, they were allowed to be part of it, you know?

And that meant that uh, within three months we had over a hundred daily users in uh, 30 different leasing contracts. So, that means that you can initially very quickly create a strong and big community. And then we had two years to kind of adjust the different projects, the different activities we made.

And after the two years this community could um, continue by itself and-

Adrian Ellis: Self-manage.

Jesper Koefoed-Melson: And yeah, yeah, exactly. And thereby becoming resilient. And this is the kind of uh, method that I'm also working with within the cultural district.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Adrian Ellis: So let's turn to the cultural district because out of your interest in that interface between culture and urban life, you are now running a significant cultural district in Copenhagen. How did that come to be? And tell us a little bit about its essential characteristics.

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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: Over the last 15 years, I have been working very much as a consultant for different municipalities and developers, again, in creating these communities that became my line of work. Some five years ago I started missing also the kind of more activist entrepreneurial kind of approach and I wanted to do something also for my own community.

So where I live in Northern uh, Eastern Copenhagen is where I have created this cultural district. So four years ago I became a member of the local council. And I started up a process where I reached out to the local artists, local cultural makers, and asked what would you need in order to fulfil your dreams within the art and culture in the city?

And through this process, I both got a lot of brilliant input and a lot of great relations. And through that I then created an association that started up in February 2020, just as corona shut down the country. That was kind of challenging, but I did have an association, I had support from the local community through this process where we had gathered some great input and designed some ideas on how to collaborate through festivals, how to create a communicative platform and so on and so forth.

But we didn't have the possibilities to execute. But again, we had this association. Then as the country was shut, I started investigating what kind of framework is possible to create once you have gathered support from the local community.



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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: And I actually found the GCDN. So I started reading up on the reports you have on your website. And I learned that the cultural district was a really uh, interesting framework to develop a community, to enter into also societal questions, uh that could be really interesting to use also culture as a driver to kind of, create solutions.

Then all of a sudden the association was named the cultural district, very much thanks to the research I read on the GCDN website. And now uh, after some time we have some different activities. We create, we have a conference, we have several festivals. We have a network both within culture and within businesses, local businesses and we are working on a platform online that can promote the different facilities we have in the cultural districts.

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Adrian Ellis: Tell me a little bit about those. Give me some idea of the composition of the district – it's scale, how you, whether you define it tightly, geographically, or whether it has hard corners or not.

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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: So the cultural district is a fairly big area which inhabits approximately 100,000 Copenhagen houses, it covers two parts of the city it's called Østerbro and it's called Nordhavn. Østerbro is a traditional historic area of the city with old housing, regular houses and a lot of apartments. And then we have Nordhavn which is a new part of the city. Uh, it has been an industrial harbour but now it's gradually transformed to more residential and also business areas. And diving into this urban development of the area is really interesting also for the cultural district to see how we can create culture in this new part of the city through our approach.

Then we have different institutions. We have some museums, we have some really high end theatres. We have a lot of associations that gathers people with the different cultural activities. In the near future, we will see two very big cultural institutions race in this new part of the city.

Adrian Ellis: What are they, if I may ask?

Jesper Koefoed-Melson: So one is uh, called The Tunnel Factory. Which is a huge factory that is being transformed into one of Northern Europe's biggest culture houses. So this will be a mixture of venues, there will be uh, student housing there will be office spaces, food, ateliers, workshops. So it will be a small city you could say, in the city.

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Adrian Ellis: What are the voices around the table? What's the structure? What's the sort of constitutional structure, and also, because they're usually tied, what's the underlying business model.

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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: In order to answer that question. I need to say that we are a young cultural district and we are looking for a sustainable business model. For now, we do have a board representing the strong, cultural institutions of the cultural district.



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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: So we sit together and we talk about the overall strategy. Until now it has been with focus on creating the activities that could bring us closer together and create awareness about the cultural district. Then the next aim is to also involve the local businesses. And this is why we also are creating these business networks.

The business model is under development and will be with focus on promoting the uh, local businesses and institutions through partially the activities we do that involves the local actors and, and partially also with the community platform that we are creating.

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Adrian Ellis: In Lugano, we were all recently in Lugano, there was a lot of discussion and I think uh, at least one formal panel discussion of BIDS, Business Improvement Districts. Uh, is that a model that you think would potentially work in your context? In other words, is that a way of addressing the underlying issue of sustainability? And if so, is that on your, is that one of the options that you are considering?

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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: Definitely. Business Improvement District is the inspiration of building up the organisation for our cultural districts. We try to create an organisation that gathers the best from the different sectors by involving the private sector, the public institutions and the civil society. So that is definitely the way we approach um, creating a business model for our cultural district.

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Adrian Ellis: And you haven't mentioned so far in, in or you haven't highlighted the relationship with elected politicians and the uh, the city itself. How does that work?

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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: So as we are a cultural district that has grown bottom up, it has not really been a political decision to start this cultural district. However we have approached both the officials and the politicians of Copenhagen. There is great support in this initiative. This support comes both morally and financially.

However we are also facing a challenge because the cultural district is a framework that the municipality is not used to handle. So they are traditionally looking at institutions, and how can they support these and not the framework of a whole district. So we do have continuous meetings discussing both on a visionary and a strategic level.

But we are still trying to find out how on a very practical level, can we support each other in our common goal that is to create you know, great activities and experiences for the community of this area.

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Adrian Ellis: The other aspect that hasn't come up and I'm just interested where it plays, which is Copenhagen is also a tourist city. Where is tourism on your institutional agenda?



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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: As a cultural district, we are both looking at creating value for our local community. So this is the very core of our business. But this needs to go hand in hand also with creating a destination for tourists or visitors from outside. Now our area, is not an area that you as a tourist would see coming to the city.

So I have actually looked at some of the different maps you see in these tourist guides. And it's actually pretty much a blank spot where we are located. And that is quite, uh, strange because we do have a lot of great assets. But this means that a big task for us is to communicate and promote these activities. And this is why a big part of our projects, which will also be to create like, a platform that will promote the different assets we see in our community.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Adrian Ellis: What part does technology play in your world? There is, as you know, a very live discussion about smart cities, about the uh, gathering of data for decision making electronically, about uh, ways in which technology can be embedded successfully in communities.

Does that smart city agenda play a part in your thinking?

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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: Yeah, definitely. We would very much like to dive into the whole technological aspect of uh, cultural districts. We do have collaboration with universities where students go out and give us data that we can use also to create some technological solutions in the future for our cultural districts.

However at this point in our young organisation, we have not had the resources to, to dive into specific solutions. But we do see that this is much needed in a situation or a society where we compete with these big technological platforms, you know, like Netflix or Amazon or whatnot, where we give out money and responsibility to big players that are not part of our local community. So my hope would be that we can also create some technological uh, solutions, that could bring value and create our own ecosystem in our own community.

But that is in the long run. To be honest, we are not there yet where we can start looking into these kind of solutions.

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Adrian Ellis: Very near the top of the most pressing issues facing society today is the climate crisis. And I'm curious to know – this is a question that all districts are asking themselves, which is how can a district intelligently put its shoulder behind the wheel of mitigation and of contributing to some form of curbing of emissions. Is this on your agenda? And do you, either now or in the future, have you got any sort of useful insights into how cultural districts as entities can usefully engage with this agenda?



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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: It's such a, such an important agenda and also very complex. But we do have different areas where we work on these issues. So on a very concrete level, we have code of conducts concerning the, the different materials you use on cultural events and stuff like that, that we um, send out to our different collaborators so that, you know, when we have events there's sustainable materials being used and not producing garbage and stuff like that. So that's on a very concrete level. Then you can say we are also part of a big urban development in this new area where the buildings being built are also very much with focus on sustainability in the materials they use. So we build up both the profile and knowledge around how to build cities concerning also the footprints you leave for future generations, concerning the climate challenges and stuff like that.

And then on a more visionary level, you could say that what we can do to hold people in our own district, you know, so that the people that live in our cultural district, they do not have to go to other parts of the country because they have such a nice time in their own community. So, uh, they don't need to travel and thereby, also with the CO2 footprints and stuff like that. So, so you can create like such a nice atmosphere that, that people will just stay in, in their own area.

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Adrian Ellis: One of the, you know, questions that I always try and put in a table somehow in my head is, what does the cultural district actually do? In other words, what is the programmatic agenda of the district? Perhaps you could just run through that because it helps listeners understand the scope of the organisation.

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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: Totally. Back in 2020, we started out uh, before we really had an idea about what was the specific design of the cultural district, we wanted to kind of learn what are the potentials of our own local community. And we started out by creating a festival, which is called Open Festival because it's uh, simply an open platform where everyone that is interested can contribute. So we reached out to the local artists and the cultural makers, we created an open call and we got a lot of different applications to be part of this festival. So, the first festival, which was held during the corona, it was September 2020. We had over 50 activities gathering over 100 different contributors that collaborated in different ways and staged the different public spaces and institutions of the cultural districts, and then our primary goal and that was to promote the really nice both organisations, institutions, facilities that we do have in the cultural district. And this has been repeated each year. So every year in September, we have this festival which gathers different artistic genres and uh, present this to an audience for all the value that that creates.

After the first year with this festival, we also created another festival with focus on biodiversity, which is in natural sites in our cultural districts also presenting different associations that work within this biodiversity, sustainability. Because we see this is a very important agenda to, to promote.

And then as a third activity that we started up this year in 2022 was a conference gathering professionals because we also want to put this on the political agenda and see how can culture be a bigger part of uh, the urban, uh, development in our cities. So this is what we discuss at this conference.



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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: And in that way, we create an annual wheel where we keep adding different activities and promote our goal that is to, bring culture into the political agenda in a more ambitious way.

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Adrian Ellis: And as you look forward over the next, say three to five years, are there areas that you would, into which you would like to expand?

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Jesper Koefoed-Melson: Uh, yes. What we have seen in cultural districts around the world is that where they are really influential is where they also have an actual ownership of buildings. So this is something we would really like to have in the future. You know, as an organisation to have ownership of actual buildings where we can create culture and experiences for the community.

Furthermore how we would like to expand is also to dive into international collaborations and see how can we learn from cultural districts around the world and in exchange, both knowledge and activities.

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Adrian Ellis: Well, I would hope that the GCDN can, obviously contribute to that. And we are we're thrilled that you are joining it and that you were an active member of the convening in Lugano.

Jesper Koefoed-Melson: It was such a pleasure to be there.

Adrian Ellis: Yes, thank you so much for joining me. And I gather that you are up the road from me in Tuscany at the moment. So thank you for interrupting your vacation to join me this morning.

Jesper Koefoed-Melson: Thank you, Adrian. It was such a pleasure to have this nice conversation and uh, answer your very intelligent questions. (laughs)

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Adrian Ellis: Thank you Jesper, for telling us about what for me was an entirely new dimension of Copenhagen, a city which is deeply attractive than that I thought I knew. So that was fascinating. And thanks also for your participation in GCDN and for coming to Lugano. And thank you for listening everybody. And if you want more, check out www.thethreebells.net for our show notes, for a link through to Kulturdistriktet, and to other resources, which we hope you will find useful.

But first, a slight change from our recent format. Rather than subjecting our interviewee to a further grilling in their absence, we thought we might mix things up a bit and use the concluding segment for some tangentially related observations about our professional world.



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Adrian Ellis: Over the last year or so, Stephanie, Criena and I have been talking to people like Jesper, who we thought, as it turns out rightly, would have something interesting to say about the social and economic agendas of the communities that they live and work in; the place of culture and creativity in those communities, and how they're contributing to their development.

It's been, as they say, a privilege and a pleasure, and we have more interviews recorded and still more planned out ahead of us.

The last 18 months have been a fascinating period to be in a project like this. Because we're so obviously in an inflection point in society, one that's permeating well, pretty much all of what we do, what we're thinking about and above all, the emotional tenor of our lives, which I think has changed profoundly.

A handful of what they call drivers, has meant that background has become foreground. Perhaps most obviously the climate crisis is now truly upon us and every political system, democratic or autocratic, has proven itself less than equal to the challenge. The repercussions of this failure overshadow us physically and psychologically.

And our deep technological interconnectedness magnifies those impacts, but at the same time, it also numbs us and makes us turn away. One result is that very few of us are leading the lives that we really think we should be. We're struggling to work through what it means for our personal and professional lives and the uncomfortable gap between what we do and what we think we should do. And as background becomes foreground, the personal and the professional become increasingly indistinguishable.

Secondly, the immorality of the world order and the injustices that are built into it are not exactly breaking news, but it has moved central stage over the same period. George Floyd's murder crystallised one aspect and somehow mobilised a latent anger. But again, the increasing inequalities of our Belle Époque and their magnification by social media that put them front and centre of our professional lives.

You should read the New Yorker article called The Haves and the Have-Yachts and reflect on what it means for how decadent we are as a society. The mobilisation of this sense of justice and injustice is manifest in the whole movement of decolonising museums, what that means for the narratives and what that means for the collections in that context, the debate around deaccessioning, which has moved from being a minority interest to being at the very middle of museum sectors' primary preoccupations, racial, gender, ethnic, and other injustices in the workplace, the gig economy and the responsibilities of anchors institutions for those gig workers. The exodus of younger people out of our sector, and more generally, the terms of employment, everyone from interns to directors, all these cumulatively amount to a reckoning.

Third, we are clearly witnessing a changing world order with the rise of autocracies internally and the systematic undermining of the values that we associate with liberal democracies. The rule of law, human rights, and internationally hot war in Ukraine, and possibly in Taiwan.



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Adrian Ellis: Meanwhile, the grinding of civil society between the tectonic plates of liberal globalisation and nationalism, the assumption of social progress is somehow ground to a halt. Social mobility in the states, the revocation of Roe versus Wade in the Supreme court, the many other reversals around the world. This sense of reversal is not new to world history, but it is new to us and to recent generations of cultural leaders. So is the souring of our confidence in technologies, those of participation above all the worldwide web which is now fake news, doxing, and the commercialised inanity. But more generally, our fear of the technologies of social control, like AI, facial recognition, et cetera.

Fifth, of course, the longer term impact of the pandemic, its left field character and it's attended uncertainties about future pandemics, about engineered viruses and about habits and attitudes and travel patterns and work patterns. Oh, and I won't dwell on the proposition that is increasingly gaining currency in mainstream press. Most recently the Washington post that the U.S. Department of Defense is trying to prepare public opinion to embrace the idea that we are being actively observed by aliens.

That would of course, rock our world too. None of these are to say the focus of the agenda of this podcast. And yet at some point, background does become foreground. And you begin to understand that cumulatively you're operating in a very different world from the world a few years ago. Most of these things are threats and challenges that require human beings to work together in ways that clearly do not come naturally. We're walking across a narrow bridge into the future, a future that's within our collective grasp we know, but also elusive. So we probably need to re-examine our professional lives, fairly ruthlessly and decide what's worth bringing on the journey and what is best jettisoned.

What is the core of the core? And we need to decide what we have at our disposal to help us. Culture binds, that's important. And creativity solves, that is important too. Both seemed pretty central to the journey, but what do we vested interests set aside?

Think about the infrastructure we have created to nurture them. Are they really fit for purpose? How well do they function in this new and evolving environment that requires agility and pragmatism? Can they be refined and adapted? So we have an exceptional opportunity and a profound responsibility. Can we help steer the future onto a better trajectory? Not just for our generation or even our children's generation, but for all the generations to come, that is what we want to continue to explore with our colleagues and peers and with you on this podcast.

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

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THEME MUSIC

