



S2:E9: The complexities and simplicities of placemaking

Ramon Marrades in conversation with Criena Gehrke

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[THEME MUSIC]

[00:00:05] **Criena Gehrke:** Hello and welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of a series produced 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 culture and urban life.

I'm Criena Gehrke and I'm speaking to you today from the land of the Kombumerri families of the Yugambah language region here on the Gold Coast in Australia. I pay my respects to elders past and present, and I also acknowledge the First Nations people of the many lands you are listening from today. Our First Nations people are the original storytellers and custodians of our culture.

So today I'm pretty excited because I'm joined by the fabulous Ramon Marrades – urban economist, writer, and activist. And when I was doing a bit of research in getting to know him, I'd also probably add provocateur to that list. Ramon is currently director of Placemaking Europe and strategy advisor to the Creative Bureaucracy Festival. He has served as the chief strategy and finance officer at La Marina de Valencia – Valencia's waterfront redevelopment agency and a board member of the worldwide network of port cities. And I'm particularly interested in that because I too live by the water. Ramon is a co-editor of the book: *Our City? Countering Exclusion in Public Space*, and the host and co-curator of Placemaking Week Europe. His work focuses on the interface between public space and economic development.

Hello, Ramon, and welcome to The Three Bells.

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Ramon Marrades: Hello, hello Criena. It's a great pleasure to be today with you.

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Criena Gehrke: I have been very much looking forward to this conversation. So you have actually spent some time in Australia, haven't you?

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Ramon Marrades: I have actually, I still an associate at Western Sydney University. I've done some work there and I was supposed to come more often, but as many others, I was deeply affected with the pandemic. So unfortunately haven't been there in the last couple of years, but I hope I can get back soon.



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Criena Gehrke: (laughs) I feel like those that often listen to this podcast will be saying, oh, she didn't do her terrible gratuitous pitch for the Gold Coast and how fabulous Australia is right at the very beginning.

Ramon Marrades: (laughs)

Criena Gehrke: But I'm sure that we would welcome you back. What were your reflections of Australia while you did spend time here? You know, considering your passion for placemaking.

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Ramon Marrades: I felt really much home, actually. I think it has a speed of living and working that it's close to the Mediterranean. So makes it feel like this influence of being next to the sea and also a bit of Italian influence, maybe that the way of being outdoors and a way of experience outdoors on the beach. It's fairly Mediterranean, but at the same time, quite efficient now in the Anglo-Saxon way that I liked.

Criena Gehrke: (laughs)

Ramon Marrades: There was a lot of people that I really liked a lot and also a lot of things that I extremely dislike, but that happens probably and particularly politically in some of the countries that I'm more interested about.

So, I mean, I found some of the most interesting, progressive people that I know in Australia, but I also, I was also have seen some of the outrageous conservative, I don't know, like anti-regional policies to give you an example. And I just give you an example of one. It was actually like my colleagues at Western Sydney University that were vetoed recently by the ministry of education because their research that was approved by a peer to peer committee uh, theoretically was not meeting the interest of Australia or something like that.

Not that just one of examples, but it's like, it's interesting to know and I think in another country that I feel really like a home and a space, my country, it is the same. It's a contradictory place when I can find actually examples of the best and the most fascinating and things that I really don't like.

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Criena Gehrke: It's funny, isn't it? Because that's supposed to be part of the icebreaker question, but I feel like I wanna just launch in right there (laughs) and get down into the down and dirty because what do you think is driving the rise and rise in conservatism? Because I do think it's relevant when it comes to thinking about place and community.

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Ramon Marrades: Yeah, this is a very tough question. And if we knew the answer, we probably won't be here having this conversation.

Criena Gehrke: Yeah. (laughs)



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Ramon Marrades: (laughs) And because it would much easier for us probably doing our work. I think we are failing to, to define? And to reach out with an updated idea of what progress means and how it can be distributed, I guess.

And that's also creating a lot of tensions and we can see like, obviously this urban/rural, or maybe like suburbia, like densities just divide or how most communities around the world perceive that climate action would be detrimental to their quality of lives. These sort of elements are related with the, with the lack of capacity to define progress in a way that it's both understandable and achievable.

It's on us to blame a bit, but at the same time, I don't know, like it is rather simple. No, because people need a bit of, like, what's given say ontological security and roof, some safety to like, to develop oneself. Access, the possibility to grow, to like for more opportunities to their kids to breathe cleaner, you know?

And I think like, like the idea of progress is the same that the world sometime that we do in culture and public space – it's incredibly complex and the same, extraordinarily simple. So not really sure what is not working in the cultural mechanisms behind those. But long story short, I do think that we really, really have to rethink progress in a constant base obviously, what does it mean? How do we shape it, which policies are needed and then making sure that it's accessible, obviously.

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Criena Gehrke: Yeah, it's interesting, I read an article – I think that you'd written and you talk about human scale, you know, and that we are building structures and civilisations that are so far removed from the scale that we are as humans. And I love that idea of, you know, it's actually very complex, but it's really simple.

Like the human condition has always been thus, hasn't it?

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Ramon Marrades: Absolutely, absolutely. But I think that those, and I think part of the work, my work has been in the last years to try to reconcile those dimensions. And we are learning as well that, in the physical environment sometimes, with institutional or cultural centrality, like these big places for operas or like, or institutional representation can also be great places for the everyday life.

And I think that this is a missing piece because we learn, I don't know, like if we take the historical perspective to create development – first, it was geography then density, then infrastructures, then after that knowledge but now none of them are enough. No. And we do think we do need to do better than just building stuff to, to resonate next steps and linking back to what you say about building the human scale.

It's as, as I said, at the same time, extraordinary complex, and it's impressive how little times it is achieved, but at the same time, very simple. And placemaking actually has a variety of tools that are rather easy. We know that benches work and comfortable benches and shade. It's like very basic stuff, but there, there are at other all intangibles that are very basic, very simple, but hardly achieved like representation.



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Ramon Marrades: For instance, inclusion, safety, you know, and that in public space, it's just, it's the same, no representation.

It's something relatively easy to like in a programming to produce things that are appealing to the community that lives in a, in a place to speak their language, both metaphorically and real, you know, the, what language means and these sort of things.

But as I said is impressive how simple it is and how hard it is achieved.

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Criena Gehrke: So why do we get it so wrong so often? And seriously, I have been known to almost have an existential crisis over this stuff because I agree. It on the surface appears to be so simple, you know, that notion of benches, that notion of spaces where people want to gather, I, you know, some of the solutions are often just the simplest things that connect people together and to their environment. So it is beyond me. Why do we get it wrong so often?

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Ramon Marrades: I think there are obviously many reasons when it's how the planning system is based on engineering and drawings and how top down it is obviously. Then there is obviously this overreaching element of how based on global finance our development model is generally. We also have all the strong vessels for a sprawl and suburbia and to take, get community separated.

I guess that is a global crisis, and that was obviously linked to the past crisis. Not this one, the big crisis, 2008. The crisis of big architecture and how like imposing and arrogant sometimes it is. And there are, there are many, many elements. And then there is one thing that I generally described that I guess, that we have a fundamental problem of being obsessed that with buildings, we can solve human problems.

But the thing is probably policy-making how with a general human scale, how it is defined, it's very, it, it incentivises those sort of things because at the end of the days, buildings and infrastructure are self-explanatory. You see them, they are massive. You can see the investment and all the complexity of human life, cultural production, entrepreneurship, innovation that's much more diffused, less visible, less diff more, much more difficult to grasp, grasp much more difficult to foster than just building a massive incubator centre for the start-ups in the middle of downtown.

I also like have been saying. For quite some times that there are many, many cities that are suffering a strong depersonalisation disorder. And that means that they cannot recognise themselves in the mirror, and that makes them to commit a lot of mistakes because a city that cannot read, their heritage, but the assets and assets sometimes are very soft, no, they, they are not big cathedrals, that force them to try to become someone else.

And actually like, you were, it's one of the, of the things that you wanted to discuss. But if I became interested in other approaches to urban development, it's because I saw that in my own city.



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Ramon Marrades: In my own city in Valencia, because Valencia is a beautiful, Mediterranean city, 1 million inhabitants uh, with a very, very, uh, a long and interesting history, a lot of heritage. But during one period, like around the 2000, it was completely obsessed in becoming something else.

Criena Gehrke: Yeah.

Ramon Marrades: And it having invested in like those called so called mega projects. So there is a big science museum that remained empty for a while. Then they created this super fancy waterfront area that then I had the chance to manage. We organise Formula One, America's Cup and, you know what? That didn't create like distributed economic growth and long term it was a failed economic strategy. And the thing is, because most of the people thought, why should not deserve to have something like the Louvre? We are not less than others to have Formula One, but that also at the same time creates a complete blindness to realise how great the city was already.

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Criena Gehrke: How do you think that we as either policy makers, strategists, but also cultural leaders, how do we begin to really make impact and influence governments to have strong, relevant strategy positions that are authentic to their place and stop aspiring to be something other than what their city or community is?

You know? Cause I know that you've done a lot of work in strategy and policy, but also your passion for creative bureaucracies. What does that look like? Like how do we influence that change?

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Ramon Marrades: That's also a very tricky question. (laughs)

Criena Gehrke: (laughs)

Ramon Marrades: But I guess like, those are the kind of challenges that are appealing though. They, that is not one straightforward answer obviously. And probably like projects or ideas that make it through, it's because of a combination of things. But let me explain you a bit of the idea of creative bureaucracies, because it was coined by my friend Charles Landry.

And I find it very interesting. First of all, because when you have creative bureaucracy, like something rings in your mind wrong, because it really sounds like an oxymoron. Creative bureaucracy? That cannot be the case.

Criena Gehrke: (laughs)

Ramon Marrades: Now that's the initial reaction to that. But second of all, if you think of it deeply about that, and you compare it with other concepts like public innovation, creative bureaucracy actually uh, points to the creative bureaucrat, which are the individuals that are making it possible.



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Ramon Marrades: And actually they, to the individuals that don't necessarily see it at the top of the government like, but any single position within public administration. And one of the sparking reflections, uh, to the concern of creative bureaucracy by Charles Landry and actually an Australian civil servant Margie Caust that wrote the book was this realisation that behind every innovation project in urban landscape in any city on the world, that it was some bureaucrat that make it work, that made it work. Sometimes twisting the loss a bit, sometimes convincing the policy makers, but there's been always a counterpart that, that, that, that made it possible.

So that means that there is always an ally.

There is always some people we think that is willing to help.

But there is one thing linked to that. And I guess like lately, lately there is more and more people talking about that. Is that change has to be done with the people that is working in public sector. And there is talent there and we have to work with them. So sometimes those strategist and say, okay, like we, like, we have to come from the outside to start from scratch.

It doesn't work very well. And I think like that's a bit, a bit problematic no? Like, I mean like, putting on the shoulders of consultancies, all the creative work that public sector has to, so we need like, as I said to, to work from within as well. And then, yeah, obviously like, I guess, like, it is a combination of doing proper research, understanding the needs first, showing the right examples, then do the work right basically – which is again, a bit complex.

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MUSIC BREAK

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Criena Gehrke: What do you think makes a good public policy or strategy? What are the ingredients of it?

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Ramon Marrades: I guess that it needs a level of abstraction, but also it needs a level of specificity and that's very difficult, like, but to not end up saying, okay, we want a sustainable city. We want a cultural city. What does it mean, no? So I guess like being more specific on that, it's important. I see good public strategy as a sort of a compass. So we had sort of, uh, marking or signalling our, the north we, we wanted to head to. But it doesn't matter. We take another route or we take another tool or we stop a bit to add more value with things that are unplanned. And obviously what the compass helps us is that if we find something unexpected, a lake to cross, whatever, to keep using the metaphor, we still can use the compass.

So the compass is not telling us, okay, 10 meters on the right, seven meters on the left, then 100 straight, you know, that's the whole idea of like those strategic plan with 100 like actions and 50 together, these sort of things.



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Ramon Marrades: Now the compass is rather much more simple because it allows us to make decisions still, that are unplanned because we are facing a changing environment.

And this North of the compass is defined. It has to developed as democratic, as research based, as inclusive as possible. And I, I think that, that this is a very, very important thing to do. And next to that, I think as well, that one of the key elements is very well aligning the short term and the long term.

So when the compass is set, make sure that this short term actions, the improvement, that transition is perceived like as soon as possible and change is visualised. And the same time we are learning from that to improve it, keeping the same compass that we can reassess at a certain point as well. But I guess like most of public sector institutions, lack of this compass and where there are big decisions to be made or small decisions or conflict decisions that are loaded with conflicts, they don't know what to do because this compass is not clear, but this compass could be very, very helpful.

And I give you an example. If a city decides that its North has to begin completely carbon neutral in 2030 and they commit, then there is some international investor proposing to build a new airport. That cannot be done because it's like, it's not compatible to the compass and then the decision can be made in an easier way.

But the problem is most of the time strategic risk decisions are resolving a other way because they lack of this compass. No?

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Criena Gehrke: Do you think that strategy has changed or should change after COVID? Do you think that we should all be regrouping, whether it's around our environmental policies, our community strategies and I'm a huge believer that all of those things should be joined up that all of your policies and strategies should speak to each other so that you actually achieve what you're trying to as a city.

But do you think that there's a need for us all to stop and reflect and have a look at, you know, the post COVID strategy?

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Ramon Marrades: Probably the need was there very present, but I guess like, COVID work as an accelerator or a magnifies, yeah it worked as a magnifying lens. So like this functions and problem was much more clear and obviously we have the ongoing climate emergency. Did it force us to think differently? I think it made us reflected that in a deeper way, but probably like we are facing. Now I'm a bit doubtful. I think we at Placemaking Europe, we started immediately to react to that. I remembered in March, 2020, we start to work on the after COVID city strategy, trying to say, okay, we have to reflect on how to do cities differently. And obviously we realise how important access to public space was, how important gathering was.

But at the same time, we saw as well that COVID, everyone was trying to read COVID with their own lenses. So, that also, I mean, polarise and magnify the debate.



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Ramon Marrades: And, but that's one thing, but there are other long-term effects that we are not seeing yet that are going to be dramatic. First of all, obviously like the health, the long-term health impacts of that, but even more importantly, probably the psychological effects that can come long term.

Also the impact of creating inequalities on education uh, because there is a lot of kids that where a lot of times studying from home. And that's, that is very different to do it from a home when there is silence, when there is access to technology that in an overcrowded place where there is noise.

So there is going to be a big difference, probably a big impact in the future. And for me, there is something quite terrible that we are still not measuring and which is particularly terrible for the case of Australia. It is that for too long the countries were closed. So cities were not open.

Like people were worried about tourism. I was much, I am much more worried about like the long-term effect of halting international students coming in on migration in general, this constant flow of new energy was short for a couple of years. And we'll see, we, we probably will be seeing the long-term effect of that. And that obviously needs a specific policies.

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Criena Gehrke: Yeah, I think that's a really interesting reflection and you're right. Australia has really struggled without international students. And you know, I wonder what that's going to mean moving forward for that generation. Anyway, can I completely divert for a minute?

Ramon Marrades: Absolutely.

Criena Gehrke: Why did you choose this path in life instead of rock and roll?

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Ramon Marrades: (laughs) I guess we cover a bit of, one of the reasons which was how clear for me, where the mistakes of development of urban development, of urban planning. So like seeing what my city did also like realising how wide top down, male-dominated planning was. You know so I was just linking like the products of urban development and then seeing who was behind those.

And I remember, it was beautiful. One of my first international experience was founding an NGO, what was called Urbego. We call it the young urban planning professionals platform like I mean woah, Urbego – the name's nice, which means "city" in Esperanto, but basically Urbego, it was we, we, there was a group of people that met around the Netherlands when we were doing our masters.

And it was a very interesting group of people because it was like, I'd give you Julia Machi from Italy, then Simona from Romania, Philippa from Serbia, Farah from Lebanon, myself, and also Southern European Mediterranean, mostly women.



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Ramon Marrades: Urban planners that they didn't, we didn't see each other's reflect on planning culture and we were seeing all other mistakes.

So we decide to create Urbego. So one of the reasons with like that reaction to failure, and there was another human reason – much more personal, is that when I was, I really enjoyed economics and I consider myself an economist still, and I like economics, but when I was doing my bachelor, I was hanging out with artists and I was playing music.

And I was like in doing into this alternative scene and I really didn't want to spend my whole life working only with economist only like, like working in a bank or something like that. So I really wanted to keep like doing stuff with those artists and those creative people. So I thought that jumping into the urbanism side could make it work and it did make it work. Very happy I did that.

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Crieda Gehrke: And I'm very happy that you are also a musician and an artist in your own right. But I'm always fascinated when people choose a certain path through life. So, that leads me on to placemaking week, which you're about to be in the fifth edition of, and the festival has four key themes that you're going to explore and they range from innovation and the creative community to blue and green placemaking.

Tell me a bit more about that. Tell me a bit more about placemaking week, why it's important and what you're hoping will be discussed and achieved.

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Ramon Marrades: So very much looking forward to that actually, because the last we organised different events, but the last big placemaking, which happened in 2019, obviously was halted by the pandemic. So very much looking forward to meet a lot of people that I know, and a lot of people that I will meet um, for the first time there.

So we are expecting about 400 people from around the world gathering in Pontevedra from 27 to 30th of September. I think it's probably the, the most important gathering around placemaking that is happening this year. So yeah, very, very very excited about that. But it is not like placemaking week is not just a regular conference there is obviously a lot of exchange among the placemaking community, but also it is a very much embedded festival in the city of Pontevedra.

So it's not for random reasons that we are meeting in Pontevedra. Pontevedra is a small scale city in Spain around 100,000 inhabitants and is the only city in Spain that claims to have met their SDGs already. It's a completely human scale city. So it was been transformed for the last 20 years, clean and pedestrian oriented, great city centre, kids friendly where like all people walks, walks a lot and they have an independent life with extremely beautiful amount of cultural venues and spaces with strong leadership.

But also it is a city that will explore what happens after becoming human scale, which, it's a problem of a privilege. No, because there are not many cities in the situation, but say, okay, we are already a human city, a human scale city. And we have a lot of cultural amenity. We have strong leadership, but what's next? How can we be better still?



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Ramon Marrades: Like, it's a very west it's in the extreme west of, Europe, it's not geographically centred. It's small, it's in the periphery of Spain. So what's next? How they can keep people living and working there. How can they develop, which will be the next challenges.

And we also are addressing that and we are also facing and trying to respond these questions together with the city of Pontevedra. And then obviously there is a lot of fun workshops, interactions and, and you described some of the topics, but I think there is an overarching discussion very particular to this, to this moment.

But I guess though we believe in an organisation that placemaking, it is the tool to make a just climate transition, also distribute it and, progress-generating process in itself. I mean through placemaking, we can really align the short with the long term and what we want to work and demonstrate is that while creating cities that are much more social, healthy, accessible, and fun, we are not only creating a more sustainable world, but we are creating a more just everyday life as well.

So I guess that also linking and bringing, connecting to our, the initial part of our conversation, the question is as well, which are our tools that our kind of journey to make a better sustainable world long term is an enjoyable path.

Criena Gehrke: Can I be controversial and a bit provocative?

Ramon Marrades: Absolutely, you should, always.

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Criena Gehrke: (laughs) I love that I asked permission then, that's a first. That sounds like an absolute utopia and that sounds like absolutely the place that I want to live. Now I'm going to put my Gold Coast hat on where we are a city that our entire economy relies on development and tourism. So can those cities that are human scale and around place and around all of those things you just spoke of, can they be economically sustainable and all of those things?

Like what, what becomes the economic drivers of those places?

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Ramon Marrades: I think they are. And if we compare for instance Pontevedra, with the surrounding cities, they have a bigger GDP. For instance, they have less unemployment. It is the only city in this area of Spain that is growing.

Criena Gehrke: Yep.

Ramon Marrades: Little, but it is growing, the others, the other ones are shrinking. And there are another examples that are more sector specific. But for instance, Pontevedra is a city that refuse to authorise any shopping mall. There is no shopping malls in the city, but which is the outcome that the city centre is vibrant commercially. And there is a lot of individual unique stores that work well, economic wise.



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Ramon Marrades: And that's a, it's just a sound and sustaining economic model, but we also have to assess and tell those stories.

And if I give you another example, because like comparing the case of Spain, because the data is it's very fresh and we use it for some more. Actually, it seems that in Spain we check metropolitan is about 50,000 inhabitants. Some of the poorest are the ones that has a higher amount of GDP related to tourism.

So the biggest portion of the economics tourism, and that makes poorer. Because generally like we see, but particularly the kind of tourism that we have in Spain that is not a very productive sector. When a city becomes highly specialised, it becomes fairly productive with, this is part of diversified basket of economic sectors than it was.

Because I think overall I do have a, I do have a short of motto of that. So I, my motto is understanding tourism as a delegate. Tourism works well as a second goal. If you create a great city for locals, tourists will come. If you create a great city for tourists, that's not great for locals. And then you create big dysfunctions. And then we see that in COVID that suddenly those also economies are super exposed to changes. No, suddenly there is a crisis or maybe inflation or maybe a currency, a bit more expensive. And then those are fucked because it was not a sound, a proved economic strategy.

So I think that generally those Pontevedra models do work as well. And I guess, I, I really believe this idea of understanding tourism as a, as a second outcome, because it makes policies much long term proof.

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Criena Gehrke: Yeah. You know, I'm sort of contemplating that perhaps the strategic policy platform way forward and you know, this is not a new thing, but actually liveability and community and authenticity are actually the new economic strategies.

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Ramon Marrades: Absolutely. And also realising that some things that they thought have a direct economic impact have a long term performed one like benches, for instance, place for gathering. And we see like many cities like those mistakes taking out benches and allowing restaurants to open, to open like sitting place, like how we saying it is that you have to buy something to enjoy a public space and that might work short term, but it's a big mistake, long term.

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Criena Gehrke: Yeah, I agree. So we've nearly come to the end of our time together of difficult questions and provocations and my love of benches. Um, what do you think history's gonna say about this period of time? Because it has been extraordinary and I'm not actually convinced that it's unprecedented because history is full of upheavals and trauma and significant moments. And then humans developing amnesia and forgetting that they should have learned something through that period of history. But what do you think that we should take from this moment in time and what do we need to do next to support those great places and the human scale and humanity and connection and place?



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Ramon Marrades: I really think that's going to be perceived as an anecdote in the future. Like I don't know the Spanish flu and other sort of those moments in itself as a crisis. But what I do really hope is we are steering the wheel just a bit. And you know, like societies and development are like a big boat.

Then when you steer the wheel a bit, it's completely unnoticeable if you are inside a boat, but obviously long term, it totally change the trajectory. So that's my hope or that this steering the wheel slightly a bit with adding a lot of individual and community force strategy, thinking ideas, et cetera, could really make a difference in the long term trajectory to make, to basically save the planet, our life in the future, and don't destroy this beautiful world.

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Criena Gehrke: Ramon, I have thoroughly enjoyed this conversation. I feel to draw that metaphor to its natural conclusion that I've sailed through this incredible storm of ideas. And I'm very grateful to have the conversation with you about what should be our true north. Thank you so much for joining The Three Bells today.

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Ramon Marrades: Thank you so much, Criena, it's been an extraordinary pleasure and thank you. Thank you for your generosity.

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Criena Gehrke: Listeners, if you want more, check out www.thethreebells.net to find all the external references and other resources linked to this episode and to learn more about the incredible Ramon's work.

Now for those of you who are regular listeners to The Three Bells, you'll know that in the last episode, Adrian Ellis, my fellow host and the driving force behind Global Cultural District's Network. Well, he decided to mix things up. And instead of our normal takeaway section, he spent a couple of minutes allowing us into his own incredible intellect, insightful musings and tangential thoughts. It actually was really powerful stuff that asked what happens when the background becomes foreground. And so I suspect that the new outro to The Three Bells has been born and I'm choosing to call it:

Things that keep me up at night.

So in the past month or two in Australia, there has been some really interesting and quite alarming research emerging around visitor and audience trends in the arts. And while Australia might be an island, they do mirror international insights. A report commissioned by our national arts funding body, the Australia Council for the Arts notes:

65% of audiences are ready to attend events. So this is the highest in some time, but it still means that 35% aren't ready to attend. And until there is little to no risk of contracting COVID, they are unlikely to engage. 46% say risk of transmission will impact their engagement over the next 12 months.



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Criena Gehrke: 54% of audiences over 65 will not attend large theatres without masks being mandatory. And 24% of all audiences are reporting financial barriers with 47% of audiences under 35s, noting that this is their single greatest barrier. Now, if we think of these trends in the context of this other deeply disturbing statistic from research undertaken by Edith Cowen University in WA. 63.5% of Australia's performing artists reported worsening mental health during COVID. Problems were exacerbated by not only a loss of income, but also a loss of identity.

So here's, what's keeping me up. I'm increasingly concerned and I live it every day as the CEO of a cultural precinct with multiple stakeholders, complex relationships with government and partners, and a deep commitment and respect for our community and our artists. I'm concerned that we, as a sector, won't be given the time to deal with the long tail in the scorpion that is COVID, both literally and emotionally.

I think that we're expected to bounce back quickly. Get the audiences back into our venues, artists back on our stage, visitors back to our precincts, reach our financial and visitation targets, masks and kid gloves are off spit spot. After such a long, hard, confusing journey that we've had over the past three years, where everything we love and believe was lost or diminished. I think that unrealistic pressure is bad for our collective mental health and wellbeing. And that pressure also makes it so, so, so very easy to go back to what we know and the way it has always been done. Not the new normal, but the old normal.

So here's the thing: Imagine if we were afforded time and the pressure of key performance measures associated with economic return visitation and secondary value and primary value were removed. Not forever, but just for a little while. What if our governments and stakeholders, and even our own communities demanded that we spend time regrouping and understanding this new world before we are consumed by business as usual.

What if our single most urgent responsibility wasn't to relentlessly deliver the old, but to spend time with our communities to understand their urgent and unfulfilled needs? Their new dreams and wishes. What if it was demanded of us that we take the temperature of our neighbourhoods? We sit with discomfort, we be fiercely curious, and then respond with places and programmes that are for, and of the people of this changed world we live in.

And then, what if we were only expected to do this? After we, as the artists, cultural leaders, creatives, placemakers, humanitarians and change makers after we were required to sit quietly for a while to recharge and renew our belief in the power of the arts to change the world in this changed world.

I'm not convinced we'll be afforded the time, but I do think we need to take it, steal it and demand it for our own benefit for the love of our communities and for the love of the arts.

I'm Criena Gehrke. And this week I resigned as CEO, HOTA Home of the Arts to afford myself time.



[00:39:00]

Criena Gehrke: 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.

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My name is Criena. I'm the ex-CEO of HOTA Home of the Arts. And thank you so much for being with us today. I look forward to joining you again soon.

[00:39:30]

THEME MUSIC

