



S3:E1 THE DISTINCTIVE CONTRIBUTION OF ARCHITECTURE

Vincent Chang 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 for the Global Cultural Districts Network, in which we explore what's happening around the world on the intersections of cultural and urban life. The series and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net.

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I'm Adrian Ellis, Chair of GCDN. I'm thrilled to have as my guest, Vincent Chang, who is a colleague and old friend. We both moved to New York at about the same time in the late 1990s, early 2000s. And Vincent is the Deputy Chair and Partner of Grimshaw Architects, a really significant global architectural practice with uh, an astonishing array of all types of architecture and planning, and an approach which is extremely interesting, both in terms of its results, but also in terms of the underlying philosophy and what I thought it would be interesting to do would be to explore some of those things with Vincent.

But before we do that, Vincent uh, I'd like just to ask a little more about you and your professional formación, how you came to be uh, Vincent Chang, Deputy Chair and Partner of Grimshaw Architects.

[00:01:29]

Vincent Chang: Adrian, firstly, thank you so much for having me. I'm delighted to be, uh, here in, in conversation with you. Um, I'm a bit trepidatious actually.

Adrian Ellis: (laughs)

Vincent Chang: There's a, a lot that's been happening in our world professionally and it's sort of somewhat destabilising. Um, in response to the question, I have been with this practice with Grimshaw for over 20 years, and it hadn't really been my intention to uh, be in a practice for such a length of time.

And obviously as an architect we often aspire to do things for ourselves. And I had an experience short-lived working with a friend prior to joining Grimshaw, which was remarkably enjoyable. But, you know, we focused on an individual commission without any consideration for pipeline and future work and so, that wasn't to be.



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Vincent Chang: And then my wife got a place at a business school in London. So I had returned from being overseas and looked for work and I was really delighted to get the chance to join Grimshaw. I think it's a practice that as I've spent so much time there, I've begun to appreciate, there's a phenomenal spirit of generosity that really emanated from our Chairman Sir Nicholas, in trying to just build a culture around investigation, exploration and then the currency of good ideas.

And that is quite rare and was rare at the time. So, so that was magnificent. I'm not entirely sure why I'm an architect. Actually I was reflecting upon this the other day. I think the first time the term architect came to me was from a neighbour when I was playing in our adjoining yards.

And he was a carpenter and he had sort of, uh, cornered me and said, What did I want to be when I grew up? And I said I didn't really know. And he was always building stuff in our joint space.

And he says, Well, you know, knowing you a bit, you should be an architect. And I went back that evening or went home and spoke to my mom and dad and I think that was really, the die was cast. And at that point, really, I hadn't really had any serious consideration to do anything but architecture.

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Adrian Ellis: So, how interesting. So you did architecture at college, at Cambridge?

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Vincent Chang: I did, yes, I did. I did both my degrees there. They were interrupted with an internship, in fact in New York City for a wonderful practice, a modernist practice, Edward Larrabee Barnes. Um, that was a great humanist and I think that was an extraordinary opportunity. It's actually somewhat interesting because there's an element of symmetry. I'm in the very building today, some 30 plus years later where I had my first architectural employment at Ed Barnes's office. So it's in, in Gansevoort Street, in the Meatpacking District in New York. So I've seen this neighbourhood up close for really 30 years, which is quite a, a privilege actually. And New York City was very different then than it is today.

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Adrian Ellis: Yeah, I want to start a slightly oblique angle, which is as well as being an accomplished architect to which we shall return, you have also been responsible in various and continuing capacities in managing the practice. Both setting up what is now a formidable New York office – I think you were employee number one and subsequently in, I guess the word is managerial roles. And we have, you know, touched on some of the challenges of managing coherently, ethically, and professionally successfully complex groups of people who are highly motivated, highly skilled and often passionate about their subject.

And that has a lot in common with most cultural institutions. And right now, there are fascinating challenges and really quite profound ones and I'm just wondering how much of your non architectural or non-design day is filled with those issues currently?



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Vincent Chang: A lot. And we are a practice of some 700 individuals across eight studios. I think the coherency is that we do share a very strong commitment to the way that we design the process and the things that we inquire about and the things that we hold dear. As a practice actually quite recently, you know, Andrew Whalley, our Chairman, had made very public some pledges with respect to the carbon agenda and also now into regenerative design. And I think those are things that have been core principles of our practice since its earliest days. And it's nice that we have a strong understanding of what that means to us.

That it's more than simply to say, here's a commitment that aligns us to other progressive institutions that we then work out well what does that mean in practice and how do we deliver against those obligations? And so we have an entire team working across all of our studios, assisting in our training, our education, and our ability to then examine what we've done and bring forward the best practice for future work and improve that.

So I think there are very much binding agents that are more around the way that we design rather than being particularly commercially or authoritatively driven in terms of, of governance. You know, we are in this moment of significant chaos and there's a lot that is quite messy around the practice of architecture.

I think the closeness of the partners and the ability for us to actually still speak very regularly, and I suppose one consequence of the pandemic is that we might all have Zoom fatigue, but it has meant that we can easily drop in and out of each other's lives and make those kinds of inquiries.

And I think we're getting better at understanding the value of that and how we do that purposefully. So things move fast. Ideas can move fast from one part of the practice to another. And there are clients as well that we now can easily share because they're migrating in a certain way. There are aspirations and there are approaches and strategies we can stress test and examine kind of in a, in a global setting.

And I, and I think that's profoundly important actually as an opportunity that as a design practitioner and as a professional, we really ought to do our best to avail ourselves of those opportunities. And staff now, I think rightly so much more demanding and much more inquiring about why we do what we do for who we are in service.

And I think we're at a moment where the whole practice of architecture has to become that much more democratic. It has to, you know, you have to be able to understand, or at least attempt to understand the interests of a far broader range of stakeholders than might have been the conventional paradigm, a generation of work ago, where you're in service of a particular client with a particular programme.

Even today, you know, programmes, business model, foundations, they're all fluid and they're and they're changing. And so just having that ability to have great agility and to then still retain your sanity, (laughs) is a challenge, but it's an important aspect of our work and our future.



[00:08:26]

Adrian Ellis: That complexity, which includes sort of working out who your client is – is your client the person sitting across from you on the table, or is it your idea of what they should be and your idea of what their preoccupations would be in a more perfect world? How do you learn that and how do your colleagues learn that sensitivity? Is that on the job, or do you, migrate or add to their skills as architects and designers those quite complex interpersonal skills, how do you inculcate them?

[00:08:55]

Vincent Chang: I'd like to believe that the way that we work and because we favour the dialogue around ideas, you know, that is the, the testing bed for what ascends as the preferred solution and strategy. And that requires a lot of willingness to really listen and to understand things more holistically. And I think increasingly, you know, we're at a time when if it wasn't apparent before, it's become essential today that as an architect you have to be an integrator and you have to be a participant in a very collaborative journey.

So I think from the youngest stage, you know, coming into a practice where we do consider ourselves having some foundational aspect to our work which is process driven – and that can sound dehumanising, but it's anything but, you know, when the process is about collaboration and about dialogue, you emerge from that with a far broader appreciation of what good design is.

It's, it's, to me, it's kind of fascinating that, you know, I was reading the other day, the investment of whether it's time or capital in programming and conceptually thinking through a project might be a single dollar or a euro. And then 10 times that is the cost of actually completing the design and the communication of the design.

Then a hundred times that is the consequence of constructing and making manifest those ideas and a thousand times that is the cost to the future in terms of operation and repercussion. And what that really in, in one respect says to me is that first moment has such cascading importance in the decisions you make.

That you really want to be assured that you've listened to the best ideas because your responsibility has to go beyond hard boundaries of who the client is into civic duty, attitudes towards social justice, attitudes towards the planet, you know, that is really the place that we need to be much, much more cognizant of.

And I think as a practice, and, and we're not alone in this, having a willingness and an ability to have more systems thinking in our toolkit is really critical.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Adrian Ellis: I don't know whether it's about ages and stages of professional life or whether it's about the very charged environment that we're operating in, but it seems to me that those fundamental dilemmas are vastly on the increase. Let's, let's stay with architecture.



[00:11:32]

Adrian Ellis: The generation of architects who were certainly in the cultural sector preeminent 10, 15, 20 years ago felt that it was the appropriate thing to look for opportunities, to explore a set of agendas about expressive architecture, about icons, about the use of new materials, about the opportunities of advances in structural engineering, and so long as they were broadly compatible with the func-, and I say broadly compatible, with the functional requirements of the client, then they hope to have, and indeed their clients hope them to have – I'm not saying there was a conflict there, their clients hope them to have a fairly free expressive hand.

Today uh, there is a sort of fundamental further layer of consideration, which is, what are the wider implications of the materials I'm using, the long term impact of this uh, building, the underlying function that this building is fulfilling, its relationship to the larger economy or ecology.

And those are, I think, much more heavily a responsibility felt on the shoulders of people making decisions, both on the client's side and on the design side. Is that true?

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Vincent Chang: I think there's an opportunity that there are things that are universally required for us to engage with and to understand, and that actually makes the possibility that that work or the realisation of programmes in architecture gain in significance. I think that there's, there isn't an incompatibility between producing icons and symbols as long as they are imbued with that positive reflection of our communal values and understanding.

I'd like to believe that if you commit resource, physical resource to something, if it's well considered and the end product is beloved, then it survives multiple generations of use. And that is, you know, one of the apogees of humanities to produce those things that are cherished and that say something about us in that, in that fashion.

So I think it's a contract where if you are willing to sincerely explore all of the vectors that you should, then there's adequate trust between the community in which you're working, on alignment to the needs of the institution or the organisation you are serving. And that's the best place to be. I think we're in that moment of transition where yeah, there are still probably practitioners and clients that prefer a particular approach that may lack that nuance. And then you have to ask yourself, you know, where do you wish to serve? You know, you know, Adrian, as well as anyone, our projects take a long time and so they should.

And that's a massive investment of intellectual capital, not to mention other forms of capital. So, being assured that what you've done is something that you have that pride in and that you have understood it's real value, I think, I think is, is great.

To me, it's got so interesting to see why some buildings are beloved, you know, and some will be because there is something beautiful aesthetically very much from the relationship between that building and, and the beholder. And there are others that are just so profoundly human in their willingness to receive us and our activity that they survive again and again.



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Vincent Chang: You take, for example, another district in New York I'm really familiar with um, in SoHo, and you look at the Cast-Iron buildings that got protected, I think in 1973, after, you know, prior years of being taken over by the artist community.

And prior to that, you know, being these extraordinary places of kind of ill repute and decline, but the foundational pieces of those buildings, the consideration about the prefabrication of the facade systems, the openness, the kind of the light and airiness of them, the flexibility of the interiors, the fact that they had broad linear stairs that often would ascend many flights in one run – I think that's been you know, spoken about by many architects in terms of flexibility and forms of engaging, a way things can be used. All of those things lent them to be usable and reusable. And to me, that is the, you know, that is the goal, is to produce a significant quantum of construction that has that continuous life.

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Adrian Ellis: So how do you learn, in ways that can systematically inform future practice?

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Vincent Chang: I think you do have to return to projects and I think you have to observe them in use over multiple periods of time, and that's the best way to learn. It's interesting you raised the question right there. We've received one, and I suspect we're going to be receiving many more invitations to develop evaluative toolkits for a generation of projects, not necessarily projects that we've been directly involved in. And I think that's a really progressive place for many institutions to be. I think a number of them are challenging themselves from the point of view that they've made these considerable capital expenditure investments and they want to know not just whether or not it satisfies the results, satisfy their basis of design, but I think additionally, whether their basis of design was even correct.

And where this gets to me very interesting as it isn't simply about, do you have the parameters of air movement or the loading criteria for a given floor. It comes now also into, are these buildings welcoming? How do they actually affect the psychology of users? It's an incredibly important thing that we should invest time in because once we've committed to build something, with all that we've learned about embodied carbon, all that we understand around the amount of building that's going to be necessary as we urbanise globally, it's an extraordinary volume of construction.

If we can't force ourselves um, ideally, willingly, go and understand the consequence of that and whether even those criteria of success are valid, then we'd be missing, incredible opportunities.

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Adrian Ellis: So we've talked about some of the complexities on, you know, the shorthand as the client side, the outward world, and also I think implicit ones. What you are saying is that there are uh, important ways in which collaboration is essential on the, what I'd say, the professional team side.

The professional team for many of the cultural projects that I witnessed, is massive.



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Adrian Ellis: That is to say, you have landscape architects, you have the architectural practice, you often have urban planners as well. You have structural engineers, you have mechanical and electrical engineers, you have cost consultants.

You have either a theatre designer or an exhibition designer. And I'm sure you and I, if we put our minds to it, could think of another sort of 10 professions whose expertise is or appears to be integral to satisfying the client's need for the realisation of the project.

What is the distinctive contribution of the architect?

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Vincent Chang: I, I think there's two aspects to an architect's work in this scenario. You know, one is clearly the technical integration of all of those assets and contributions. Making sure that there is the ability then as they come together that the performance isn't compromised by, at moments where there will be a negotiation between them.

The more distinctive contribution is that they're all in service of something greater, which to me very much comes down to the story of this project or its narrative and its site specificity and its programme specificity. And finding a way to deliver a coherency in that is crucial.

Because without that, then you won't generate the emotional response or the ability to connect to that place and to that programme in all of the ways that you ought to be able to make it special and to sort of lift it above the ordinary or the simply performative. So I think that's the crucial, maybe distinctive contribution of architecture?

I think, through that, defines the relationship we then have to that building, to that place, which in turn lives very long after we've left or it can do, and I think that's the positive contribution it can make.

[00:20:19]

Adrian Ellis: And one of the strengths I think your practice is, is clearly being in the integration of urban planning and, urban planning and architecture, which are overlapping but, quite distinctive.

And we are in a period when there is fascinating debate, certainly in, in the cultural sector about equity and inclusion in the context of public spaces and the civic domain.

Are these issues that are alive in projects that architects are dealing with currently?

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Vincent Chang: Oh, very much so. You know, we've been engaged to prepare design options for the expansion of Penn Station. And it's very important that we examine not simply the kind of functionality of the infrastructure, the capacity that sites might have to generate additional wealth and funding to assist in the provision of the infrastructure, but what this really means and feels like for visitors and for inhabitants of the city.



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Vincent Chang: And this is increasingly through a huge array of Grimshaw, I think magnificent projects in transit, urban architecture. That understanding of the thresholding experience between transportation and the city, around the consideration of the journeys and the individuals that use and move through spaces and what gives them delight and when they simply need the efficiency of movement, when they actually need other experiences.

So there is so much that's taking place now in that intersection of either the infrastructure of the building and the street scape. Other projects, you know, we've been commissioned over the last couple of years to help Google work on some of their development in San Jose. And I think that they've taken a remarkable level of dedication into thinking about, I suppose what people would say was the first 40, you know, the first 40 foot as buildings meet the ground and precisely how that affects our perception of the place, you know, how that affects our understanding of welcome or accessibility and the enrichment of amenitisation that, that goes beyond simply serving a population, in this case, of workforce.

It's really become something that we are very, very much engaged now. And I think that the challenge at the moment is that things are moving quickly. There isn't such certainty around how these spaces should operate in. And I'm actually a member of the Urban Design Forum here in New York, and they just published, I think, quite a remarkable body of work that looks into open streets and how we can take advantage of this opportunity and this time to really re-evaluate ways to reimagine not just vibrancy and resiliency, but across a whole series of different uh, studies.

You know, we had a time when through the pandemic, with the sharp decline in vehicular traffic, how do we then reclaim these areas? And some of those have become permanent, I think to the joy and delight of many city residents. I think what needs to be interrogated further is that some of those changes, if they're not coherently understood across the entirety of the city or between different neighbourhoods, you end up potentially driving to a point of homogeneity or let's say commercial focus in one street, a proliferation of dining opportunities, because these streets can be reclaimed in a certain way. But you have to ask yourself the question, are they still available for all and are they in service of all members of the public in the way that they ought to be?

So I think there are significant gains that are taking place. I think that we have this opportunity. I think that it's a fascinating experiment, a time actually where we need to be comfortable with uncertainty and actually build a methodology of design and study that can allow for um, experimentation, and for learning as we go.

And it shouldn't be too monocultural and too providing for one which might be generative of revenue, but in, in an asymmetric way that it is equally considerate of other needs. There's been, you know, I think areas given over very successfully for festivals, street art, performance, you know, those, all those things have to happen in balance.

At the same time, there's still foundational pieces required for making sure that the city can function. So the ability to share in that real estate, manage that carefully, look at it holistically across larger scales, I think is a very pressing area of interest.



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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Adrian Ellis: You have worked on a lot of extremely successful public buildings of one sort or another from Fulton Street subway through to, you've mentioned Penn Station to innumerable others, and they involve significant flows of people in complicated patterns that fundamentally need to be understood for the design both to function and you need to understand, as it were, the emotional texture of what it is to function. You know, it's not just how many people can get through that space in such and such a time. It's how they feel about it.

And there have been many advances in simulations and modelling. How important, and how much of contribution is formal modelling of movement to the sort of work that, that you and the practice are involved in these days?

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Vincent Chang: Ah, it's important. I think it is important perhaps in two very specific areas, and then obviously it can, it can grow from those points. Understanding desire lines or intended parts to travel is fundamental. And then ensuring that when you've developed spaces that they have the adequacy for the level of service, for the demand of people moving through is crucial as well.

So those are kind of things that are quantifiable. I think at the same time though, architecture and planning is there to affect behaviour as well, in a positive way. And so the means with which you allow for that movement and we always like to stress the importance of creating spaces that have intuitive movement opportunities.

And that's true of museums as well it is of, of transportation. So, you know, you mentioned Fulton Center. You know, we work very committed to the notion that in New York City. So much of the relationship between transit, systems and the street tended to be through fairly mean easements in commercial and private building.

And so the opportunity presented to create this significant ascending volume that literally opened and unified space between street into lower concourses. And that provided the opportunity for the first time where people could really take stock of where they were, look further into the entirety of the space and system.

And that brings with it this perception of, I think, confidence, and therefore safety in your decision making. So those are kind of parts where both the measurement was important to understand, the desire lines, and then the actual effectiveness comes to bring value through the architecture.

It's funny, in, in another project that is as far from Fulton as you could perhaps imagine uh, the science museum in Miami, you know, we were very inspired by speaking with children. In fact, we did a series of workshops with children and they, to a girl and boy, you know, always enjoyed on the wonder wall of images, all of the images that had huge staircases. And you know, when you asked for why, it was something around just the drama and the enjoyment of that level of movement.



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Vincent Chang: And so the entirety of that primary open street in that building is founded around these extremely oversized staircases that have these generous landings. And those landings have now become the places where docents and others could put together exhibits or have teaching moments.

The concourses are all oversized. That was never initiated by algorithm or by measurement. It was just to make people feel that there was that decompressive space where there was confidence to look ahead and around and then feel that you are part of a larger audience. And it's an area actually that's become important in lots of ways.

I was actually speaking to a series of university campus architects and planners and even presidents of schools over the last couple of years as we tried to understand what was happening in their world during the pandemic. And in a number of those conversations, it became very apparent that the assets that were increasingly the most valuable to them were the ones that were more ambiguous, and they were more about fluid open spaces, concourse spaces, the areas before the spaces that were very specifically designed for a particular purpose.

And so that, that value of ambiguity or uncertainty or, or transition, I think has a moment again in architecture as we sort of look to see how can we use and how do we wish to occupy space? And do any of us have enough of the answers to define that? And therefore, in the meantime, maybe there ought to be a goal of building more indeterminate buildings.

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Adrian Ellis: So, unpack that a little because certainly in the cultural sector, we have made our buildings incredibly specified. We sit around designing concert halls with very, very fastidiously demanding acoustic properties, very fastidiously demanding sight lines and for a particular canon of work performed in a particular way.

And at the same time when you look at audiences, they kind of like informality. They're not nearly as preoccupied with acoustics... So, I often think we should be designing with increasing sort of indeterminacy, the cultural spaces...

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Vincent Chang: Oh, I couldn't agree more. I think it was actually, but again, back to referencing these really fantastic conversations we had with higher education. The number of times that we heard a concern about the investment into assets, lecture theatres, rate floors, the inability for those spaces that other highest cost spaces to function in other configurations and how might you adapt them, was really enlightening to hear.

Of course, you know, there are spaces that absolutely have to be designed to the nth degree for a particular use, technology and performance, but there are places that we love and there are experiences that we have there that are very much dependent on how that place makes us feel and our, therefore willingness to then adapt to it. I think combining that with the need for change, we should be talking about architecture in that sense of latency and how might that be reconfigurable.



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Vincent Chang: You know, without being too predetermined on programme, how might you design a space that could unfold and accommodate a variety of different uses that could either relate to street or relate more internally, that could either relate to commerce and consumption, or could relate to production and ideation? And all of those different forces, I think, need to be actionable in the spaces we create.

So, so that, that sense of indeterminacy, I think has become increasingly relevant and it, it sits very neatly as well, in the future of economics, in the future of our wellbeing, perspective, in what architecture should be, as well as into the, the carbon equation. So I think there's a lot there that with the right willingness to be uncomfortable, and be uncertain, it is a very fertile place to practice.

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Adrian Ellis: So, what is the lasting architectural legacy of the pandemic?

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Vincent Chang: I hope it's that we need to recognise hubris when we see it, and we need to be more receptive. We need to be very conscious of the health of our communities. Obviously not just health with regard to medical condition, but the sense of connectedness. Um, that our architecture actually is a bit kinder. It's a bit more receptive, it's a bit more considerate. It's a bit more capable of change and flex. I think those things are all lessons that would be great to, to come away with.

[00:33:02]

Adrian Ellis: Vincent, thank you for fascinating uh, discussion, set of insights that are always stimulating.

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Vincent Chang: Great. Thank you so much Adrian. It's really, it was great fun and uh, you've given me lots to think about, so I appreciate that too.

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Adrian Ellis: 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

