



S3:E2 A VISION OF IMPACT

Elly Andriopoulou in conversation with Criena Gehrke

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Criena Gehrke: 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 those busy and sometimes congested intersections of cultural and urban life.

I'm currently speaking to you from the lands of the Kombumerri people of the Yugambeh language region here on the Gold Coast. I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the many lands we gather on today and pay my respects to elders past and present. Our First Nations people are the original storytellers and custodians of culture. I'm Criena Gehrke, and today I'm very excited to be chatting with Elly Andriopoulou, the chairwoman and managing director of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, or SNFCC as we're going to call it because that's quite a mouthful.

Before joining the SNFCC, Elly held leadership positions in banking, strategy, consulting, and most recently philanthropy. In 2012, she joined the Stavros Niarchos Foundation where she prepared the business plan and future operation of the foundation's largest grant under construction, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, and later managed the 50 million Euro grants through which the SNF supported the first five years of the operations of that great cultural centre after it had been donated to the Greek state. Elly, welcome to The Three Bells.

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Elly Andriopoulou: Nice to be here, Criena. Thank you for having me.

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Criena Gehrke: Absolute pleasure. I can't wait to have this conversation. Now I do want to talk at length about the SNFCC because I feel as though – having been responsible myself for a cultural precinct development in recent times, everything about this project appears to be utopian for those of us who have been involved in cultural precincts. It's got all of those elements that we all aspire to. So I do want to dig deeper into that. But I'd like to really start with you.

So, when I was doing a bit of background reading for this podcast it struck me that I loved that your career path seemed to be eclectic, and yet highly considered.



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Criena Gehrke: You wanted to be a student counsellor, and then you actually did a degree in psychology and then you diverted and ended up consulting to Fortune 500 companies and being appointed as managing director of Citibank in Greece, like it's very impressive, but also a very interesting pathway.

I'd really love to hear about how that career pathway came to lead you to this point.

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Elly Andriopoulou: I, I definitely think my whole background has led me to where I am today and psychology studies just give you a different perspective on people and communication on relationships. Even though I never became a psychologist, I just got my bachelor's degree in the subject, but never practiced. It does give you very interesting background, and just insight.

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Criena Gehrke: It's interesting that you, at one point, it appears, decided that you really wanted to pursue that balance between the corporate world and social impact would be my reflection. Is that how you ended up in this role?

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Elly Andriopoulou: Yes, definitely. Even from my first studies studying psychology, I realised I liked applied psychology more than anything. So that led me to Human Resources management, which led me to business. And that's how that path evolved. And having an impact has always been a key driver in what I've selected to do from having an impact on a small team, you know, in a junior role to now having huge impact through the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center. And moving from banking to the Stavros Niarchos Foundation to work on grant making was all about switching to a role that had more impact. And then from there, my current role has been just a natural development because I've been working on this project since before construction started, so, it's been my life for quite a few years.

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Criena Gehrke: (laughs) So tell me about that life. You know, you had gone from the very beginning of this project in many ways. So what has been that evolution and how has that come about? Because from the outside looking in – and I can't wait to come and visit, you know, there's evidently been a big vision there, incredible generosity from the foundation, and then strong public and private partnerships. So can you wind us back? How did it all come to be?

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Elly Andriopoulou: Yeah, as you mentioned, it is a result of a great vision. It was the vision of Andreas Dracopoulos, the president of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. And the way it started is, the foundation does grants in arts and culture, and education and health and social welfare. And it had received two separate grant requests from the Greek National Opera and the National Library of Greece for new premises.

So initially these were treated as two separate requests among the many requests that the foundation received.



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Elly Andriopoulou: And, very quickly, it became evident that these two could be combined into a complex, especially when the land was found in the southern part of the city. So then the foundation decided to create the cultural centre, which would house both these two very important national cultural institution as well as a large public park.

And you mentioned, as a utopia, I think a lot of that has to do – obviously it's not a utopia, but a lot of that has to do-

Criena Gehrke: (laughs)

Elly Andriopoulou: Nothing is. With the design, the thought that went to, into the design of this project. And I'm not talking just the architectural design, but what it would be, what it would represent, who it would be for.

For example, when the land was found and the foundation decided to co-locate the National Opera and the National Library buildings, they wanted to make sure that this wasn't a cultural centre built just for the academia or just for the opera aficionados, because those are two very small sub-segment of Greek society.

So they wanted to make sure that the way it was designed, it was for everyone and it was open and inclusive and accessible to everyone. And the way they did that is they asked the National Library of Greece to add public lending services to their scope. Which as you know, is not typical for national libraries, but that immediately made the library relevant to everyone.

It's a public library now, in addition to all very important work in safeguarding, you know, Greek heritage and for the Greek National Opera, they created a second performance space in addition to the grand theatre which held musical theatre of all kinds. Different kinds, not just opera. And that has allowed the opera to really expand its' audience. And of course, public park, 42 acre public park. That makes it very accessible and inclusive because that's open to everyone. So that was part of the design. It was part of the thinking. It didn't just occur. And the foundation decided to create this great project, and it started working very closely with the Greek state, and that's how the partnership started.

The Greek state provided the land to the foundation on a temporary basis just for the construction to, to take place. So the foundation funded this Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center. It built it and equipped it, and it also prepared it for its operation. And then in February, 2017, it handed over the SNFCC to the Greek state.

It handed over the premises, and it handed over the organisation it had created, the SNFCC Inc – which is basically the third resident on the complex in addition to the library and the opera, is the facility manager. We are the facility manager of the complex. We do our own programming and we manage all the revenues too.

With the exception of course, of the opera ticket.



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Elly Andriopoulou: So they created this organisation and they handed that over to the Greek state, the one and only share they donated it to the Minister of Finance who now oversees the SNFCC. But their job wasn't done there. They wanted to make sure that after this huge investment, that this would operate in a way that would have a great social impact.

So they stipulated what that meant into an agreement. And a contract was signed between the Stavros Niarchos National Foundation and the Greek State, which basically outlined each party's responsibilities, both during construction, but also during operation. So since the foundation donated the SNFCC to the Greek state it no longer has any governance role, it doesn't have board members or any involvement in its management. However, it has a contract with the Greek state on how this operates. And it continues to support it with a very significant grant. So that means that the partnership also continues through time.

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Criena Gehrke: Wow. So, (laughs) you're not convincing me that there's not utopia in there by the way, because you know,

Elly Andriopoulou: (laughs) There's a lot of utopias.

Criena Gehrke: Yeah that's right. My recent experience, and you know, I've been very privileged to be part of a significant cultural precinct development here on the Gold Coast after the, over the last five years, and it has been extraordinary, but my experience has been slightly different in that there was a strong vision, but that vision probably focused on the infrastructure more than it focused on how it was going to be accessible, inclusive, who it was actually for. And then over time certain things have been value managed out. And that includes not just in the infrastructure, but in the soft infrastructure as well around programming, support, around how people engage with the precinct. That sounds a bit doom and gloom and it's not, it's a fantastic precinct, but I'm interested in how that strong vision and commitment to a place for everyone, evolved, and how you all stayed on track and strong in that over that period of time, because you've most definitely delivered.

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Elly Andriopoulou: The vision from the start was about social impact, and I think that had a lot to do with the fact that this project was envisioned by a philanthropic foundation – that was part of their DNA. So the infrastructure, even having Renzo Piano as the architect, everything that went into the project went in to serve this vision.

It wasn't the other way around. So it wasn't about the building, it was about what the building would do for the people that would live in it, that would enjoy it, that would come to visit it. So that, that was part of the initial vision and has remained that way. So everyone who's worked on the project has always worked in that direction. And the foundation, even before opening the SNFCC, even during construction, made sure that this impact became evident to everyone. So they created a temporary visitor centre where people could visit, they could get onto a bus and be driven through the construction site. There was very small scale programming, but it was conceived to be preamble of the programming that would follow, you know, at the cultural centre.



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Elly Andriopoulou: They travelled all over Greece and did programming to show what the project would be about. So it was always about what this will do for the people. And it wasn't someone's big idea of a cultural centre that Athens needs. This came as a response from two national institutions that they needed better, larger facility in order to achieve their mission. So it wasn't someone's pet project. There was a need, a national need that the foundation responded to. So everyone who's worked on this project has known this from the start. You know, it's been people who have come on board, understand what we do and the impact that we're trying to achieve.

And of course, the funding has made it possible. The fact that the foundation continues to provide funding, that makes our programming accessible because in the five years of operation, we've had you know, thousands of events; over 5,700 culture and educational events, over 13,000 sports activity, and over 99% of that has been offered for free.

And even ticketed events have a very low ticket just to make sure that people, you know, commit and come. So the continued funding has made that possible. And that makes it very accessible to everyone. You have people coming, you know, in the summer in the park to watch a movie on our Great Lawn.

They don't have to pay anything for that. They can come with their family and just put a blanket down, watch the movie, or attend an open air concert at no expense. So this has made it, uh, very much possible and inclusive. And of course, accessibility was also built into the infrastructure.

We have, you know, the blessing that it's a new building. So a lot of the learnings that other cultural centres had, had to deal with over time, we were able to build in from the start, not just in terms of, you know, physical accessibility, but also technologies and services that make our services accessible and our programming accessible.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Criena Gehrke: You were saying that part of the success factor to date has been the incredible generosity of the foundation in terms of that operational and programming support. My understanding is that it was for an agreed period of time. I guess I'm interested in what happens next because I think we all struggle at times with the notion of accessibility and often that is around financial pressure as, as well as a whole range of other factors, and so to be able to provide that level of free programming is just extraordinary.

But I guess what, how is that sustainable and what might happen next?

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Elly Andriopoulou: You're very right. I mean, this is one of the key challenges, financial sustainability of such a project. Cultural centres are, you know, non-profits and all their impact comes through what they're able to offer for free or at least make it accessible. So, it is a key priority and a key challenge.



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Elly Andriopoulou: So the foundation, when they handed over the SNFCC to the Greek state, they made a commitment for a five year operating and programming support. This came to an end in February 2022. However, they decided to renew the support for one more year, and now we're-

Criena Gehrke: Oh! We love them.

Elly Andriopoulou: Yes, we do, (laughs) and we're also discussing a further renewal at this point, you know, post 23. At the same time, this is a project that, you know, belongs to the people. And it is expected that it would be supported by the people and everyone in Greek society, not just the foundation that created it. So while the foundation continues to support it, we are also looking to diversify our income sources.

We are asking for the Greek state to cover all our facility costs because we think that is, you know, a fair ask. And given that they own the SNFCC, we are asking for the foundation to continue their support. But we're also asking corporates to partner with us in sponsorship. Also are launching a sustainability campaign for individuals, providing them with naming rights and in something that has now been established and they can understand its value to Greek society.

And of course, you know, at a very small scale level, we'll have our members, you know, with a 50 euros contribution a year. So we're asking everyone to come together and support this project because it is of national importance and it has amazing impact on the Greek society.

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Criena Gehrke: And is your sense of it at this point that everyone understands that and they're supportive?

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Elly Andriopoulou: I don't find that we have to convince people about how important culture is or the SNFCC specifically or its impact. I think the harder part in Greece is convincing everyone that they need to contribute. We don't have a philanthropic culture. And so we're trying to raise awareness about, you know, the SNFCC and its financial sustainability plan and at the same time create a culture of philanthropy.

And, you know, it's something that we've done before on a very different level. When the SNFCC opened, its public park was one of the few public spaces. So it was very evident to us that we had to introduce what public space means and to work with the public to see how this could be leveraged to their advantage and used to their advantage. So, there was an educational aspect of the use of the public space. And now I feel that as we're trying to raise funds, there's an educational aspect about fundraising. In Europe, it is very much expected that the state has to provide for everything.

And that's a challenge. And having the foundation support has been amazing, actually, critical to our survival. But some people think, oh, you have the foundation, you don't need us. So what we're trying to say is we need everyone, everyone needs to contribute to this project because the project belongs to everyone and everyone's enjoying it.



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Criena Gehrke: And you've said it a couple of times, and I love it so much, this notion that this place is, is for everyone. What does that look like every day? You know, so you turn up at work, how, how do you ensure that it is for everyone? You've talked a bit about accessibility, physical accessibility into the buildings, free programming – do you think part of the success is also that rich mix of, there's many ways of people engaging with the centre? So there is recreation, there's sport, there's parkland, there's bike paths, is that part of the success? That rich mix of opportunities to feel a sense of belonging to the place?

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Elly Andriopoulou: Definitely, our programming also reflects that philosophy because we are trying to offer something for everyone. So not everything is for everyone, but we want to have something for everyone. And we have a very broad range of programming because we have the space also to, you know, to do a lot of activities.

Our main area include music, so we do concerts indoors and outdoors which are large scale events, exhibitions in general, contemporary art in the public space are very, is very important for us because the vast majority of our visitors come just for a walk, just for a visit. Most people don't come, you know, we're not a culture institution, a performing arts institution that would, people would come, you know, with their ticket in hand. They visit us anyway. Over 90% of visitors come just for a walk. So when we placed art in our public space, that creates an encounter, which for them wasn't planned.

But for us, it's very much designed. And we also do a lot of programming around public art. There are many educational workshops and activities for all ages. We do children's theatre twice a year. We have daily sports activities, so all the locals come in for yoga in the park, pilates in the park. They have many activities that they can do on a daily basis.

We have facilities that allow different types of visitors to come. So we'll have, we have a running track, and outdoor gym equipment. We have a canal that you can take a kayak and go into the canal. Now we're building a climbing wall. It's going into operation soon. So all these different facilities bring different crowds then. Also our school programmes are very important because that by design, you know, it come, they come from very different backgrounds, very different geographic areas, but even very different social backgrounds.

And we have thousands of students. We've had 387,000 students come through the SNFCC and participate in school programmes in our five years of operation. So, that makes it quite accessible. And then during COVID, as everyone, we had to adapt and switch to a lot of digital programming and from that we've kept our school programmes platform, SNFCC Class, which has reached over a thousand schools all over Greece and abroad. So that creates a different type of accessibility beyond our, our geographic limits.

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Criena Gehrke: It's extraordinary, in a very short period of time. It really is. And you have undertaken an impact study, and I want to talk to you a bit about that, but part of that study also gave insights into tourists coming and visiting.



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Criena Gehrke: And I'm interested because you've been so clear and it warms my heart, it really does, around the vision being about social impact and about connectedness and community, and yet it feels as though one of the benefits, has been cultural tourism.

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Elly Andriopoulou: Yeah, it has been a result. It wasn't the driver. I mean, as you mentioned, the primary driver was social impact. However, when the scale of the project became apparent and when Renzo Piano was selected as SNFCC architect, it was quite evident even at that point that the SNFCC would become a landmark for contemporary Athens and then this has materialised. And of course this has led to interest by tourists. So when we did the first impact study – the impact study, we've done it three times. One time it was five years before construction and it was actually before construction started, so it was projecting the impact of the project during construction and then during operation. The second time it happened right about the end of construction.

So it was about the actual impact of construction and projected impact of operations. And now five years after you know, our full operations, we did it again to see what was the impact in our five years. And talking to people in the tourism industry, first of all, they have evidence that visitors of Athens are extending their stay by maybe a day or two so that they can also visit the SNFCC.

Research done by the Athens Airport indicated that the SNFCC is the third most visited cultural venue after the Acropolis and the National Archaeological Museum by foreign tourists. So it's definitely become a tourist destination, and even though it wasn't an objective of the project, it's something that we have worked on.

We collaborate with the Athens Airport, with our national carrier, with ferry companies, with all hotels at Athens to create awareness about the programming and the facilities at the SNFCC. We have English speaking tours from day one. We have created self-guided experiences for tourists. So it's something that have become an area of focus for us because we see a lot of tourists visiting the SNFCC.

We have received quite a bit of international press because of the scale of the project, but also because of the events that we host here. So we, when, whenever we have heads of state visiting Greece, it's quite typical that they would also visit the SNFCC and that creates publicity. Our new restaurant, the Delta Restaurant, was just awarded after only a year of operation two stars Michelin. So that is bringing some foodies over. So, it has been a tourist destination and we are trying to make sure that as with all our visitors, they find interesting things to do and see at the SNFCC.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Criena Gehrke: Do you think that the way that the community has embraced this place also plays a part in terms of the tourists being attracted?



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Criena Gehrke: Like I've spent a long time over the last five years really talking about and advocating for the fact that as a cultural precinct, if we aren't of the people and representative of the people of the Gold Coast – and that buzzword that everyone used that sometimes I'm a bit thoughtful about what it actually means, but really authentic and really of the place, everyone else will come.

Whereas sometimes I feel as though governments in particular like to embark on a magical mystery tour where it's like I'm going to build something and it's going to be iconic architecture and it's going to drive cultural tourism. And I'm firmly of the view that the people must love it. It must be of the place, and then tourists will really be attracted to that. You know, and a lot of what you are talking about is precisely that, along with anchor institutions that really represent Greek culture.

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Elly Andriopoulou: Yeah, I mean, I think it, it all goes back to the vision. who this was built for, and it was built for the Greek people, for residents of Greece – also for tourists, but it wasn't the main consideration, and especially the local community, really appreciated this project. Some history would help explain that. Before uh, the SNFCC was built there, the horse race track was there. And before the Olympic Games, that was moved in 2004 – the Athens Olympic Games, it was moved to the suburbs, and then it became a parking lot for the Olympic Games. And after that, it just became a place where everyone would dump their construction waste.

So you had like huge redevelopment. You had from like a vast area of waste redeveloped into the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre, a public park that doubled the green space per capita in all the neighbouring municipalities, you have a place where people can walk their dog or do their morning run or exercise or just, you know, hop over for a concert or a workshop or bring their kids, you know, to play on a Sunday, or for a picnic.

So, it would've been a surprise if the local community hadn't embraced that. And obviously it really helped that a lot of work was done during construction to show everyone what this was. There was huge transparency to this project during construction. There wasn't a wall around it, you know, something high.

Nothing was unveiled at the end. It was always accessible. People could see construction progressing every single day. They could visit the construction site. They could have a taste of its programming, even the government committee which was formed as part of the public-private partnership during construction and met monthly to discuss all issues related, you know, with the ministries involved, the mayor of the area, even that was livestreamed the last two years. So even, you know, from a stakeholder perspective, everyone could, if they're interested, can learn about what was being built and why and for whom. I think that really helped. There were town hall meetings with locals held at the temporary visitor centre.

So there was a lot of work that went into educating the public about what was being created. And it was also being created at a time that was a huge crisis for Greece. Financial crisis. So it became a beacon of hope for people.



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Elly Andriopoulou: If this new venue, this spectacularly new venue is built for the people, you know, it means the good things are coming and the people deserve something of that quality.

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Criena Gehrke: There have been a lot of stakeholders in the evolution quite evidently. Can you give me any hints about how to manage those complex stakeholder relationships so that everyone stays really committed to the “one team one vision”, which has evidently stood you in good stead in delivering this incredible asset for Greece.

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Elly Andriopoulou: Yes. I think the impact that we’ve had so far has really helped. You know, before the SNFCC, it was, there was a vision and there was a lot of work that was taking place, but it wasn’t clear to everyone exactly how this will work and what it will offer. Now it’s hard for any of the stakeholders to put the project at any risk because it has such a huge impact and it’s so embraced by the Greek people that anyone who creates some obstacles for the implementation of that vision, you know, it wouldn’t be accepted, I think, by the people. So I think that the fact that the people having embraced the project, it offers it a lot of protection. And the key stakeholders continue to be the Greek state and the foundation.

For the foundation, you always have the same people you’re talking with. For the Greek state, obviously ministers changed. Governments changed during construction. I think there was more than six government changes.

Criena Gehrke: Wow!

Elly Andriopoulou: Now we’ve had two governments in operation. So obviously that creates the need for building new relationships and also creating awareness about the project.

But I think everyone sees the value and everyone understands the impact. Where it becomes harder to bring everyone to the table is regarding funding. That is, you know, more concrete commitment. You have good will, of course, and there’s a lot of work being done to, to translate that into, you know, hard commitment.

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Criena Gehrke: And I’m assuming that you have clear key performance indicators that you work to so that you understand what success looks like for those stakeholders?

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Elly Andriopoulou: Exactly. And the impact study has really helped us to measure some of that. I mean, we, given our mission for social impact, um, number of visitors and number of participants of our event, just the sheer scale and reach of what we do is a very important indicator. So that’s something that we measure anyway, even before the impact study.



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Elly Andriopoulou: But as part of the study, we were able to learn things about, you know, how tourists view us, that I mentioned earlier, how SNFCC is viewed as a landmark in Greece. We were able to get metrics around its environmental impact because it has LEED Platinum accreditation. The whole construction site was, you know, operated according to LEED Platinum guidelines and our operations, we try to, for them to be as sustainable as possible. So, you know, that's always a work in progress, but we were able to measure the impact of our, you know, 10,000 square meter solar panels and their contribution to our energy needs and things like that. But also our financial impact to Greek society.

In 2019, which is sort of a reference year for everyone because it's like the pre-covid year, it is estimated, and we did the impact study with Boston Consulting Group and they estimated that the contribution of the SNFCC to GDP is 203 million euros, and that translates into 36 million euros of fiscal revenues for the state. And it also translates into 20,800 jobs being maintained – not in the SNFCC, but because of the SNFCC, because of the, all the economic activity that it has created in its area and in Athens in general, especially related to hospitality and tourism.

So it's important to, to be able to measure that and to convey that information to stakeholders.

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Criena Gehrke: Absolutely. And, for anyone that's out there listening – and I hope many of you are, to The Three Bells podcast, I think one of my key takeaways from this conversation that we've had tonight really is place the pressure on the project or whatever you need to do, to do those impact studies because the data that you've just expressed is compelling, you know, and it shows the impact for all of the stakeholders, but also for the community in which you placed, you know, and I also love that you talked about, it's not just about visitation – although that's really important, but what level of engagement? How are people experiencing this place? You know, the importance of the education programmes, the recreational use, it's the sum of the parts that bring it together to make it a significant place for people.

So, vision and impact. It's so simple when we just say it like that, isn't it? It's like just have a clear vision and measure your impact. And yet here we all are in our everyday lives and jobs going, some days it's not actually as easy as that.

Elly Andriopoulou: Exactly.

Criena Gehrke: Our time together sadly, has nearly come to an end with this podcast, but I literally cannot wait to come and visit. Everything that you've spoken about just sings to my heart. You know, a place for everyone, a place with a clear vision, a place that focuses on social impact first and foremost, and then everything else flows from there, that has the generosity of a foundation attached and government support. It really is an extraordinary story of success.

My parting question, is, what next? So how do you imagine this place in a hundred years' time? It's also very evident to me, just from this conversation that you personally are interested in the impact and the legacy for generations to come. So what's your dream?



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Elly Andriopoulou: A hundred years is a long time. I won't be around to witness it.

Criena Gehrke: I know! (laughs)

Elly Andriopoulou: (laughs) But, I mean, I feel we're still a start-up. I mean, we're only five years old, so there's a lot of things that we're still trying to figure out and try to put in place and try to organise better. But I hope that in a hundred years' time, I imagine the SNFCC would still be full of people and full of life on a daily basis. I imagine that people won't remember a time when it wasn't there. And that the quality of the public space, the quality and level of services and the programming offered, that it will have set the standard for what people think they, they deserve for generations.

So I hope that this will continue and that even though that the SNFCC will be established, by then, for sure, I imagine that it will continue to evolve in order to achieve its mission of social impact. I don't think social impact will be the same, you know, a hundred years from now, or even 10 years from now, what that means and how you achieve it. So I hope that it will continue to evolve over time and be part of the community.

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Criena Gehrke: Elly, thank you so much. It really has been an absolute pleasure to spend time with you. Your morning, my evening. Thanks for your insights and vision.

Elly Andriopoulou: Thank you, Criena, for having me.

Criena Gehrke: Thanks for sharing.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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 SNFCC and Elly's work.

And now, to some random musings from the cultural front. It's been a big week here in Australia with our current Labour government who have been in power for less than a year, releasing their National Cultural Policy. This comes after a decade under the previous centre-right liberal party of a policy void.

During that perplexing 10 years, there was significant slashes made to the Australia Council for the Arts, our national arm's length funding body. Cuts made to our national broadcaster, the ABC, some eye watering and frankly, ridiculous investment was made in projects and companies, not through peer and expert assessment, but completely at the discretion of the then arts minister.

Many artists in creative industries weren't eligible for government funding during covid. We weren't seen as essential, or there was little understanding of the gig economy.



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Criena Gehrke: And then, there was the quite eyebrow raising moment when Australia no longer had a federal department communications in the arts. Instead, arts was rolled into a mega department, the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications.

We'd been ghosted. Now, believe it or not. My musings today aren't actually about showing my political hand or an analysis of the relative merits of left, right, or centre politics, and whether history shows, that perhaps governments that are more, hmm, left leaning, have a greater love and understanding of the democratic, not elitist importance of the arts to our society.

They do, by the way.

It's not even a dissertation on the importance of cultural policy in providing a roadmap for some pretty big ticket items like national identity, storytelling, reconciliation, and healthier, more connected communities. Although Australia's new cultural policy has all that in spades; revive a place for every story, a story for every place, puts First Nations first, and sees the artists as absolutely central to success.

It speaks to national identity, storytelling and the role of arts and community. You'll be able to find a link to the policy on our website, and I encourage you to have a look. It's a really good policy. But no, my musing is actually about the importance of recognition of being seen and feeling valued.

The release of this national policy has brought with it a new optimism for us as the Australian arts sector. The launch took place in an iconic, slightly grungy Melbourne live music venue where the carpet is sticky, and the history of Australian gigs is long.

It started with a Welcome to Country by a traditional owner, and featured First Nations artists. It celebrated Australian art and Australian artists. During the official speeches – that were kept blissfully short and concise, with not one single sniff of self-congratulation, the arts minister Tony Burke, told us in no uncertain terms, the ultimate success of the policy rests not with the politicians or with the bureaucrats, but with Australian creatives.

This policy is there to provide a larger canvas and a brighter spotlight to crank up the volume so we can succeed. Then the Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, said the words we had almost desperately craved for so long during those years of neglect and hardship and COVID.

He said, the arts is essential. You are essential.

And we were suddenly seen. And almost instantaneously there was renewed optimism, unity, energy, and excitement from the Australian creative and cultural sector. We were seen. Now look, it's early days and there's still a lot of work that needs to happen in details to come about the policy implementation, new investment and funding models.



[00:38:45]

Criena Gehrke: Over the next five years of the policy's life, there will inevitably be missteps and disappointments along with the afterglow and successes. My hope and aim, is to hold onto this feeling of optimism and hope, to hold this policy and government to account, but to be part of the solution. To take the arts minister at his word, when he says that it is up to us, the creative sector to make the difference.

[00:39:12]

THEME MUSIC

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. 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 is Criena Gehrke. Thank you so much for being with us today, and I look forward to joining you again soon.

