



S3:E9 FROM DETROIT WITH LOVE...

David Cowan in conversation with Stephanie Fortunato

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[THEME MUSIC]

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

I'm your host, Stephanie Fortunato, Director of Special Projects for GCDN. I'm speaking to you from the ancestral land of the Narragansett, Pokanoket, Nipmuc, and other Indigenous peoples on which Rhode Island is located. I recognise their enduring connection to this place and I pay my respects to those who have and continue to live here and to all the First Nations people, of the many lands on which we're listening today.

What do you think of when I say New York? Tokyo? Paris? There are some cities you think you know whether you've been there or not. What do you think of when I mentioned Detroit? My first thought used to be cars. The legacy of the automobile industry that shaped the city, the population and built environment alike.

A city that rose to great heights in the 20th century, built prestigious cultural institutions like the Detroit Institute of Arts. Home of the famous Detroit Industry Murals series by Diego Rivera and later Motown. And then in 2013, the City of Detroit declared bankruptcy. Like many, I watched from afar, grimly studying the forces which led the government to make that decision.

And in the years since, cheering on the Detroiters, especially the visionary creatives and civic leaders who believed in the city and helped to remake it. My guest today is one of those loyal Detroit champions. And from our first conversation, he has asked me to rethink everything I thought I knew about Detroit's story.

Sure, the city's history as Motor City and as the birthplace of Motown are important to understanding Detroit today. But take it from him. There's so much more. David Cowan is the Chief Public Spaces Officer at the Downtown Detroit Partnership, one of two new GCDN members from Detroit. And it's my pleasure to welcome him to The Three Bells.

Hello David!



The Three Bells: a podcast about culture in its urban context produced by AEA Consulting and the Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network.

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[00:02:13]

David Cowan: Thank you Stephanie, for having me on. Pleasure to be with you.

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Stephanie Fortunato: It's so awesome. Thank you for joining us to set the record straight about Detroit. (laughs) You have two great titles actually, I want to start with you and your role here. First, you were born in Detroit and I've just learned that that makes you a Detroiter, which is a pretty cool, pretty cool title there.

And second, you are the Chief Public Spaces Officer for the Downtown Detroit Partnership. So you're responsible, I read, for a staggering 500,000 square feet of public space in the heart of the city – including what I also learned, is the number one public space in America. How does one become a Chief Public Spaces Officer?

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David Cowan: (laughs) Well, right. I mean, isn't it so telling of where the priorities are at when you've got a C-level title for something like Chief Public Spaces Officer. So, I'm actually as you said, a Detroit native and, and grew up on Grosse Ile, which is an island that floats in the middle of Detroit River.

So it's equally as close to the U.S. as it is to Canada. So, you know, just having the chance to be part of such a culturally rich, historic place growing up, I think is what has carried me away into the career I have today. So, I'm proud to be uh, Chief Public Spaces Officer here at the Downtown Detroit Partnership and to surround myself with so many passionate Detroiters.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Well, you yourself are so passionate about your city, so I'm sure that working for the Downtown Detroit Partnership is a dream. How long have you been there?

David Cowan: Eight years now, actually, yesterday.

Stephanie Fortunato: Wow. Congratulations. Happy anniversary!

David Cowan: Thank you.

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Stephanie Fortunato: What does the Downtown Detroit Partnership do? Like, who are the partners for that?

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David Cowan: Sure. So Downtown Detroit Partnership is a non-profit, public-private partnership in place management organisation. And really, we're the urban planning entity that's been behind the transformation of the Greater Downtown Detroit area for certainly the past 10 to 20 years through a period of incredible growth. But we're actually a hundred year old organisation, so established in 1922, as a retail services entity and have really evolved to becoming a one stop downtown shop – if you will, for all things that go on in our one square mile district.



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Stephanie Fortunato: Oh, I want to get into that, but I just want to spend another second on your experience. Because I know that your background is in the performing arts and you've done a lot of uh, work to use creative placemaking to creatively transform public spaces and parks. Where does that fit into the agenda for Downtown Detroit?

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David Cowan: Yeah, so I've got an urban planning background and an arts management background, but I've got no formal training in what you might expect with this role. There's no architecture experience for me, no public space or placemaking training. But I found that, you know, I just continued to be attracted to community gathering spaces, vibrant streetscapes.

Loved the arts, was enticed by the ability to do really whatever in public space. So being able to put all of those things together, I think has been really successful. And I stand by the fact that if you go into the arts or creative background or into cultural heritage studies, I mean, you can really do whatever you want and make any industry better by that.

So, and that's certainly been true for me. It's not been a linear path in my career by any means. I spent five years in Washington D.C., I spent some time on the East Coast and also in Moscow, Russia, studying theatre. So I definitely try to bring a global perspective through life and also with me to my work here in this very hyper, locally focused community in my hometown of Detroit.

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Stephanie Fortunato: I mean, I have to say it's kind of... surprising maybe? Is the right word. I'm not sure that, there are so many public spaces and parks in the heart of Detroit. Again, from afar and looking in, it seems like automobiles really were the dominant feature of the city for so long. But what are those public spaces like?

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David Cowan: Yeah, so the public spaces that we manage at the Downtown Detroit Partnership are right in the heart of downtown. They are urban destinations. We get more than 4 million visitors a year.

Stephanie Fortunato: Wow!

David Cowan: The one that you mentioned in the intro was Campus Martius Park, which won the best public square in the USA by *USA Today* this past year. And that started it all in 2003. So we're celebrating 20 years of Campus Martius Park this year, which, for so many leading up to Campus Martius, it was an unexpected development and people were sort of questioning why, a public space when there's so many other needs.

But I think people have started to realise that public spaces are so important for any number of reasons to bring a community together, social reasons; to meet your neighbours, all the way to economic. And the fact that when you think about people want to live and work near green space, and the ability you have to attract investment when you've got a beautiful green space in the heart of downtown.



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David Cowan: There's, you know, civic pride that comes from having these beautiful award-winning spaces. There are um, benefits for the community to be able to participate with programming and you know, we hire hundreds of artists. So there's no limit to the amount of benefits that a dynamic urban park can provide.

And certainly Campus Martius kicked it off, and now we've got five other ones that we've taken on or built since then.

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Stephanie Fortunato: You know, it's interesting that you were talking a little bit about the programming of the spaces. Back in May, there was a session at the GCDN convening with the leaders of cultural districts from around the world, and they were talking about cohabitation – how they work with, and for the many different community members that they serve in their public spaces. And I wonder, what do you do to help your organisation make people feel welcome and invite them to participate in the vibrant cultural life that is happening within these public spaces?

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David Cowan: Oh, I love that question because really, you know, when you think about parks and public spaces and how they're designed, so often, you have a municipality or a non-profit or a private entity designing really beautiful parks that are high-end. And they are not thinking about anything but the design.

And so what ends up happening is, beautiful spaces are created in cities all over the world and country – and certainly here in Detroit, that don't get used after they're built. And it's because people are often thinking about the use as an afterthought as opposed to integrating the programming, integrating how people will behave, how the design dictates behaviour. And thinking about that really intentionally on the front end. And so, we've been really intentional about putting people first. You know, at the end of the day, public spaces are for people. So thinking about that use, that psychology, who are they for, who do we think is likely to come versus who do we think is missing?

That's all something that we spend a tremendous amount of time thinking about. Not just in building new spaces, but in the spaces as they evolve over time.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Do you have any partnerships or collaborations that really stand out in your mind as an opportunity that you've had to work with groups, maybe unconventional partners in these public spaces?

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David Cowan: Oh, so many. The amount of uses, Stephanie, that we could talk about that, that these parks have seen would just be, you could write a novel on that alone. Um, yeah, no, we've got 250 programming partners that do so many different things all year round. Everything from night markets in the heart of downtown to various fitness classes; Tai Chi and Capoeira, to Shakespeare In The Park, to Glow Yoga with silent disco headphones, to large scale video mapping and projections on the facades of our buildings.



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David Cowan: I mean, there is really- one thing that I love about my work in public spaces is that the flexibility is amazing. So for somebody that gets kind of bored easily with doing the same thing over and over again, this is a perfect role for me because they may be the same spaces, but they're designed like theatre sets to constantly have things and activity flying in and flying out. So, yeah, we try to bring that flexible design to how we build and programme spaces. So it just creates a really vibrant backdrop to any number of partners and activities we've got. Um you know, just, all these unique experiences that are part of a vibrant streetscape and create that individual culture and a unique identity for each of these parks. And so we're really thrilled by creating that flexibility.

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Stephanie Fortunato: It's kind of interesting to think about the different models that are possible when you do have so many great public spaces that you are managing and responsible for. What do some of those financial models look like for Downtown Detroit Partnership?

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David Cowan: Yeah, so I love the private public partnership aspect of our work because it gives us flexibility to seek private funding in ways that can sustain the activity and the operations of the parks year round. So, Detroit is a little unique in the sense that we've got you know, a city that declared bankruptcy in 2013 – the largest municipal bankruptcy at that time. And there was real need. And so a lot of non-profits jumped in to take on space and steward it and fundraise for them.

And certainly DDP (Downtown Detroit Partnership) through its affiliate, the Detroit 300 Conservancy which was created around Detroit's 300th birthday was that entity for Campus Martius Park, and then later Cadillac Square, Capitol Park, and Grand Circus Park. So it actually arose out of a need to create a sustainable funding mechanism. And so all of our funds are privately raised every single year, whether it's through corporate partners, through foundations and philanthropy, or, and something I'm really proud of: We're getting a lot smarter about our earned revenue channels and how we get the best and most use out of all of the activities that happen in the parks. From an ice skating rink in the wintertime to 75 food trucks that are part of our fleet, to bars and restaurants, cafes, anything that rolls up to the thought of, you know, we need to give people things to do in these parts to make them active. So that Detroit really feels vibrant.

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Stephanie Fortunato: How do you balance the interests of private sponsors and corporations with the interests of the users? That's just a question I'm always sort of interested in.

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David Cowan: Yeah, no, it's a great question. And so, I think having a non-profit be in the middle of that, is an amazing model because, you know, you can sort of be the continuity between government and administrations. But you can also level set what you are and are not willing to do in terms of a partnership aspect, and really make sure that when you do decide to take on private funding, that you're not drifting too far from your mission.



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David Cowan: So it's really important to have your priorities and values established. So that you don't drift off too far at the potential of some shiny object, which might come with additional funding. So we try to be really careful with that. 95% of our events in the parks are free and open to everyone, so right out of the gate we prioritise that.

Stephanie Fortunato: That's awesome.

David Cowan: And so we, we do very little ticketed activities. If there's something that needs a revenue source to produce or pull off, we'll go and help fundraise for that so that we keep the access preserved. Because, you know, that's the difference between a public space first, maybe a traditional venue in that respect. So, if it's about bringing all walks of life together to experience something, uh we felt like that was important to our mission.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Right. No, I think that's, that is something important and unique that you can offer. You know, we have a, we the GCDN have a partnership with an online resource called Mastering Public Spaces, an endeavour of city space architecture and we curate a collection of works about the unique role that public space can play in cultural districts.

How do you see the contribution of these public spaces to the, not just the cultural district, but to the cultural life of the city?

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David Cowan: Yeah, especially coming out of Covid, Stephanie, I mean, you know, we've gotten more interest than ever before from traditional institutions. Who have said, look, you know, subscribers are down. We're struggling to get back up and running at the level that we were before. And I think, more and more across the U.S. there's a national conversation – and maybe the world, I mean you guys can tell me, but there's a conversation about you know, is this model really working anymore?

You've got people coming out of Covid who are saying, where, when, and how do I want to do things? And it's not necessarily the nine to five. It's not necessarily spending time in a dark room for three hours watching a performance. I think people want to participate. They want to engage, they want to spend time outside and take pictures. And, I think there's a you know, an evolution going on in the cultural space that, coincidentally public spaces have been primed to receive. And so I think some of that is by accident. But I also think part of it is intentionally designed and certainly in Detroit, we've been wanting to for a while, transition our downtown to more entertainment, recreation, residential, culturally focused. So, you know, it was intentional to bring all four of our major sports teams to play in one district downtown, which created huge pedestrian life. It was intentional to invest over \$200 million over the past 10 years in public space.

It was intentional to really bolster and create sustainable funding for some of our key cultural institutions in the Greater Downtown. So that has been intentional. But I think the speed at which people have come to appreciate coming out of Covid; outdoor space, and what it means to connect with people in real life off the bone? In reality?



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David Cowan: Is really kind of been interesting to watch. And I'm glad that we, went on the path we did before so that we were ready and able to accommodate this influx of interest. So, that's been fun. But also uh, growing pains, you know, there's challenges with that too.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Sure, tell me a little bit about that.

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David Cowan: Yeah, I mean, you know, safety. I mean, when you get a lot of people, a lot more people all outside, and I think with cities and some of the civic you know, questions that municipalities are asking and cities are asking. And people are asking other cities, you know, with that, those conversations first and foremost, policies are changing and not everyone's happy. So balancing city vibrancy with safety is something that is really top of mind for a lot of places.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah, absolutely. We had Ilana Altman on The Three Bells last year, and she was talking about a great initiative that The Bentway did in Toronto around public safety in their public spaces – which might be something to listen to later on or to make a connection there, but I think, you know, being able to invite people not only to feel welcomed, but to feel safe, to feel like they belong, to feel that they can enjoy the celebration or the protest or whatever reason that has brought them to the public space in the heart of downtown is such an important service that you provide for the city and for those individual users.

And what is going on in Downtown Detroit? It sounds like you guys are on a different, almost a different trajectory, a much more vibrant trajectory than a lot of other downtowns around the world.

How are things going in Detroit? Is tourism recovering, recovered?

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David Cowan: Yeah, exactly right. Is it recovering or is it recovered? I don't know. We're kind of still in this strange twilight zone of a time and you know, in some ways we're different than other major cities. But, we certainly are seeing and experiencing a lot of the same things also.

So, um, you know, we're not an outlier in the safety conversation. We're not an outlier in the fact that commercial real estate is going to need to be reinvented. You know, so, so some of these things are national and international trends, but I think what a lot of people don't realise about Detroit is that we're 139 square miles.

So you can fit, you know, you can fit Manhattan, Boston, and San Francisco all within our city limits.

Stephanie Fortunato: And seven Providences. (laughs)



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David Cowan: Right, exactly. So I mean, you know, there's a tremendous amount of space here. I mean, our population has declined and it's, you know, it's gone down from a million to 700,000. So when you think about the combined population of Manhattan, Boston, and San Francisco, you know, you're close to what, like 3 million but we've got the same amount of space. You know, so it's a real opportunity, but also a challenge because yes, we've got room for creative enterprises and creative people and ventures and, you know, it's affordable in many cases, which creates its own vibrancy, but then you've got too much space.

And what do you do with that, and how can parks and public spaces help with the vibrancy, not just downtown, but in the connecting districts, the neighbourhoods? There's so many unique challenges in the city to get consistency of quality across the district and to best utilise space. I think that's a huge opportunity and challenge for us. How are we evolving to meet the needs of people that, again, have changing preferences like we talked about before? So I think that's true in many cities.

In Detroit, it's especially true that artists are decentralised here and they're starting to do unique things that are not the traditional path like we've seen before.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Mm, I think that's the real opportunity. Are there any projects that are happening right now that really have just blown your mind in the way that artists are approaching this space and activating it in a new way?

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David Cowan: Yeah, I love collaboration with my partner, another GCDN, new member up the road, Annmarie Borucki. Yeah, you know, just thinking about events like DLECTRICITY, which is our light art new launch festival, and how that has really brought a global level of artistry to the city, but at the same time really had a meaningful exchange with local artists.

And that I think is what's really fun when you can, you can have an event where you've got this world class artistry, but there's also kids and youth involved where they can learn, they can be exposed to and experience things that they didn't even know existed. And so it's balancing the sort of surprise and delight element of the work in public space with the- you know, what do people want in the engagement?

You know, can we do things that they want to come back for and be, you know, a little unconventional? So I think, you know, performance art – there's so many great experimental endeavours going on.

Whether they're coming out of traditional organisations by need to diversify what they're doing or they're coming from the artists up and becoming, you know, relevant that way. And also you know I think that something interesting, Stephanie, that you and I talked about is, the renaissance of sort of a blockbuster concert or these entertainment venues that are driving 60,000, 70,000, a 100,000 people down on a Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday.



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David Cowan: And what are the impacts of that and how are they felt in the city? And so I think that, one, those have been super successful and popular for us because there's been an absence of them for, you know, due to Covid, but also I think people just miss that sort of sea of humanity that we were starved for, you know, being out in the crowd.

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Stephanie Fortunato: And I guess, I mean that's another one of those great, you know, opportunities and silver linings with artists performing arts groups coming into the public spaces and having the opportunity to interact and be on the same stage as some of those visiting international artists and the potential for collaboration, what that can do for their own careers and development is really, I think, quite interesting.

David Cowan: Absolutely. I think there's just so many partnerships like that, that are, that I think are the future.

Stephanie Fortunato: And the deliberate choice that you made in Detroit to put that stadium in the downtown so you were able to activate the neighbourhood around it when those sorts of concerts come through, the potential there is so great to be able to realise the arts ripple effect, you know, to sort of capture that story of vibrancy.

Is that something that has been enabled by the arts being at the table with those other civic leaders from sports and from the civic realm? Is there something special about the Detroit approach to coalition building?

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David Cowan: Absolutely. I think, you know, Detroit uh, in addition to automotive and some of the, you know, Motown and some of our other famous brands, you know, people generally understand that Detroit has a rich arts background in any discipline. And so that's a real asset that I think everyone even corporate partners to philanthropies understand.

And when there's planning going on, for even things like, you know, we're hosting the NFL Draft next year. Even in that football space, there are creative ways coming out to think about what's the theme? How are we communicating what Detroit is, beyond just, you know, superficial you know, themes, but what is, what does Detroit mean?

Who are its people? What are the visual cues? So there, there really is a deeper thinking around that. And because we have that, it's easier to get some of these projects done in Detroit than I feel like in other cities who are maybe more set on purely data-driven industries. You know, if there, there's a value for qualitative and storytelling here that I think, is certainly not unique, but it, it's amplified here, it seems, than other cities I've lived in.

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MUSIC BREAK



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Stephanie Fortunato: What is one thing you want our listeners to know about Detroit that they might not?

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David Cowan: I think that the perception of Detroit has, been this sort of um, depending on when you last thought about it or maybe you visited here in the nineties or early 2000s, I think understanding that over the past two years, there has been such an evolution. There's been a tremendous amount of investment, both in terms of infrastructure, but also in creative placemaking, which pulls in design, it pulls in the arts, it pulls in food and beverage, culinary.

And that we're this culturally rich city from creating Motown to jazz, to, you know, being in right in the centre of industry and I would just, I think that, you know, again, a lot of people don't realise that we're right on an international border. While we're two separate countries, there, there is so much shared heritage and just the whole you know, international border. I think a lot of people forget that if you look south from Detroit you're looking at the Canadian, at the Windsor skyline. So yeah, the influence and ease and ability now to once again go across borders has not only contributed to our visitors in the public spaces, but you know, it certainly makes up for a more dynamic border town and helps with, you know, making Canada and the U.S. feel more culturally relevant with each other.

So there's so many great things about the city that get overlooked when the focus is on that Detroit has abandoned buildings, you know, and all this uh, sort of depressed, desolate space. That, that has really shifted over the past 10 years. And just encourage people to come out and, pay a visit. I would be happy to give anybody a tour.

Stephanie Fortunato: (laughs) Well, you be careful what you say. You might actually get some people to take you up on that. Me, definitely.

David Cowan: (laughs) We'll get Greg out the next time. Yeah.

Stephanie Fortunato: Yes. But you know, I was just thinking, Kresge is in Detroit, isn't it?

[00:26:37]

David Cowan: Yeah, we have a ton of amazing philanthropy and philanthropic partners. Kresge Foundation, big one. Ralph C. Wilson Foundation, a big one, between Detroit and Buffalo. William Davidson Foundation, a big one. Kellogg Foundation. So the funding, the philanthropy and funding climate here is really unique as well. And that, that we have not taken for granted as a community and certainly has been tremendously important in the rebuilding of Detroit, but also just sustaining it through the tough years.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah, that's an enviable abundance of funders to be located in one city, you know, and I'm sure it does help with that continued vision and intention around making investments in Detroit and in the people who I have heard through this conversation and in past ones, really are at the heart of the ingenuity and creativity that we see coming out of Detroit all the time.



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David Cowan: Yeah, I think the continuity role that the Downtown Detroit partnership or a non-profit like ours can play in a city is really important. We are the conveners, we're the balanced voice in the downtown to make sure that there is integration and coordination between corporate interests, public interests, you know, and really bringing that to a place where it is mediated and feels meaningful.

And that, that we ask tough questions to each other to make sure that these projects and the direction that the city is going is not only, you know, responsible, but sustainable. So that has been a really great role for us to play at the Downtown Detroit Partnership and, evolving as a place management organisation has been really important as well.

So, having folks on the ground is something that sets us apart in many ways because we have people out here, day in and day out, nights and weekends ensuring that what we put on paper and what we design in renderings actually delivers. And so people feel that in the experience, whether they feel it intrinsically or viscerally, and they don't really know what's behind the scenes, that's okay. We just want that to be felt and people to understand that the quality of what we're doing is consistent across the spaces we manage.

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Stephanie Fortunato: You know, one last thing that I want to just talk about is I think the opportunity that you have had, you being DDP, in working in relatively new parks, you know, Campus Martius being 20 years old, the opportunity for those parks to have really 21st century amenities integrated into the design and use.

I think is such an important component and can help with that success. I hear the programming, you know, is the other half of that right? But are there historic parks in the downtown as well?

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David Cowan: Absolutely, yeah. In our network alone, we've got a few parks that are more than a hundred years old. So we've got brand new parks. We have historic parks. But yeah, to my earlier point, keeping that consistency across our spaces is something we really try to do. And my philosophy with programming is you could have the most incredible talent in the world in your space, but if you don't have infrastructure to accommodate that, then it's not going to work.

And so, designing the space to have enough power or utilities that are in the correct spots, really the engine to what makes these parks function, that all has to be shored up. You know, Campus Martius is 20 years old, but even that space, you know, we're starting to renovate it because use and needs have evolved over 20 years and Campus is getting some needed work. Beacon Park, which is on the western side of downtown, is actually a private park that we consulted to build with DTE Energy, our local, you know, utility here. And um, that space opened in 2017 and we loaded it up with all modern amenities. You know, it's sort of like when you think about a historic home and you move into it and you've got like one outlet, you know, in the room and you're sort of thinking like, okay, I might need to, given how I live today, I might need to upgrade this a little bit.



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David Cowan: You know, same thing with the parks. But Beacon Park, brand new park, built it with quick connects for staging, rigging. We put in massive amounts of electricity and point of sale CAT lines to enable bar service. So there was a lot of creative design that nobody will ever know about, that enables the functionality to happen.

And I think, that sort of technical artistry is uh, is appreciated just as much as what the public sees.

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Stephanie Fortunato: A hundred percent. It adds so much value to the experience of those spaces, as does DDP it sounds, really, your expertise and the capacity that you are bringing to Downtown Detroit is really admirable and I'm so grateful that we've taken the time today to get to talk a little bit more about what's going on in Detroit.

Is there anything else you would hope that I would ask you?

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David Cowan: No, Stephanie, thank you again for just your work with the GCDN and I've been so thrilled with how the network's grown. Can't wait to see everybody in Athens next year. I'm already doing a little planning and this has been a real pleasure and I can't thank you, Greg, and Adrian enough for the opportunity.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Oh, thank you so much, David. Thank you for joining me today on The Three Bells, sharing your Detroit with our listeners.

[00:32:02]

MUSIC BREAK

Stephanie Fortunato: I'm writing this editorial in high summer, but subtle changes in the morning light and much less subtle ads demanding I take care of back to school shopping are beginning to prod my attention toward the next season.

Even though I'm not quite ready to give up the pleasure of this one, somehow knowing that there are only 13 weeks of summer encourages me to be present and prepared to use and enjoy time in a way that none of the others do.

My parents are really good about making time and space to celebrate seasonal transitions throughout the year, marking the passage of time with annual rituals. Of course, there are those season specific activities, and growing up we would collect mementos of the things that made up our summer vacations in a basket.

Nothing too precious. Flyers for events, certificates of participation, glow in the dark necklaces that had long lost their light. Mostly stuff that would eventually make its way into a recycling or trash bin anyway, but by the end of summer, we had usually accumulated an interesting array of artifacts.



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Stephanie Fortunato: On the last weekend before school started, we would go through the basket as a family, sharing stories with one another. Eagerly adding and correcting each other as we confidently asserted our version as fact. Through this regular exchange, which blended and tested evidence and recall, we co-created the small and tall tales about our family, a shared memory bank of moments to revisit as the days got shorter and darker, and as I have come to appreciate, as the years pass.

Families are good at inventing traditions. Institutions are too. And both can and should evolve and reinvent themselves by coming together, committing time and care to honestly assess where they are to course correct and to address the needs and priorities of all the individual members.

The chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, Dr. Maria Rosario Jackson spoke about this recently much more eloquently in connection with the discussion about the cultural sectors evolving recovery from the pandemic. She noted the value of questioning orthodoxies to become more discerning about how we do our work in the art sector. She called on the audience to take a beat, to learn what we need to from the past few years.

What is essential, what we need to evolve, what we need to let go. To ask how we can preserve the innovations that took place. She offered this during a conversation with U.S. Senator Jack Reed and Lynne McCormack, director of the State Council on the Arts. They were speaking about how the arts contribute to the economic and community development among many other areas of society.

While she was here, chair Jackson also met with community leaders, non-profit organisations and local artists to discuss creative opportunities, the issues impacting the arts and Rhode Island's evolving landscape from beautifying downtowns to arts education, and a range of other civic concerns. The chair was in Rhode Island as part of her NEA on the Road Tour and the NEA's Art Matters newsletter in July reported on this visit alongside stops in South Dakota, New York, and Detroit.

The tour through different landscapes and context allowed chair Jackson and her staff an opportunity to better understand the needs of artists and arts organisations. While this is an example of an arts leader actually meeting the people they serve where they are, it reinforces one of the underlying messages that I have been reading this summer in articles about the uncertainties many regional U.S. theatres face.

Performing arts organisations are still navigating the long-term effects of the public health restrictions on operations, unpredictable audience behaviours, and altered financial models, which have forced some high profile non-profit theatres to make really tough choices. One avenue forward has been becoming essential to the city or communities where they're located.

Some have even found increased community support by bringing a creative perspective to bear on the cross sector issues that are important to the people who live and work there. As part of this move forward, the cultural sector and its ecosystem of support are continuing to reckon with longstanding systemic inequalities.



[00:36:25]

Stephanie Fortunato: The continued push for social justice has many cultural workers asking hard questions about how the cultural sector is structured, how it functions, about whose labour is either over or undervalued.

This past summer has seen museum and heritage workers in the U.S. and U.K. organise and take collective action. It'll be interesting to see which groups are successful in advocating for a redistribution of institutional and community wealth, and what the long-term impact of these movements can be for the whole of the creative workforce and the places where they live and spend their money.

If and how, that can make a difference for the communities that have historically faced disproportionate prejudice because of their identity, race, gender, or sexual orientation, time will tell. The why is clear. At all scales and industries, employers must work to make sure that wages afford workers a quality of life that makes sense for the local market.

A challenge in the best of conditions, and this is compounded by soaring housing costs in many cities and rising inflation. Most small and mid-sized non-profit cultural organisations have always been pretty lean operations and appropriately addressing sharp increases in the cost of living becomes a charged question of how.

Which brings me back to chair Jackson's call to communities to make the time to carry the important and collective work of preserving, pruning, iterating, and innovating the cultural sector forward for the health and wellbeing of all community members. And this brings me back to the rhythm of the seasons and how this can guide our way.

A mother myself now, responsible for making summer vacation memorable and passing on family traditions, I appreciate what my parents did to hold space for celebrating the end of summer rather than to mourn it. In practicing rituals, we find the reserves to keep moving at our own pace.

So keep listening, keep sharing your unique perspective. Keep claiming your space. We've got this. Keep going.

[00:38:30]

THEME MUSIC

The Three Bells is produced by a AEA Consulting for the Global Cultural Districts Network. This podcast and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net. I'm your host, Stephanie Fortunato. Many, many thanks to David Cowan and the Downtown Detroit Partnership, The Three Bells production team, and to you, our listeners.

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