



S3:E6: BREAKING OPEN THE BOX...

Naseema Asif & Peter Emerson in conversation with Criena Gehrke

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[THEME MUSIC]

[00:00:04]

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 Criena Gehrke, and today I'm speaking to you from the Gold Coast, Australia, on the land of the Kombumerri people of the Yugambeh language region.

I pay my respects to elders past and present, and to all First Nations people of the many lands on which we are listening today. Now, as regular listeners know, I like to talk about the weather on the Gold Coast, and it is sunny and I'm gonna go to the beach later on. But I also have an almost unhealthy fascination with the existential question of what creates the perfect ecosystem for cultural precincts.

What is that magic mix of community, the public realm, the built form, cultural infrastructure, recreation, invitation, and the artistic programme that makes the cultural experience sing perfect humming harmony for people? So, I am very excited to welcome our guests today. Naseema Asif, Senior Architect and Peter Emerson, Studio Director + Landscape Architecture are from internationally-celebrated design collective, Rios.

The collectives' combined talents include architecture, landscape, urban planning, interior design, video, graphics and signage, experiential and product design. Rios' work is connected to the narrative of place and the complex order of human culture, creating solutions that are joyful, authentic, and unexpected.

Oh my goodness, you are like singing my song. Naseema and Peter, welcome to The Three Bells.

[00:02:00]

Naseema Asif: Thank you, Criena. We're so happy to be here.

[00:02:02]

Peter Emerson: Yes. Thank you. It's great to be here, thank you.



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[00:02:05]

Criena Gehrke: So I wanna start, I really genuinely loved being introduced to your work when I was preparing for this podcast and some of the language and the way that you articulate things. So you say, you know, you speak of spaces of the future and breaking open the box for audiences, and there's a real sense of the fact that the practice puts the human experience and connection at the centre of everything.

So what I'd love to hear firstly is, what is it actually like inside Rios? Like, how does it work?

[00:02:39]

Naseema Asif: That's a fantastic question because quite honestly, we are working on how we work all the time. It is a continual evolution on how we collaborate. The firm has grown immensely over the time that I've been here, and it has always been interdisciplinary. Our founding partner is both an architect and landscape architect, and very interested in interior design.

And it's always been a firm about design in general, in as seamlessly of a method as possible to blend all of the disciplines and expertises that we have in house. And so sometimes that means that there's a messiness to our approach, but very often it means that we try our best to get all of the diverse voices, design languages, design point of views, into the beginning of the project as soon as possible. To think about it beyond each person's individual lane, so that it can be—the project can become as cohesive, a design intent and ultimately human experience, as possible.

[00:03:48]

Criena Gehrke: What makes for a good vision and a good brief? You were talking about how that looks from your perspective, but what is the role of the client in going: "I've got a clear vision. This is the brief and this is the purpose and this is what we wanna achieve through this project."

[00:04:06]

Naseema Asif: Very often the client comes to us with a programme with an intent, with a point of view on how to accomplish the project. And through the process of us all coming together from all of our points of views, very often the solution can come from an angle that may not have initially been anticipated. And that is really how we're able to reframe and position the project for success in potentially a different way than was initially imagined.

[00:04:41]

Peter Emerson: If I could jump in here too. I think one of the things we always have to acknowledge—and we know this the second we start reading a good brief—is that people often think about something for like 10 years, 15 years before they ever get to that place of asking for a proposal or even qualifications. And so, I think our role is often to come in and be disruptive a little bit?

Criena Gehrke: [laughs]

Naseema Asif: [laughs]



[00:05:07]

Peter Emerson: And in the best possible way, of course. But we always acknowledge, you know, the most knowledgeable, the most passionate, the most dedicated person is the client. And our role really is to facilitate the discussion.

And I think that messiness Naseema was talking about is spot on. It's necessary. You sort of have to like, let go of all the baggage and really start fresh in creative thinking. So we like to throw out schedules for a second. We like to stop thinking about the constraints and who those stakeholders are—just for a little bit, just for a minute—and challenge ourselves to like, think about the problem again. And some of those most creative solutions come from, you know, putting everything else on pause.

[00:05:59]

Criena Gehrke: What are the sort of mechanisms that you use in that messiness to have that dream so that you're sure that—before value management takes hold—the vision is in place, and that you're gonna get really great outcomes?

[00:06:12]

Naseema Asif: In terms of starting the project, making that space to put all of the information and assumptions on the table, so everyone can look at it together as if it were the first time. I mean, it quite literally is as simple as having those initial work sessions with the client and their major stakeholders.

We like to present them with a lot of different ways, or not a lot of different ways, but a few different ways to interpret what we're seeing so that we can see where there are alignments, see where possible reinterpretations are hitting the mark or where there may be—we're missing something about the priorities of the client and the way that the information's been presenting, and now we understand it better.

And it's a combination of things. It's being on the site, being in the space, talking to people one-on-one, being able to sketch together and from a workshop the ideas of how different programmatic elements need to work together, what are the methods that in which that they operate the space and the practicalities of how that will occur.

And have all of it come together through a series of workshops and tests. And we walk away, and we sketch, and we design a little bit to push the ideas, and then we come back and we interrogate with the client again. It's a very iterative process right at the beginning.

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Peter Emerson: Another aspect of, you know, kicking off and engaging with the consultant team that we find so valuable, is just the ability to have some time to build trust.

Criena Gehrke: Yup.

Peter Emerson: And really getting to know each other. Sometimes that means having a dinner where you're not talking about work.



[00:07:55]

Criena Gehrke: [laughs]

Naseema Asif: [laughs]

[00:07:57]

Peter Emerson: Honestly those can be the best kick-offs where you're like, you know, you're getting to know each other, you know, how many pets the other person has or what, you know, what summer plans they have.

[00:08:10]

Criena Gehrke: How many pets do you have, Peter? [laughs]

[00:08:12]

Peter Emerson: Four, oh my gosh. [laughs] Two cats and two dogs and that's too much.

But no, it really is about establishing a relationship where you're familiar, you know each other, you trust each other. And then the hardship can come, the challenges can come, the, you know, the ideas can come. You know, the creative process is emotional. I don't know how else to put it. You kind of have to brace yourself.

And building something is emotional. And challenging. And will test you in all sorts of ways you don't expect. But when you come through it all and you start it with the trusting relationship and you end with one, there's nothing better in the world.

[00:08:57]

Criena Gehrke: I wanna move us on to a real life example, The Music Center Plaza. I really love the idea of that project because I think it's a great reflection on this notion of being able to find new life in old and existing places and reimagine them. I wanna just unpick that project if that's okay. So, can we go to the beginning of that project? What was it? What was it about?

[00:09:26]

Naseema Asif: The Music Center Plaza renovation was actually a culmination of a series of projects that Rios had contributed to in the development of the Grand Avenue cultural corridor in Los Angeles, which is where The Music Center is located. That corridor spans from the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels all the way down to the Central Library and now passes by The Music Center, the Walt Disney Concert Hall, Colburn School of Music and so forth, the new Broad museum and it is an environment that has been growing over time. We began with the realignment of Grand Avenue itself so that it actually could become a more welcoming pedestrian environment.

Um, worked on the renovation of the Mark Taper Forum, which is on that mid-century campus—the Welton Beckett campus, which is actually removed from Grand Avenue, it sits on a plinth above, it's this rarefied space.

You know, we worked on the redesign of Grand Park, which is four blocks of a public park space spanning from right in front of Los Angeles City Hall, up to Grand Avenue.



[00:10:35]

Naseema Asif: And so, by the time we began the design process for The Music Center Plaza, it was also positioned as a final piece along those several blocks of public space between City Hall and capped by the Los Angeles DWP building.

And so it was a culmination on a number of different levels. And so going back to that rarefied space, at the time that The Music Center campus was designed and constructed, everyone was arriving by car off the freeway. And people would proceed immediately into one of the venues; the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion or the Mark Taper Forum. And, over time as the Grand Avenue cultural corridor became the major thoroughfare through the neighbourhood and all of these other projects were developed along the way, it became increasingly obvious that what we really wanna do—the notion of breaking open the box to connect The Music Center and its Plaza back to Grand Avenue.

And so, you know, the vision for the project was twofold. The first was to establish a new front door to the Grand Avenue culture corridor. Because as I said, it's one story above Grand Avenue. And this was the biggest opportunity for us to start to break down that perception of rarefied space at The Music Center, and, you know, people that are attending performances there are removed from the city at large for that moment, for that kind of idealised, sublime experience. And so we did that by some pretty simple moves. I mean, we rebuilt a grand stair that pushed back into the plaza so you have better visual access.

We put escalators there and we had everyone who's coming out of the parking garage join everyone who might be coming from public transit, across the street, and everyone goes up to the plaza together. These new pavilions that we built on the plaza to provide amenities are designed so they're all the way at the edge of the plaza in gardens.

And so you see activity as you're walking by and it welcomes people. It makes you feel like you're welcome to go up to the plaza. And this was, this was the first major vision for it, to actually reconnect it to the city life along Grand Avenue. And then the second was really to, create that plaza space as the fifth venue at The Music Center, a true outdoor performance space.

And that really gives them the opportunity to get experimental about what they're offering in order to be attractive and respond to what the next generation audience might be and what they might be interested in. And also allows them to provide a performing arts experience that's a little bit lower impact so somebody new can come and experience it and try it out, without maybe too much of a financial commitment, it's easier to bring your family, and create a space where that they have that flexibility. At the same time, there's visual cues that make it clear that people are welcome to hang out there, even if they're not going to performance. And so it becomes a true urban living room based at The Music Center.

[00:13:46]

Criena Gehrke: I love that idea. I also am just gonna pick you up on something which was a very modest reflection around the simple things that were done to make that space more accessible and inclusive and welcoming, because I know for a fact changing staircases, bringing things up, is not that easy. So, so well done.



[00:14:12]

Crien Gehrke: Bless you two, I really appreciate that you're taking these spaces and making it look simple, but I do appreciate how complicated that is.

[00:14:20]

Peter Emerson: It's a theme. I have to warn you, it's a theme on every, on every project in any place that's already built. It's amazing.

[00:14:28]

Naseema Asif: It's interesting because it was one of those moment where everybody—our clients, the major stakeholders we've been meeting with, it was like "oh, obviously". We need to do that. It's worth the investment.

Crien Gehrke: [laughs]

Peter Emerson: [laughs]

Naseema Asif: There's a deep commitment though, to what it was able to achieve. You know, Rachel Moore—who is the CEO of The Music Center—when we're working on the project, had said that she viewed this renovation as a physical manifestation of The Music Center's mission to enrich cultural lives of all Angelenos.

And you know, they are a GCDN member and she spoke last year at the Lugano convening about the work that she did behind the scenes as well. Transforming the board of directors, The Music Center leadership, to better reflect the diversity of our local communities. And so it was on many levels, this project really expanded the notion of inclusivity for the space and for the venue, at all levels at The Music Center. It was really quite remarkable.

[00:15:29]

Crien Gehrke: Can I be a bit provocative?

Naseema Asif: Of course, of course.

Peter Emerson: Yes, please do.

Crien Gehrke: And I guess, will we get to a point where we don't actually need the black box or the theatres? Like, is that the experience that people actually want anymore?

[00:15:44]

Peter Emerson: That is a very provocative question. [laughs]

Crien Gehrke: [laughs]

Naseema Asif: [laughs]



[00:15:50]

Peter Emerson: Did you just go there? [laughs]

[00:15:52]

Criena Gehrke: Feel free to now say “I represent the interests of Rios, and I’m not in a position to comment”. [laughs]

But I have become fascinated with it because my background and my love is theatre and performing arts, and I’m just curious about what that’s gonna look like in 40 or 50 years time when, people are craving different experiences, you know, and you are supporting that through public realm.

[00:16:17]

Peter Emerson: Yeah, and I guess, you know, I’m interested in theatre and the performing arts because I love the public open space, so it’s interesting. I think that to not only go hand in hand, but they need each other. And what’s so important right now is getting people in those boxes, in those black boxes and, there’s a huge need to introduce people.

And accessibility is a lot more than just being able to get up the stairs or around the stairs. It’s about introducing all populations to the things that are happening in these boxes that can’t be seen into. And so that’s, that for me has been, you know, one of the most exciting things about practicing as a landscape architect in the realm around these boxes.

And in urban places in general, it’s a huge opportunity.

Criena Gehrke: Yeah.

[00:17:12]

Naseema Asif: If I could add to that. You know, I think we all know that we’re at a key moment of transformation now because of the way that culture is now consumed digitally on social media platforms where you can react, you can engage immediately and in the space of everyday life. And so, you know, moving away from the notion of a cultural venue as a presenting institution that tells visitors this is what culture is to an acknowledgement that we’re in a space of co-creation of culture. Where the creative process itself can be harnessed as a way to engage new audience members perhaps in the public realm, the way Peter has just described, really, that is what breaking open the box is to us.

It’s about breaking down that separation between what art is and the day-to-day life in the community where the arts institution is situated because it is actually that moment where it’s a shared act of creativity and inspiration that allows the continued evolution of, all of these art forms and institutions along with them.

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Criena Gehrke: What makes for a good public space that links into a cultural institution? What does it look like? What do you need?

[00:18:27]

Naseema Asif: I think primarily you need the ability to almost administratively bridge the gap, to be able to operate in both spheres seamlessly. And an example of where that doesn't work for—maybe is a way I can start is that, you know, we recently are involved with a project at Balboa Park in San Diego. You know, it's this immense, beautiful campus. It's the site of a world exposition—or Panama-California Exposition in the early 1900s and has several cultural institutions on the site. Beautiful park space, and yet people find it very difficult to engage and to go to these institutions, and there is a dearth of life in the space.

And a lot of it has to do with—the city operates in one sphere, each of the institutions operate in their own individual spheres, and there's gaps in between. And so, what ends up happening is that, that people go and just attend one of the institutions, or they can have an event in one place, but it doesn't somehow bleed over. And so, you know, both Peter and I have worked on projects where, where somebody, somehow, has found a way to bridge that gap. In the case of The Music Center, you know, the Music Center Plaza is part of the campus. And so therefore The Music Center takes over, the programming for the space and is able to coordinate it with other goings on within the Music Center campus.

But not only that, they have also taken under their wing Grand Park, which is a 12 acre public park, and they programme that space as well. And we talked about the kinds of barriers that people can feel—visual cues that make them feel like they're not welcome. They've also taken over things like security, which sometimes can feel like that's one of those things where it might make somebody feel like they're not welcome, but they have a very genial, you know, friendly team of people that's just always walking around these spaces. They never completely shut down their true public space that is also programmed. And while those are happening, there's still space for someone to just come to the park and be in the park with their four pets.

Crien Gehrke: [laughs]

Peter Emerson: [laughs] Well actually...

Naseema Asif: [laughs] Or family.

Crien Gehrke: Whoa. The collegial theme, I love it. [laughs]

[00:20:51]

Peter Emerson: Oh my gosh. Well, I'm glad you said that because actually one of my favourite, probably my favourite dance performance ever—I happened to be running through the park with my dog on a Thursday night, and I came across this amazing performance in this immense water feature that we designed that's intended for kids.

You know, it's not intended for performance, but there were 20 people performing in it in a choreographed way. It was like, I'm getting goosebumps right now thinking about it, it was so good. And I wasn't alone, you know, there were people from all over the place watching this thing, just totally impressed.



[00:21:37]

Peter Emerson: And I've talked about it for years, and I'll talk about it for many more years. That's the power of the public realm as it relates to the performing arts. I mean, it's really impressive.

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Naseema Asif: And that juxtaposition is what we're looking for when we're talking about how does a performing arts venue reimagine what their footprint is. And how do these spaces work together to create this larger cultural ecosystem. It's an idea that we're starting to talk about here as the notion of the culture scape that really acknowledges that the growth and evolution and, twists and turns in culture occur when you have the space of art and the space of everyday life melding together in dialogue, allowing different people—their myriad, different ways—into the process, that it's not only appreciated or seen or experienced the same way for everybody.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Criena Gehrke: What's the thinking around how you then integrate that "right from the very get-go" into both your design practice—you know, like this multidisciplinary collective. Because you are passionate, quite evidently. You've got a philosophy behind it, and that sense of open invitation that these places belong to their communities and to the people you deliver. But at the end of the day, you hand them over. And are they then only as good or great or welcoming as the vision and commitment and values of the people that are then the custodians to programme into them?

Naseema Asif: Mm-hmm.

Peter Emerson: Yes. Wholeheartedly, yes.

[00:23:34]

Naseema Asif: [laughs] It's an interesting time to ask us this because I'm at the end of a process with one project and Peter's just about to launch a project that responds to exactly your question. And, I'll start with mine 'cause I'm at the end of my process. You know, The Music Center Plaza was completed, unfortunately just before the pandemic. But Grand Park itself—which is also part of that Music Center ecosystem—just celebrated its 10 year anniversary a year ago.

And the feedback that we've received—and we've been in touch with them, we, you know, continue to aid with projects to make sure that they are evolving as they need to. But they shared us a very kind feedback that the design of the park and the infrastructure of the park is still operating for them as successfully as it did on day one.

And that's really about um, it's a combination of scales, of spaces that allow—I think as I alluded to before and Peter has—that you can have varying scale of events and still room left over for people to use in their day-to-day lives. And you have intimate spaces, you have huge open event lawns and they all come together.



[00:24:48]

Naseema Asif: Or the whole park can become a focal point for when something happens in our community and the city wants to come together.

It's all worked out that way. But, you know, the notion of the programming is really—those are the first ritual steps that are taken to build in this pattern of “This is where you come to get a moment of respite. This is where you come to see a performance and engage with your neighbours and fellow Angelenos.”

And this is where you come to for, you know, periodically, for these types of events. And pretty soon it becomes a practice of “I'm just gonna meet you at the splash pad in Grand Park and buy that Starbucks and have a coffee” and it becomes part of the collective community focal point. And Peter is just about to launch a project in Houston. Peter?

[00:25:37]

Peter Emerson: I guess I'll start off by saying, we knew from the beginning that programming, activation, thinking about what would really draw people here instead of other bigger public open spaces with more things to do, drove our process. And programming is 50% of the success. You know, the built environment is 50%, but programming is 50%, and that's in the first 10 years. We need to build great places, but they have to function and then they have to support really great activities because people aren't just gonna go to a place because it's nice. They don't need to. There's a lot of nice places in the world.

Criena Gehrke: [laughs]

Peter Emerson: And so you know, we were—so we've been working on what's now called the Lynn Wyatt Square for the Performing Arts. It's situated in the heart of the Theater District in downtown Houston. It has, I would say, you know, the nice way to put it is, it was no man's land. And it really hasn't ever attracted anyone, except for large events that happened periodically. And it was only good for accommodating a couple thousand people after work on a Thursday night. And otherwise people didn't want to go there, day or night. And again, this was one of those projects where somebody thought about it, and worried about it, agonised about it for 10 or 15 years. And you know, when we were fortunate enough to actually be able to contribute our ideas to it, you know, so much care and thought had been already put into it.

But I think, we took this experience that we had at Grand Park and The Music Center, Grand Avenue cultural corridor, and applied it to Houston, a place where we had never worked. And we were very much sort of—I wouldn't say the underdogs or the out-of-towners... Didn't quite know what we were getting into quite at first, but that, you know, worked. It worked really well for everybody.

You know, we saw this as an opportunity to—I think initially, think of it as the fifth venue. They have Jones Hall, uh, let me see, the Alley Theatre, Wortham Theater Center and the Houston Ballet. And over time we pivoted that a little bit to be not so much a fifth venue, but a place to introduce people to everything that was going on around them.



[00:28:05]

Peter Emerson: And so the infrastructure, the sort of like technical backbone of this thing, is a little different from what we did at The Music Center, what Naseema is talking about there. You know, the other part of this project is it aligns with the edge of the high rise district—which is not residential, it's all office.

Criena Gehrke: Ah, okay.

Peter Emerson: Yeah, so it's kind of a weird mashup of, you know, the arts and office. And so we looked at that as an opportunity to grab those audiences—those people who work there and need to get out of the office every day—and introduce them to what was going on around them because a lot of them weren't seeing it.

And so we developed, as a part of our project, a programming scope of work. And we sort of insisted it had to be a part of the design process. We weren't asked to do programming and we sacrificed elsewhere to make that happen, because we know it's such an important part of the success of a place.

And again, we didn't exactly know what needed to happen, you know. It was like we needed to first dig in, meet everybody involved, get to know the client in a big way, get to know the city in a big way.

[00:29:24]

Criena Gehrke: Who is the client?

[00:29:26]

Peter Emerson: In this case, the real visionary and leader is Roksan Okan-Vick. She is an architect and fellow with the AIA. She's the Urban Development Officer at Houston First, which is an organisation really dedicated to bringing business, bringing people, bringing culture to downtown Houston. And you know, this is what she worried about for 10 or 15 years. Um, so I think we all went into it thinking, oh my gosh, you know, we'll hold concerts here, but it'll be cooler and more beautiful than what we had before. Um, but through the process, we actually kind of learned that we didn't need an enormous venue. We needed a place to introduce people to the enormous venues around them.

And so actually that going—getting back for a second to that infrastructure, as a result we didn't build a stage and we didn't just build one place to perform. We built five, or actually six places for people to perform and all the gear and data and, you know, infrastructure there for them to do that right under the surface. And position it a way that people could experience things in a sequence as they move through the space. And circulation was a pretty big part of our concept in bringing people in from every corner, bringing them through the site again. Gosh, enormous ADA Accessibility concerns, you know, it had never actually achieved accessibility before. And there's topography and there's all these existing constraints that are absolutely the most challenging things to solve. And they're as simple as like, "how do you get somebody from this corner up 12 feet?" But that circulation that our design was to really pull people in and through, and in the process intersect them with the arts and culture. Um, you know, it's not just like the five district venues that are there. It's like all of these programming partners. You know, the Houston Theater District actually has you know, its own resident opera, symphony, ballet, theatre companies.



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Peter Emerson: It's one of only a handful of US cities that really boasts its own resident opera, symphony, ballet, and theatre companies. And all of those reside around this public open space. And so we really thought that, well, let's take this creative energy of all of these organisations and let's let that overflow into the public realm. You know, we all need some life in the public realm.

[00:32:08]

Criena Gehrke: Yeah, yeah. I love that description of these amazing arts companies that were, you know, kind of at the perimeter or were the circle and now they're overflowing and coming into the public realm. Whereas when you talk about The Music Center, it's becoming porous into that elevated architecture. And I really respect any project that starts at one point and then through that messy creative process ends up with something that is fit for purpose that responds to the community needs and its environment and really is that true commitment to making this space work, so it sounds like an extraordinary process.

Now we're nearly at the end of our time together. And I could just keep talking to you both forever because I truly think that there's something in the way that you're working, that is holistic and that is just wonderful, and it's obvious that you are creating these places and spaces for humans that are making a difference, and that will make a difference for many years to come. So I'd like to just end with one last question to both of you. What does the future hold? You know, like you've created these great spaces, will they stand the test of time?

[00:33:44]

Peter Emerson: I don't... actually want to know. [laughs]

Naseema Asif: [laughs]

Criena Gehrke: [laughs] That is such a beautiful answer.

Peter Emerson: I wanna be surprised. I wanna set these places up for innovation, and I... honestly really don't wanna know. I want my niece to know, I want my nephew to know. And I don't necessarily expect everything to last 50 years or 60 years, but I hope we can serve innovation for that amount of time, especially in something as dynamic as culture and the arts.

And really, I guess I just don't want to know... I want to be surprised, I want to be delighted. I wanna be, you know, engaged in ways I wasn't expecting, you know? That will be the beautiful part of it.

Criena Gehrke: I love that. Naseema?

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Naseema Asif: I think that we're actually not supposed to know, because that's the point, right? I think, you know, we have a legacy and we have hope for the future and hope for those who are imagining things that we don't even know yet. Uh, that these can be canvases for them.



[00:34:43]

Naseema Asif: And that's I think really the way that the power of the city can transform over time. There's a grid, but not a set demarcation. There's—it's a process of being able to evolve. I mean, I think we hope that our spaces are as open to that as well and the— We're at a point also where anything we build, we have to know, can have a second life, a third life, a fourth life down the road.

So not backing ourselves into a corner and giving a framework that can be maybe not so singular, it needs to be a space that can support art and wonder and joy, but also be open to transformation. And we have to be open to our projects being taken apart and put back together again.

And that's part of the exciting—the excitement of giving somebody a space to use for these purposes.

[00:35:38]

Criena Gehrke: I have so loved this conversation and your final responses to that question around the future I think is so telling of who you both are, but also what Rios stands for, because it feels to me like you've absolutely articulated that we all are part of a continuum and messy humanity. And we are here for a while to write this chapter, but it belongs to future generations. It's the legacy that we create. So, thank you so much for joining me here this morning, this afternoon, this evening. Wherever we are in the world.

Peter Emerson: [laughs]

Naseema Asif: [laughs]

Criena Gehrke: Peter and Naseema, thank you so much. It's been an absolute pleasure.

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Naseema Asif: Thank you, Criena. It's been wonderful to be able to talk to you both about these issues.

[00:36:30]

Peter Emerson: Agreed. Thank you Criena so much.

[00:36:31]

MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:36:33]

Criena Gehrke: And now for some regular musings that happen inside my head. I apologise in advance.

Recently on the Gold Coast, the local government council met to consider the future of a major public art commission. Now that in itself is not unusual, it was a multi-million dollar sculpture, publicly funded and installed on a major freeway. You would expect due diligence from our elected representatives.



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Criena Gehrke: What was unusual, however, is that the artwork being considered had been approved by the very same council in 2017 and installed in 2018, ahead of the Gold Coast Commonwealth Games. The artwork was selected by an independent panel of experts following an open tender process. The brief was to create an iconic gateway for the Gold Coast, an arrival statement through art.

HI-LIGHTS by US design team LOT-EK is a hundred meter long installation that spells out Gold Coast using repurposed highway light poles. It's located on a wide median strip on the major highway into the Gold Coast. Now, you would think that hits the sweet spot of the brief. It does. However, right from the get-go, HI-LIGHTS was controversial.

You see, when it was unveiled, it became evident that due to the way the artwork is installed on the freeway, and the speed you pass it, you can't actually read the words "Gold Coast".

And so the keyboard warriors leapt into action. "Waste of ratepayers money!" "Epic fail." "What a joke." "Bureaucratic bungle." "Whoever is responsible should be sacked!"

You get the idea. And the controversy and commentary hasn't diminished with time. Some ratepayers of the Gold Coast like to use this artwork still as the benchmark for, and constant reminder of, the incompetency of our elected representatives. Unfairly, in my opinion. In the intervening years, there have been a range of reports presented to council, including costs for removal and options for relocating the artwork to a new site where you can read the words.

No progress was made until two weeks ago. In recent months, hoons have discovered the HI-LIGHTS and have been using it as a backdrop for drag racing selfies. And so public safety entered the debate. The police turned the artwork's lights off on the weekend to deter the hoons. And finally, council has voted for its removal.

Now, here's the thing. Full disclosure, I was working for council and I was the bureaucrat responsible for developing the brief for the gateway commission. I was not, however, working for council when the tender was released, LOT-EK was appointed and the artwork approved. So, I have both an inside interest and an outside objective view.

I don't actually like the artwork, and that is my subjective opinion. And we all know art is subjective. So why don't I like it? Well, it's a bit industrial for my liking as a gateway statement for a city that has a reputation as Australia's playground. It lacks whimsy and nostalgia, which is my personal aesthetic.

It's true that you can't read the words Gold Coast except from the adjacent petrol station, and I do think that that's a lost opportunity. Or maybe I'm just too literal. And it's painted yellow. I hate the colour yellow, which again, is a personal issue of taste. But I have also sought to understand the vision of the artist.

Ada Tolla, one of the lead artists, has always been clear that the lights were not intended as a sign, but as a sculpture that interacts and engages with its surrounding landscape.



<https://www.thethreebells.net/episodes/s3e6>

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Criena Gehrke: The lights were designed to announce a change on arrival. The artwork is meant to provide emotion, not direction, or instruction. It was never meant to be a literal sign.

And here's what I wonder, for now at least. Public safety is paramount. And hoons doing donuts on highways are idiots. They put their own and other people's lives at risks, and that is not the art's fault. HI-LIGHTS was never intended by the artist to be a legible sign that reads "Gold Coast". And yet the fact that you can't read the words, continues to fuel the public's perception that this is bad art.

Is this a failure of the art? Or of communicating the context and intention of the art? Art is subjective. Great art encourages discourse, different perspectives and emotional responses. And in fact, maybe if the controversy is loud and ongoing, then that is a measure of success. Personally, I'll miss the HI-LIGHTS, the controversy, the outcry. And my own emotional response every time I speed by it, at an 110 kilometres an hour.

[00:41:35]

MUSIC TRANSITION

Criena Gehrke: The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting for the Global Cultural Districts Network. This 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 Criena Gehrke. Thanks so much for being with us today. I look forward to joining you again soon.

[00:41:59]

THEME MUSIC

