



## EP 2: WHAT MAKES A GREAT CITY?

### Ben Rogers 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 and The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network, in which we explore what's happening around the world on those busy and sometimes congested intersections of global and cultural urban life.

I acknowledge the traditional owners and first nations people across all the lands and countries who are joining us today, and pay my respects to elders, past, present, and emerging. First nations people are original storytellers, artists and custodians of culture. I'm Criena Gehrke. My day job is CEO at HOTA, Home of The Arts on the beautiful Gold Coast in Australia. But today I get to indulge in a curious conversation with an interesting person from the other side of the world. With me today is Ben Rogers.

Ben is currently the Visiting Senior Fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science. And in 2011, founded the highly regarded Centre for London. He's an urbanist, researcher, writer, and speaker with a particular interest in urban life, citizenship, public service reform, and the built environment. Ben is also the author of several acclaimed books on philosophy.

Ben, welcome from across the globe. And thanks so much for joining me for a conversation today.

[00:01:30]

**Ben Rogers:** Thanks for inviting me. I'm really looking forward to it.

[00:01:33]

**Criena Gehrke:** So Ben, I'm looking forward to discussing many things with you, but can you just indulge me for a moment because I have actually a very specific and quite personal question that I need your advice on before we start. So, my daughter who is 22 years of age – Rosie, she's about to graduate from university with a degree in philosophy and she calls it a degree in arguing.

And I'm very thoughtful about that when I heard that you have a particular interest and passion for philosophy, because I was curious about – did I give that kid some really poor advice when she left school? When I said, you know what, Rose, you should explore what you love to do – which was philosophy, but now I'm just wondering what's going to happen to her. What do you do with a philosophy degree in, 2021?



[00:02:21]

**Ben Rogers:** I think she made a great choice.

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs)

**Ben Rogers:** I do. And I think actually, the future does lie with people who have got broad conceptual skills, are intellectually curious, you know, interdisciplinary. And I think it's great. There was a lovely column I remember a few years ago, someone wrote saying, I look at my top 10 best friends - One is a doctor and the other nine have got jobs I don't understand and can't describe. (laughs) I'm sure become one of those, you know, probably every bit of a job that you do and a bit like the job that I do -

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs)

**Ben Rogers:** You know, they attach a premium to creativity, and intellectual sort of agility, and conceptual thought and interpersonal skills. And empathy and, you know, philosophy equips you with lots of those skills. Not all of them, but lots of them.

[00:03:08]

**Criena Gehrke:** Has your interest in philosophy impacted the way that you feel around cities, urban planning policy? Because it is closely tied to precisely what you've been talking about - critical thinking, ethics and understanding of how humanity and society works.

[00:03:29]

**Ben Rogers:** Definitely. I think I sort of bring that to my work and my strengths are partly sort of - you know, I bring a sort of historical perspective on cities. You know, I'm not someone who gets deep into data. I mean, I'm more confident with qualitative research than I am with quantitative, but I'm always writing and talking about the history of cities and the different schools of political philosophy. And I think that I bring that to bear on the work I've done on cities. Which is one way of approaching things.

Obviously there are urbanists who think very much in sort of terms of sort of data or economics. I've certainly found that having both a historical and philosophical background has, you know - it really animates the way I think about cities and I'm currently, you know, actually writing a - just beginning a book called *The Urbanist Handbook: A guide to making the perfect city*. In which I am, beginning with a sort of short history of urbanism and yeah, it's always there. It's always there. That sort of big ideas about society, and cities, and how to live.

[00:04:23]

**Criena Gehrke:** So we might as well just jump straight into it. Tell me what makes the perfect city.

[00:04:28]

**Ben Rogers:** That is a great question. I mean I think, you know, we're all students of the great Jane Jacobs whose star has rightly risen and risen. I mean, all of that, let's say all of us urbanist have read all and certainly know about her great 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. I think still her sort of understanding of what makes a great city, which is, you know - density, a mix of uses, human scale, architecture, a mix of people, and the sort of central importance of streets. You know, I still just sort of walk around with those things in my head. They remain my guide.



**Ben Rogers:** I mean, in some ways I think the best way I think about what makes a perfect city is to think about your typical 20th century city. And then, imagine it's opposite.

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs)

**Ben Rogers:** I think it's the 20th century urbanism, I mean – it doesn't even deserve the name of urbanism, has been for the most part, absolutely disastrous, you know, the embrace of the car, the acceptance of sprawl.

When we think about 19th century cities, you know, we think about Manchester and Chicago and these places, which were horrible in lots of ways had helped terrible poverty you know, out of control. But by the end of the century, you know, think about what had happened in the cities in the 19th century: We had created sidewalks, we would introduce sewers, electric light, public transport, basic welfare services, public realm, libraries, and other sort of public goods. And then you think about the 20th century and really its great contribution was this sort of urban highway and the tower block.

And for the last sort of 50 years, it seems to me we've just been trying to sort of escape to the 20th century principles of urban planning or planning more generally. And in some ways from such we rediscover all the traditions.

[00:06:04]

**Criena Gehrke:** So I hate to say the C word being COVID, but I'm thoughtful about the fact that it has provided the opportunity to test some of those things: quieter living -

**Ben Rogers:** Yeah.

**Criena Gehrke:** More and different connection with your local neighbourhood and your family, the public realm. You know, it's cleaned out those big cities because they haven't been available to us in the same way. And I just wonder what we'll take from that moving forward when you think about urban centres.

[00:06:34]

**Ben Rogers:** Yes, so interesting. I mean, it has been a sort of fascinating, painful sort of experiment. And in the short term I'm pessimistic for London – the city I live in, the city I studied most, the city I know best. You know, it's been pretty devastating because London thrives on face-to-face contact, on – I know it's got this huge sort of visitor economy, both tourists and business visitors, and indeed sort of students. It's got an amazing hospitality sector, cultural sector, night-time economy – all those things have been really hard hit. I'm a trustee of a small theatre, you know, we haven't put on a show for a year. And more like a year and a half by the time we put on another show. It's devastating.

But in the longer term, I'm hopeful because I think there was something very unsustainable and inefficient about the way we were living and using our cities - you know, the daily two-hour commute to sit in a, you know, an office doing things that you could do at do a home. And yeah - and so my, I mean, when you think about things like transport in cities where so much of the emphasis has been on just increasing the supply of transport, when actually now it just seems that what we should have been thinking about doing is getting people to sort of travel less.



**Ben Rogers:** So I, you know, I can imagine a - I mean, there's lots of futures, but one future is actually, we work locally or from home more. We only travel into the city when we really need to. And that frees up the city centres for different sorts of uses, for more people, for more housing, for more of a sort of mix that makes cities special.

So our city centres might become a bit less routine and a bit, a bit more special. I mean, we might have to move them up the value chain. But that, that can only be a good thing. And I just - I don't think that people are going to want to work remotely forever. I mean, we'll reach a sort of new equilibrium where people will spend more time working locally or more time working at home - which is good for the local neighbourhood, but still be wanting to go in pretty regularly for face-to-face meetings, and particularly when you're young. And one of the things I do expect is that our cities - which are already young, will probably become even younger.

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**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah it's interesting, isn't it? That re-imagining of those urban centres.

**Ben Rogers:** How does it feel for you in the Gold Coast?

**Criena Gehrke:** We're in an interesting position because we are classified as a regional city and we're located - on a good day, talk about transport. On a good day, our highway that leads between us and Brisbane, which is the capital city of Queensland is a 45 minute to 50 minute drive. On a bad day, it's two hours commute. So there's a real issue with connectivity between us and our capital city that's just up the road, but we are classified as a regional city.

We're seeing a trend away from the big cities like Sydney and Melbourne. Our property market has just gone through the absolute roof with people looking towards moving to Queensland because lifestyle - with our great beaches away from that city hub that have had an experience of longer shutdowns than we have in Queensland.

**Ben Rogers:** Right, right.

**Criena Gehrke:** So it's really interesting. And I think that's a trend that's if not actually happening, being really promoted by government broadly across Australia, around moving to regional or second cities.

What does that do to those large capital cities? You know, and I'm interested in your re-imagining of that, but also what does it do to the inherent character and liveability of those regional centres as well?

[00:10:16]

**Ben Rogers:** Yeah. It's very hard to see into the future, but - and it has been a lot of talk on it about where the rise of second tier or smaller cities. On the other hand, you know, there's another sort of scenario where actually, in some ways, perhaps, you know, New York and London and the big metropolises are the winners? I mean, they always seem to be the winner for everything.

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs) Through the centuries.

**Ben Rogers:** They are the winners because property becomes a bit cheaper and you know, younger people move in and it becomes more dynamic. So, you know, we'll see.



[00:10:50]

**Criena Gehrke:** Is London having an identity crisis because, you know, as you said, a lot of those things that have made London, London have been stripped away during this period of time?

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**Ben Rogers:** I think things are sort of frozen, to be honest. I don't think it's the case there. It's been too, quick, I mean, too short lived so far for it to really, probably affect people's identities. Or at least for us to know how it will affect people's identities. I mean, what definitely has been the case over the last sort of 20 years, really, or 25 years since London sort of begun growing again – because you know that the story of London, a bit like the story of Paris, or New York, or Vienna is that it's shrunk after the war partly as a result of government policy, partly as a result of de-industrialization and the population began to grow again, and then that sort of early 1990s. And in that time, I think the sort of sense of London identity has got stronger. I mean London wasn't like – it's never been quite like New York.

You know, New York has a really strong sense of its own identity. And there's lots of songs about New York and lots of sort of, symbols and London doesn't really have those. But that's been changing, and people feel a sort of strong sense of, London identity. It's great in a way. And you know, and it's an identity which is about London's sort of multiculturalism and vibrant city. The worry is that it's beginning to feel like a sort of another country in relation to the rest of the nation, and London has, in some ways grown apart from Britain and from England and is paying the price for that.

And I, you know, in the sense that we've now got a conservative government that's pretty anti-London. You know, and this is something I think now you're seeing everywhere. You're seeing the rise of these sort of what Richard Florida calls sort of "superstar cities" – increasingly viewed with weariness, with suspicion by much of the rest of the nation. You know, and I really – I worry about that.

**Criena Gehrke:** Because what will that mean over time?

**Ben Rogers:** Well, what it means for London is that we're being starved of investment because Britain is very, very centralised and all the money, most of the power rests with national government and national government's decided that it has priorities and not with London, but with other parts of the country, particularly the poor areas in the North, which is ironic because of course Prime minister, Boris Johnson was Mayor for London for 10 years, and absolutely loved the job. I mean, I genuinely believe he loved the job. He always said it was the best job in politics, the best job in the world. And he certainly looked a lot happier as Mayor for London than he looks as Prime Minister.

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs) It's not for me to judge from a far, but yes, I would agree with that and probably was a little bit better at it?

**Ben Rogers:** Maybe, yeah, and he – anyways, he's really turned his back on London. But as I say, this is not just a London thing, this is a more general sort of issue just about how these sort of "superstar cities" connect with their nations.

[00:13:18]

MUSIC TRANSITION



[00:13:23]

**Criena Gehrke:** So tell me more about the political whimsy of the day. Like I think that's a really good example that your Prime Minister was the Mayor, and he seems to have changed his tune. And I guess I'm very thoughtful – I make no secret of the fact that I'm one of those strange creatures that is actually a strategy and policy nerd.

And I think that you probably share that passion. So it's interesting to me what makes good planning, good policy, and good strategy. And then what makes it stick? And can you actually then safeguard it against political whimsy, or political intent, or priorities of the day? It's a provocation more than anything.

[00:14:12]

**Ben Rogers:** I think this is one of those things where you are incredibly dependent on the leadership, aren't you? I mean, there are some leaders who just are naturally so strategic. I know I, for a short while worked in the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit when Gordon Brown was Prime Minister. The Strategy Unit was something set up by Tony Blair when he first became Prime Minister and you know – it was a sort of dedicated unit in the cabinet office and the very, very central government which did long-term strategic thinking for the whole government. And it was fantastic.

It was wound up when Gordon Brown lost the election you know, and I don't think government has anything quite like it now. But what about you, and what's your reflections on that? Is there anything that you can do to really embed that in government?

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**Criena Gehrke:** I'm thoughtful about who might be listening to this podcast. Um, I think –

**Ben Rogers:** (laughs)

**Criena Gehrke:** I think for my sins, I was invited to actually do three years of implementation of my own culture strategy heading towards the Gold Coast, hosted the 2018 Commonwealth games. And we had quite an ambitious plan that went along with the culture strategy that was around deepen fast investment in local artists and cultural development so that it could be showcased during that 10 days in the sun, and then have legacy outcomes and benefits way beyond that moment of the Commonwealth games delivery.

And I think the perfect storm is a city or a government that commits to longer-term strategy, that then embeds it across the administration and the organisation that encourages everyone to measure success based on the delivery of that strategy, and is willing to invest both the time, the resources and the dollars in delivering that strategy.

It's also, I think – it's almost like encouraging people to drink the Kool-Aid too.

**Ben Rogers:** Right, right.

**Criena Gehrke:** You know, those that take courage of delivering that strategy need to say it over and over again. They need to develop programmes, initiatives, public responses that respond to those strategic pillars or whatever that roadmap is. So I think sometimes it looks like a perfect storm, but you have to create that perfect storm through a range of different mechanisms.



**Criena Gehrke:** But first and foremost, I don't know how you get around the fact that it does actually need political will behind it.

[00:16:38]

**Ben Rogers:** Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. And what is the sort of – what is the vision for the culture in the Gold Coast? Give me a feel of that.

[00:16:43]

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs) Give you a feel for that? Well, interestingly, I feel as though it links to your urbanist approach in your obvious love of London, but also cities. The approach on the Gold Coast has been very much around: What is it that we want to be? Who are we as a city? And what's the very DNA of this place?

So part of what happened when I came into this fine city to look at the culture strategy was we did a lot of community consultation, a lot of talking to both artists, but you know, generally the people of the Gold Coast. And I was fascinated by the fact that each and every session that I held, every conversation I had generally started with: "Do you know what the Gold Coast needs?"

And I was like, tell me what the Gold Coast needs.

"The Gold Coast needs Melbourne laneways."

And I think, well that's curious because Melbourne's got laneways, but Melbourne doesn't have exquisite subtropical climate. So it's just interesting to me – that notion of cities aspiring to be somewhere else instead of embracing who they are.

**Ben Rogers:** (laughs)

**Criena Gehrke:** The ambition for the Gold Coast really is around a distinct culture that is of this place, and of the very DNA of this place. So, we are a city that's built on rapid development, construction, tourism, hospitality. We're really built on a DNA of innovation, entrepreneurialism, great lifestyle, beautiful beaches. You know, it's important to us that the way that we experience arts and culture responds to that. So at the precinct HOTA that I'm responsible for, we very much taken the approach that our programming is accessible, it's contemporary. It does showcase local artists. We're not precious about how you dress, what your experience is here.

You know, we're a new – relatively new city, notwithstanding the rich indigenous culture here that's largely unknown and still hidden, but we are a relatively new contemporary city that's only 60 years old. And so it is a place that is new and it's untethered from some tradition that you get in places like London, or even Melbourne here in Australia, you know – those established cities that have had a rich cultural offer for a very long time. So there you go, are we all moving to Australia now?

**Ben Rogers:** It does sound very tempting.

**Criena Gehrke:** It's the new frontier! So I read a blog of yours that talked about new politics of public space, and it was around what's happening with public gatherings, what's been the impact of digital connection on the public realm.



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**Ben Rogers:** I think what I'm getting at there was I think a slightly under recognised phenomenon, you know, which is that the public realm is becoming more important to us despite the fact that we can all connect digitally, you know, and in a way it's – it's a sort of, one element, one aspect of that sort of broader phenomenon by which the digital economy or the digitalisation of society has actually encouraged urbanisation. You know, in cities like London and in New York and then Sydney, have really taken off very much in line with digital revolution. But I think there's various aspects of this new politics of public space. I mean, this one is a self-concern around the way which people are just using the public space to demonstrate much more, I mean, there's been a big increase in demonstrations.

Recently we've had Black Lives Matter marches against Brexit, you know, you're seeing it all the time. Then there's a sort of set of concerns around sort of privatised – privatisation of public space, which was really a challenge for lots of developers.

I mean, if you think about Toronto where Alphabet, you know, the sort of mother company of Google, brought up and went into partnership with the city of Toronto to redevelop the Docklands. And it was a sort of really major investment and a really ambitious project and Alphabet withdrew from that last year, because there was so much pushback against what the public saw as a sort of privatisation of public space that was involved in that project.

And I think more generally the movement around pushing back the car, reclaiming the streets for cyclists and pedestrians, and play spaces and living spaces, which again has become a sort of real force – certainly in European politics and last year in France, during the sort of city elections the greens won city after city on a platform, partly about climate change, but partly about pushing back against the car. So, it's just one of those sort of ironies that at a time where we could all connect digitally, we care more about the public space than ever. And that's a huge opportunity obviously for the arts, I think.

People want to use the spaces outside their houses in the centre of their cities, you know, in richer and more creative ways. And then there's an appetite, I think, for more outside cultural events, performances. I think some of these things around the way, and I'm sure that some of the stuff that's been going on in New York about, you know, repurposing road space for cafes and restaurants will prove sticky.

I know here in London, we're planning a big street festival – essentially as a street festival of the arts for whenever lockdown finally ends. Now just as a way of saying London's back on its feet, it's open. I'm excited about it all.

[00:22:22]

**Criena Gehrke:** What do we need to do to support what I think is a revolution?

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**Ben Rogers:** In the end, so much of this boils down to the car. If we are going to free our streets for public use, it will mean seriously pushing back against the car. And that, that – the politics of that are very, very difficult. You know, we're seeing it here. I mean, we have the mayor and the councils supported by national government, you know, used COVID partly to be honest, as an opportunity – almost like a pretext to create lots of low traffic neighbourhoods.



**Ben Rogers:** So there's been lots of moves simply to sort of prevent cars going down local streets, you know, on the grounds that we need more space for us to sort of cycle, exercise or have you, but, you know, the politics of it have been very divisive.

And I do worry that it could become a flashpoint in a sort of cultural wars, but I don't see an alternative. I mean, we – you know, for those of us that live in cities, they have become too car dominated.

[00:23:17]

**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, the Gold Coast is very much a car culture and you're right, it's interesting – that culture of the car and the impact that it has.

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**Ben Rogers:** Yeah. I mean, I think obviously there are older cities like Paris and even more London – just not built for the car. And so it's more of an issue there than it is for these cities that are built around cars. I mean, it's a question of sustainability, obviously, which is really important.

But also, everything we know about creativity and innovation suggests that we want to be encouraging people to socialise, meet face-to-face, and accidental meetings can be really important. So the sorts of reasons I think, to want to push back a bit on a car centric way of life.

**Criena Gehrke:** Who does that really well?

**Ben Rogers:** I mean, I guess the poster child is Amsterdam.

**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah.

**Ben Rogers:** Where they have, long before London, you know, just done a great job in making bicycling the norm. And you go to Amsterdam and it's not – you know, no one's in Lycra, no one's wearing a helmet. They don't even have lights on them and their bikes in the evenings...

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs)

**Ben Rogers:** Because there's so many people – you know, it is the main way of getting around.

[00:24:22]

**Criena Gehrke:** I'm curious about – as you would imagine in my position, the role of arts and culture in all of those things that you've spoken about. There was a great platform paper published here in Australia a couple of years ago, and I highly recommend it called *Cultural Precincts: Art or Commodity?* by Justin MacDonnell. And it was fascinating in the fact that government, and particularly local governments inventing and manufacturing cultural precincts, because they think that that's the mechanism for bringing community together and showcasing arts and culture and all of those things that you were just talking about around connectivity and humanity.

And yet they're being built in strange places that are just convenient because the real estates there – that don't have that sense of either transport connection to other places.



**Criena Gehrke:** And that they're a construct because historically, precincts and arts and cultural precincts sprung up around what was the old marketplaces, you know, what were the natural gathering places –

**Ben Rogers:** Yeah, yeah.

**Criena Gehrke:** Where were the places that people were doing business, or transacting, or coming together because that's where they bought their vegetables? You know, it's really interesting, isn't it? Can you actually manufacture those places and those moments for humans?

[00:25:49]

**Ben Rogers:** You can build successful cultural centres. London – in the South Bank was a deliberate post-war strategy to create cultural centre in an area that had been badly bombed, you know, beginning with the Festival of Britain and it sort of worked. And the city of London – you know, the city of London is really interesting. So, by which I mean, not the whole of London, but the actual, the square mile, you know, that the old city, the centre, the financial and business services because they have always been sitting there since the war, pretty happy with their business model, which is just that, you know, they're a big centre for business services, people's community, and during the day they – there was hardly any night time offer.

Absolutely no weekend offer. It was completely dead. And they, I think, realise that people want more from a city and the people that choose to locate, or looking to locate in London actually want to locate in a place that has an offer over the weekend and in the evenings. And they also recognise that the sort of creative industries are growing all the time and they want to attract creative industry companies.

And so that – really having to sort of rethink that old model of how the city works and creating what they call a cultural mile which is going to have a new museum for London and what's going to have you – symphony, and also all sorts of things. So of course, you would do, and it sounds like you're doing it in the Gold Coast.

I mean, I just think it's as much as possible, it just needs to be really sort of connected and embedded in the sort of broader life of the city.

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**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, I think we're seeing that people are engaging and having different expectations of arts and culture. You know, so it's really interesting to me what these places need to provide and how they need to be, I think – much more democratic than what they've ever been before.

And I'm fortunate enough to have conversations very regularly with urban planners, with economists, with politicians who are all saying the same thing, give or take, which is – ignore your own community at your peril these days. So it's a return to really being embedded in your community, to listening, to being responsive to that, not saying, I know what's best or I'm going to program what's good for you, or I'm going to build what I think is good for this community.

[00:28:12]

**Ben Rogers:** I so agree. This is a line in one of Auden's poems about how a poet should be like a valley cheese, local, but no one elsewhere.



**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs)

**Ben Rogers:** And that's always seems to me, you know, that should be the sort of ambition of any cultural institution, you know, to have really local roots and to be of a place but have a sort of international quality in terms of its output.

[00:28:35]

**Criena Gehrke:** That's right, for a place like the Gold Coast, which is why we're so interested in your provocations around, you know, the politics of public spaces. It's also that – to this very day and I'm not sure it will ever change, and neither should it, the great democratic space of my city tends to be the beach. Where all they're enjoying, that freedom of the ocean. It is every person's space and every person uses it.

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**Ben Rogers:** It's a commons actually. It's a common, so people - and people treat it like a commons. You know, I mean they respect each other's spaces. They don't tend to sort of pollute it. Yeah. Beaches are such an interesting public space.

[00:29:13]

**Criena Gehrke:** Oh, that's such an interesting public space and people – I think you're right. It's fascinating how people respond on beaches because I do think that there's this sense of communal of commons, but people are quite respectful of individual spaces, but then you see, you know, how people respond when they're in the ocean together or you know, playing beach cricket and a ball's whacked at someone else, and you just pick it up and you start playing the game, like at – they're just extraordinary spaces of, you know, and preening... (laughs)

**Ben Rogers:** Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

**Criena Gehrke:** So as we come to nearly the end of this wonderful time together, Ben, I think I've got two things I'd love to hear about. What do you love about London?

[00:30:00]

**Ben Rogers:** I love its sort of domesticity, I guess, its intimacy. Its sort of village character. I think the London plan, which is the mayor's plan, identifies 220 local town centres across London. No, that doesn't make it a very hard city to manage, you know, and it makes things like transport a nightmare because all the streets are too narrow. But yeah, I like how decentralised it is. And you know, I like how cosmopolitan it's become. It's become a much more exciting city than the one I grew up in. I mean, I'm 57. And I – when I grew up in London and that sort of sixties and seventies, it really did feel like a place on the way down.

And you know, it has reinvented itself as model of a sort of freewheeling, liberal, global capital, but one which is fairly neighbourly in feel.

[00:30:43]

**Criena Gehrke:** Which I love – that notion of density, diversity neighbourhoods. You know, it's like a very simple but a complex ecosystem isn't it?

**Ben Rogers:** Yeah, that neighbourhood mix is important, isn't it?



**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah. And I guess finally, it's been a pretty interesting ride over the past 18 months, and I think history is riddled with pretty interesting rides. This is - this might be a global pandemic, but history shows that humans will always face moments of great challenge, great adversity, great change in turmoil. Being a philosopher, an urbanist, a global citizen, an ideas person, if there's one thing that we should value and defend as a community above all else, what do you think that should be?

[00:31:36]

**Ben Rogers:** Well I'd say, speaking as an urbanist, I know, I think it's the start of the public life of the city. And I think just making sure this sort of city is sort of full of places, venues and institutions where people come together as citizens. And some of those are going to be the public realm and of all its richness and diversity from the local street to the town square to the park.

Some of them will be political institutions and some of them will be cultural. But I think those – that public spaces, that sort of public life is a really important in socialising us in, you know, turning us from individuals into citizens connecting as – across the barriers of, you know, ethnicity and background or gender or whatever.

So I think, yeah, I think – so just having an eye to sort of sustaining and developing the public life of the city is absolutely vital.

[00:32:27]

**Criena Gehrke:** Ben, I love your vision for cities that have humans at the very heart of them. Here's what I've taken from this conversation. It's been an absolute delight talking to you across the ocean and across time zones. I'm genuine in my invitation for you to come and visit the Gold Coast anytime you like and I'll show you the great democratic common – that is the beautiful Surfers Paradise beach. Thanks so much for joining us.

[00:32:54]

**Ben Rogers:** I'm so - I'm so tempted to, Criena. It's been great.

**Criena Gehrke:** Thank you.

**Ben Rogers:** Thanks a lot.

[00:33:00]

MUSIC TRANSITION

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**Criena Gehrke:** I'm now joined by my wonderful Three Bell's colleague, Stephanie Fortunato, all the way over the other side of the Atlantic to reflect on my conversation with Ben and see if we can pinpoint two or three key takeaways that we can all apply to our own places and experiences. Stephanie, hello!

[00:33:26]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Hello, Criena. Nice to talk to you.

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**Criena Gehrke:** Nice to talk to you too. It's been a couple of days to tell you the truth, since I had that conversation with Ben.



**Criena Gehrke:** And I know you've had an opportunity to have a sneak listen, and what a fascinating conversation it was around urbanism, but also the future of our cities. And I was very grateful that he indulged me in a conversation about philosophy straight up, because I do think that that is important - the role of critical thinking and ethics in what we do moving forward.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** I so appreciated that as well. You know, I'm a student of the humanities and a big proponent of thinking and really finding ways to reason through decisions by putting them in context. And I loved the way you guys spoke, not just of your daughter's pathways forward, but really the need to infuse that humanities-based thinking in everything that we do as we build our cities, as we think about our cultural institutions and their roles within those communities.

I think it's - it's really important to remember that sometimes the skills that people through the ages have looked to as the cornerstones for creativity and innovation, really are the ones that are persistent and pervasive.

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**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah. The irony wasn't lost on me and I'm not sure that irony is quite the right word, but it occurred to me that what Ben was speaking about - and in that philosophical and liberal arts space, is a return to the Renaissance where science, arts, critical thinking were key. But then also when he was speaking about 20th century cities and some of the challenges around 20th century cities also referred to the past, and I do wonder about this moment in history: Are we being reflective enough and looking back to move forward?

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** I really appreciated actually, the way that you guys got into the political and cultural life of public spaces because I know what I'm finding here in Providence is that people have very little tolerance for the gatekeeping and sort of legacy power brokers who have made decisions that may not be in service to the wider community, that are - have really perpetuated inequity in different ways.

We are undertaking a redesign of our centre city and it's been a really interesting process of trying to create plans for the 21st century, and for the future cultural development of our city. But we've really needed to reckon with our past - you know, not only the - the sort of urbanist built environment here, but the systems that some, you know, like the transportation system, which really has its roots in the 20th century and may not be serving our community that well today, and how does this redesign help us get to, you know, a new place.

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**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, we're having a very similar - we're facing very similar challenges. And when Ben was talking about the role of the car, and I was thinking - Oh, Benny you're overstating that slightly because I, as I said in the podcast, I live in a car culture, but then it occurred to me that some of the challenges that we're facing as a precinct as well are precisely what you're talking about.

What's the connectivity into the site? How do people come together? How do they get there?



**Criena Gehrke:** You know, we work near a main road that becomes a car park when we're in major event mode, which makes for a deeply unpleasant experience and doesn't lend itself to those community gatherings. So it's interesting some of those challenges that you have in those public spaces that are inherited from previous plans, previous urban developments and no longer suit the community.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** And, you know, I think that you began to allude to this in your conversation, but I think that there is a real need to really work with strategy keepers. So when you're doing any sort of cultural plan or any sort of planning effort in cities to really think about who are – not just the stakeholders or who are impacted in the decision today, but who are the champions who are going to help keep that plan accountable beyond the shifts of political administration, or even the trends towards different progressive policies, like – you know, the move away from auto-centric city building right, and towards multimodal connectivity and mobility. I think it's really important that there are generations of strategy keepers who can sort of pass the baton so that the visions really can be implementable.

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**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, I think that that's an interesting reflection and I do wonder about cities' capabilities to do those hundred – almost hundred-year plans. And it applies equally to us as a precinct, to us as arts and cultural leaders. You know, our strategic plans are three to five years, but actually the generational change in the commitment of this city to arts and culture being deeply and richly embedded in the Gold Coast is a 50 to a hundred-year plan.

So, if you can nail that, that would be fantastic. (laughs)

**Stephanie Fortunato:** (laughs)

**Criena Gehrke:** And even Ben spoke of that. Some of his experience in terms of working for governments that had departments that were very clear around the importance of strategy and then the implementation of strategy. So I think it's definitely something for governments to consider, but also us as custodians of these precincts to think about, yet again, and it's not rocket science.

What are those one year, three year, five year, 10 year and a hundred year visions for what we're doing? And to as much as possible embedded in the very DNA of our organisation.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** And you know, I think this opportunity that we have right now to reimagine our cities, but also to re-imagine how we go about tackling these strategies – I think it's really important to think about how we create more access to the strategies themselves by a wider public.

You know, it goes beyond the idea of community consultation and really be – comes to a place where we're forming full partnerships, equal partnerships that – that helped to really make it part of the lifeblood of a community that arts and culture are integrated at the heart of these cities. And that we are creating more democratic spaces, more commons like your beautiful beach there that – that really can be inclusive, welcoming, and foster a sense of belonging for all community members.



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**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah. And I think that the time is now. The conversation around public realm, and those great democratic spaces and commons being more vital than ever before because of the experience of COVID, where we haven't had that opportunity to come together. They should be places of community, of access, inclusion, protest, grieving, arts, culture, celebration.

So that aspiration for precincts to be the commons, I think is a really beautiful one. And then when I think about our colleagues that are working out of major cities, then what is the role of those commons in what Ben talked about are the changing face of those large epicentres, those urban centres.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** I agree that – that they have a different set of concerns, but sort of if the silver lining is massive disruption, it seems that some of the innovations and adaptations that have been tested and experimented with over this past year really can provide lessons for long-term change. And I think that that doesn't necessarily matter – the size and scale of the city. The opportunity to really just - again, think about the context in which people are using public spaces and to think about what are the structures that are needed to really support spaces that help people thrive.

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**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah. And then it's like – it could be Alice falling down the rabbit hole actually, Stephanie –

**Stephanie Fortunato:** (laughs)

**Criena Gehrke:** Because I think what we're saying is that public realm needs to be freed up and people need to be empowered, and included, and feel a sense of ownership in that public realm. It's never been more important. In order to support that, you need great strategies, and a commitment to community, and a values-based approach. So you need to have gatekeepers or custodians of the strategy that are going to enable that over a long period of time. See, even saying that out loud sounded like Alice and the rabbit hole! (laughs)

**Stephanie Fortunato:** (laughs)

**Criena Gehrke:** Because strategy often drives infrastructure, drives urbanism, drives community, drives strategy. So it's a little bit like we were talking about – Ben and I, around how do you create the perfect storm?

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** Also Criena, it occurs to me that maybe there is a core of philosophers that are hired to help be the strategy keepers.

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs)

**Stephanie Fortunato:** There's something very Socratic in the reasoning as you lay it out as well. (laughs)

**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, I guess it's - we're early now in our Three Bell's journey, in these podcasts. So I don't want to make bold blanket statements of themes already. But what –



**Stephanie Fortunato:** Oh, go ahead. (laughs)

[00:43:45]

**Criena Gehrke:** What's occurring to me is that there is something that is reoccurring through all of the conversations that we're having, which is actually quite simple – it's around a values-based approach to everything that we do and keeping community at the very centre and in our hearts and strategies, and working with community to get these really relevant, rich, deep places and experiences and connection.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** And it just reminds me of the quote that Ben shared from Auden about being - I don't know, actually, if I'll get the quote, but it was something about being locally rooted, but known elsewhere? Which also seems to be a rationale for organisations like the GCDN that are helping us all to connect and understand what's happening in our own backyards. But to put it in a context of – of a changing world. You know, I think there's something to be said about the connectivity that happens even at that scale.

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**Criena Gehrke:** Yeah, I agree. Stephanie, if there was one thing that you might do differently, or change your perspective, or an action that you might take out of the great conversation that I was fortunate enough to have with Ben, what might that be?

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Besides, come visit you in Australia?

**Criena Gehrke:** (laughs) I have been told previously that I'm like the Gold Coast tourism board, but you know, I love this place. And I'm unapologetic about the pride that I have in my adopted city. So yes, that open invitation applies to everyone –

**Stephanie Fortunato:** (laughs) I just love it.

**Criena Gehrke:** – but in your own current world.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** I think, many of us are faced each day with a host of decisions large and small. And I think the best way to make decisions really, is to look for that context; to think about how it fits into the history of the places where we live, and how the community does actually have access, or does not, to whatever is being determined.

So I think for myself, it's finding new ways and reaching out to more community members to make sure that I am thinking through the implications of decisions that affect the city at a scale beyond just the office that I work in.

What about you? What are you thinking about?

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**Criena Gehrke:** I love that, because I think what I take away from it – and I was saying to Ben, you know, I am a strategy nerd, to ensure that the strategist in me and the leader and custodian of a major precinct and a major opportunity for the city, that I live by what I believe – which is to not become a gatekeeper of strategy, but in an enabler across a long period of time of that strategy, so that it's successful.



**Criena Gehrke:** But also, it's not the Criena show. It's around what is going to serve the community to truly believe in that custodianship, and to keep my eye on the ball that what success looks like, is not mine. It's for my children, my grandchildren, my great-grandchildren, and communities way into the future that hopefully I'll never actually fully reap what I've sown, because it's not mine. It belongs to future generations.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** You know, Criena, just on that point. We have been doing cultural planning here, and we had an indigenous artist and educator offer a land acknowledgement at the beginning of the cultural planning sessions. And she called us to think not just about what we were doing together in this moment, but to consider the seven generations who came before us and the implications for the seven generations that will follow.

And I just love that. I love this traditional idea that we are linked. And so I think that's a wonderful way to – to really think about: What is the purpose of arts and culture in communities? And why do we build cities? Why do we come together in these cities?

It's a - it's a great way for us to think about the long view.

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**Criena Gehrke:** Always think about the “why”, and the generations to come.

Stephanie, it's always such a delight to chat with you. And to hear your thoughts about these fantastic conversations that we're having. I'd also like to thank Ben Rogers again for his philosophical provocations and his insights and ideas around urbanism.

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It's a delight to be able to have these fantastic conversations across the globe. And I look forward to joining you again soon.

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THEME MUSIC

