



EP 6: Embedding hope through creative placemaking

Jia-Ping Lee in conversation with Stephanie Fortunato

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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 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 cultural urban life. The podcast and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net. If you like our content, please subscribe and give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice.

We acknowledge the traditional owners and first nations people across all the lands and countries who are joining us today, and pay our respects to elders past, present, and emerging. First nations people are original storytellers, artists and custodians of culture.

I'm Stephanie Fortunato and in my day job, I'm the Director of the Department of Art, Culture + Tourism for the U.S. City of Providence, Rhode Island, on the ancestral home of the Narragansett people. And today, I am thrilled to be joined by Jia-Ping Lee. This episode will focus on placemaking, public space, and people.

Jia-Ping Lee is the founder of Tempatico – an urban and cultural change start-up, which designs places that foster hope. She has a long career in the placemaking arena. And I'm thrilled to be able to speak to her a little bit more about these experiences.

Welcome to The Three Bells, Jia-Ping!

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Jia-Ping Lee: Hi, thank you for having me, Stephanie.

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Stephanie Fortunato: So you've had a long career, you know, that has focused in on placemaking. Uh, but recently you have founded this new urban and cultural change start-up. It's just, it's just a great imprimatur for any venture. Um, but what led you to, to set up your own firm?

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Jia-Ping Lee: Um, so, A) I never thought that I would be working with a government linked agency, or any government linked anything to begin with. But it was a time in Malaysia's history where I felt, if anybody needed to step up and really contribute, it was



me. Um, I was tired of standing by the side lines and complaining about what was not happening.

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Jia-Ping Lee: So when the call came I basically, uh, got involved with the organisation that led to Think City, uh, which was Khazanah. In 2007, when I was called into look at the brand strategy for Georgetown in Penang – which is an island up north of Peninsula Malaysia, and that then led to the creation of Think City. And then Think City was doing so well in Penang that um, they were tasked to open up two new cities and one of them was Kuala Lumpur.

And I was again, brought into look at their brand, and it was an amazing experience, but then what happened was the government changed. And because of that, a lot of the funding was cut. And I said, well, you know, I'm here to serve, but I don't see myself continuing because there's only so much you can do with a reduced funding. And KL was at that stage where you needed to pump in the same amount, if not more, to kind of get to a tipping point. And without that it wouldn't have happened. So I decided to change, uh, the pace, by setting up my own company and looking at the interrelation between many spaces.

So I call it the 'Anatomy of Hope'. And it talks about the four places: which is the urban place, the corporate place, the cultural place and the inner place. And the inner place really talks about leadership. And I feel that what's missing or what's lacking in a lot of cities is good governance and good leadership. So everything starts from the leader, and then you flow it into corporate.

And I feel corporates in terms of their ESG statements, or their governance statement, or their sustainability statements, need to be much more involved in making the city better. And then um, we also need cultural places because we need to ensure that there's soul in our cities and it doesn't just look like a homogenous whole. And then the last one is the urban space. And all of this is about the interconnectivity of cities and how human beings, plus their place, plus the technology – it all needs to connect in the right way.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Your work to embed hope in all your projects is really an exciting and inspiring ambition. So tell us, how can design be used to create more hopeful places?

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Jia-Ping Lee: Well, I think hope starts with engaging and involving the community in the space or the place that you want to rejuvenate. You know, you have to ask them, what is it that they need? Um, what is it that they desire or have envisioned for their future? What is it that's not quite there, or not quite right yet.

And these are normally, the places that we work with are places that have migrant workers or migrant communities. And it's not just one ethnicity of migrants. It's a multiple ethnicity, plus the locals. And if you're familiar with Malaysia, you'd know that we're a multicultural and very ethnically diverse country.

So it's really about managing that melting pot. And you know, what is hopeful for one ethnicity and community may not be hopeful for the other. So it's really about juggling and deep listening to what your community is saying. And on top of that then also



engaging with people who've been in the urban sphere who know, and have expertise in the area and to say, in your expert opinion, what should we do given all of these issues and given the strengths of the community.

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Stephanie Fortunato: And then of course, I think that the real challenge probably is finding ways to equalise the power imbalances between those different communities. And I wonder, you know, you talk about deep listening – what are some of the methods that you've used to really broker trust among the different stakeholders in public spaces?

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Jia-Ping Lee: Um, I think one of them is to start off with, to say, I'm here to listen to you and I'm not wearing any political hat because at the moment there's a huge distrust towards political leaders. And when I was working on the urban sphere, I was part of a government linked agency. So you have to really set the tone to say, I'm here as a neutral listener, and I really want to help you get towards a more liveable space.

So it starts from there. And I think you have to do things to gain trust. So really it's about always bringing food – literally food on the table is very important in Asia. Um, And that's a great ice breaker. And, you know, you may not even talk about anything that concerns the place in the first instance.

It could take you a few meetings before you get to the root of things, because you really want to try and get to know these people, like, how many people in their family, what do they do...? So really understand the person first and then the community. So the person, the family and their community, and then it starts off there.

So you have to kind of, really be patient and really want to have the desire to get to know them as one human being to another.

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Stephanie Fortunato: I love that idea of bringing people together around a table to share a meal. I think that is something that is so important. It's so important in Providence and you know, all around the world that we have a moment to get to know each other as people, right. People first.

Jia-Ping Lee: Yeah.

Stephanie Fortunato: Um, you know, something that I think a lot about is, you know, how we bring people together, how we amplify and strengthen the sort of resident arts and cultural foundation that you can find in every single neighbourhood uh, probably around the world.

But I wonder in your experience, what does government get right in placemaking partnerships and where do the things that you see governments often missing?

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Jia-Ping Lee: So at the moment we have a huge treasure trove of artisans. And because of the diversity, we have artisans who are doing all sorts of things from woodworking to silver silversmithing to basically batik painting, to, you know, singing indigenous tribes songs and playing musical instruments. So it's a huge array of art form and it's quite



difficult to manage this because it is also you know, we have a large country where you have the East Malaysia, which is in the Borneo island. And then you have the Peninsula Malaysia, which is you know, on the west side. And we were quite separated for a long time. And now uh, unified.

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Jia-Ping Lee: There are still a lot of political tensions and so, as with funding and as with aid or government granting, it always happens on a political line. And when that happens, you know, it's who knows how to basically work the whole engagement process with the government leaders that win. And those who don't know how to do that, who are a bit naive in the process or in understanding process, or, you know, as with artisans, they just want to do their work.

They don't really want to have to engage constantly with, you know, leaders or government people. So there is that divide. So one of the things that they're, the government doing very well is that they recognise what we call the 'masters', the master craftsmen, or the master of artisans, and they get a grant.

Um, it's not a lot, but it's a start. And so at least they feel respected and honoured and recognised for their contribution to the arts, right. So that's, that's one thing that they're doing well. The government has also created an agency to, in this COVID situation, give more grants towards these artisans. And so we have the artisans who are in the traditional sphere, and we also have the artists – who are contemporary artists, that are paving new grounds in music, in film, in writing. So, what's really good is they do recognise the diversity and they do honour it.

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Stephanie Fortunato: And, you know, I think what you're highlighting there too, are some of the ways in which those inherent tensions about the traditional arts and the master craft work and you know, those disciplines and traditions that a place is really known for and contemporary cultural practitioners, sometimes they're at odds, right?

Who gets the resources? Those emerging professionals don't always have access. So it sounds like there's a real emphasis and effort on making sure that the investments are spread across the sector, across the cultural sector, rather than just putting forth one, one version of, what's possible there.

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Jia-Ping Lee: I mean, because it's all about relevance, right? So then the new is much more lucrative in terms of audience and receipts. And the traditional sometimes it's, you know, let's face it, traditional art is losing its ground with a lot of um, in a lot of countries. It's not, particular to Malaysia.

Because you know, the, a lot of people are saying, well, it's not relevant and it doesn't resonate with me. That's, that all art from, you know, that's something that my grandmother likes. It's not what I like. And so there is that, that balance that you need to say, well, how much money do we put in preserving something valuable? Um, versus, you know, putting some money into nurturing new talent, which is now, which is here, which is very important for the growth of the industry. So there is, as you say that, tension there.



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Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah, I find cultural heritage preservation, presentation, sort of the contemporary um, contemporary approach to all of those practices, um, there's a thing really interesting and innovative happening in this moment. And I know that when we're thinking about placemaking it's so important to dial into the specifics of those unique traditions, right, and how they can be reflected in places.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Because sometimes the balance tips the other way, it tips to the you know, it can tip sometimes in the other direction, right. Where art is tacked on to these public spaces rather than becoming an integral part of, of what people are going to experience when they come together in those moments.

And I was wondering if you could just speak a little bit about what you've learned from your own placemaking practice, you know, in the face of injustices, how can placemaking initiatives catalyse systemic change?

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Jia-Ping Lee: Well, I think one of the things that we often do is that we see what's not there yet, and we imagine what would happen if we basically put something new in there. So I give you an example where I was in charge of rejuvenating the um, heritage core of Kuala Lumpur and actually where the one kilometre from the birthplace of Kuala Lumpur, which is where the city got its name from, which has the muddy confluence between two rivers.

And the thing was that in that area everything was emptying out. Businesses were going to new shinier suburbs where traffic was much more manageable, and also where the building stock was in a better condition, right? So Kuala Lumpur heritage core was basically aging. And so, you know, in Asia, people like shiny and new.

So people go toward or gravitate towards things that, that work all the time and have all the mod cons, and you have buildings that don't break down, you know? So it's about then what do you do to stop the, the migration outside to the suburb and how do you make it relevant again?

So when we talk about destinations and placemaking, one of the first things – and I'm from the brand strategy industry, one of the things is how do you make the city relevant again, to the people there, and also attractive enough to draw in new blood into the city? Um, so one of the things is if you look at what's not there, so first thing you need to do is do a baseline: Find out what's there, what industries, types of people, types of ethnicity. And then you also look at how places and spaces are being used and not used. And then you look at the gaps.

So in Kuala Lumpur, we, you know, when I was working in Think City, we discovered that there were 55,000 people during the day – living and working during the day, but that's shrunk to 20%, which is about 11,000 at after hours, like eight o'clock at night. So, when you have only 11,000 population, it's not a huge incentive for shows. It's not a huge incentive for restaurants or, or, or cafes to open beyond a certain hour because it's not bringing in the footfall.

So one of the things we do, is number one is, you need to address the footfall first. That is key to economic vibrancy. So what we did was, we created a whole series of grants, including the economic grant, which looked at enticing start-ups to come back into the



city and to kind of romanticise the old and the ones, buildings with soul, versus brand new shiny buildings, right.

So, um, and one of the things we also did was there was a lack of artists working in the city and performing in the city.

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Jia-Ping Lee: Um, what was available was busking. And the problem is busking is: As long as you could play a tune or sing a tune or hold a tune, you would get a busking license, right. And that's fine, but you know, it's not going to elevate the experience or elevate the industry in any way.

So one of the things that my executive director and I looked at um, his name's Hamdan Abdul Majeed, was to basically look at how we could democratise the arts, because when you have a huge number of bottom 40 community, they don't like institutions, they don't have the money to pay for tickets. And so all they're consuming in terms of culture, is what's on their screen. And so what we wanted to do was to kind of say, what if we brought the arts to them, without them having to pay, and in a place where it was a hub then would it increase the relevancy of the arts for Malaysians?

So we cited, we created a programme called Arts On The Move. We basically took over a transit hub. So it had two, two floors. We took over one floor for performing arts, which was at the turnstile. And then we took over a tunnel, one floor below, to do a visual arts display.

It ran for three years and we really programmed it like how you would programme a performance space, right, any performance space. So, um, there were calendars that went out on what was happening on a monthly basis, and so everybody could plan their calendars and come and say, well, on Thursday, every Thursday, there's something on.

So, you know, either plan to be changing stations at that time, and you can just pop upstairs and listen to the music, or you could just come straight in and just sit on the stairs and just you know, listen to music at your leisure for one hour.

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Stephanie Fortunato: I love that use of the transit centre as a place where people could access arts experiences and that idea of, you know, knowing that you could find it there.

That's such an important part of training people to, look for arts and cultural experiences in their own lives. It's a touch point every single day, and so that intentional focus on that transit centre and thinking about how curation could become part of that experience and it really enhance that experience, such an important and an integral part of making the arts part of a placemaking initiative and those revitalisation programmes that sometimes can exacerbate things like gentrification or displacement.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Stephanie Fortunato: Um, are there any other methods that you think that we need to be thinking about when we're designing public spaces, and when we're thinking about placemaking as a method for bringing people together?



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Jia-Ping Lee: Yeah, I think when you design, one of the things I always say is design it incomplete, and then watch and engage and see what the community does with the space. And, then you, perhaps you can ask the community to co-design with you. Or you can leave a space blank and say, well, why don't we make it a co art wall?

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Jia-Ping Lee: And we invite the community to co-create art and we painted over or we take it off every year. It stays there for 12 months and then we get the community in again because all too often, I observe that people do things once and then it's there and it kind of is there to kind of degrade and then nothing happens.

And then they move into a new space. But what if we kept making spaces dynamic. What if it, it is fluid, you know, in that sense.

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Stephanie Fortunato: And that's what real places are, right. They evolve over time and change. And so I liked that. I liked that commitment to sort of long-term stewardship. Um, and I think that is part of the transition that we're seeing when we're thinking about placemaking, thinking about public spaces as completely blank slates, and this idea of place keeping. And I wondered what you thought of this concept of place keeping?

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Jia-Ping Lee: Well I think place keeping or place management is very worthwhile and it needs to be done. So, you know, if you think about keeping a space sacred so that, you know, like if it's a church, you keep the place sacred, right. Which means that it's always a safe place for people to come and convene with God.

And if you kept that concept or, you know, you kept that intent to other spaces and say, what would sacred mean in this space? Which part of the space could we not um, disturb because some of it is sacred in terms of memory, in terms of heritage? And what are other parts that we could then play around with?

You know, um, I've observed, management is not best practiced in Malaysia. We love building things. We love coming up with good things that are new. And then two years on, three years on, then things start to degrade and then there's not much of a maintenance there, or people just give up because there's also not enough of an educational programme out there to say, this is why it's important to respect the place.

So I think when you place keep, you need to also involve the community and build pride. I feel that places that do not have a good place keeping system are places that often feel unsafe because the community has um, is not invested in it.

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Stephanie Fortunato: And I hear in that so many systems that are, that are present in, in every person's life, but in public spaces as well. And making that long-term commitment to education to civic engagement, thinking about these projects, not just as one and done, which I agree. That's not just a problem in Malaysia.

I think that's sort of a universal problem is that you can aggregate the resources to get something going, but it is very hard to then keep up a dedicated level of support for public spaces.



Jia-Ping Lee: Yeah.

Stephanie Fortunato: And it requires that relationship that you've built with the community. So I appreciate the way that you're, you know, that you are approaching that from the beginning, right.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Um, but of course, talking about Malaysia in the, in the country there, this episode will air in a few weeks. Um, but we are recording it in a moment when the country is still impacted by the global pandemic and the coronavirus. So what is going on there right now? If you could just give us a little context.

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Jia-Ping Lee: Yeah, so it's a very strange time because not only are we in a lockdown, we've had several lockdowns and on top of that, we've also got a government in flux. And so we are in a state of emergency, which means that parliament cannot, cannot meet.

So it's basically the de facto government making all the decisions, right. And some of them have not been that great uh, in terms of cities. So I think what has happened now is that we're seeing a rise in people harming themselves. We're seeing a rise in domestic violence. Um, everybody is too focused on keeping the majority safe that they're not counting – they're not even looking at the bigger picture to say, well, you know, there's one portion, one part of society that's safe. But what happens when you talk about mental health?

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Stephanie Fortunato: I know there's so much um, tragedy amidst these decisions to, to try and keep people from spreading the disease, right. I'm sorry to hear that that is, um, happening there. And of course, I'm interested in the arts and cultural sector um, and how they're responding to this crisis.

So, do you see, you know, work changing? Do you see the use of public spaces evolving? What is happening there?

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Jia-Ping Lee: Well, so we have a lot of performing artists in dire straits at the moment because they can't perform. So they've taken to performing in Clubhouse, they've taken to doing videos, but the problem is that, you know, a lot of it is not paid work, right. And a lot of them are too proud to kind of beg, um, and they, they shouldn't have to.

And so, it's very good now that Clubhouse has at least a monetised avenue for artists to collect money. But it's a small step. I've just learned that the foundation that uh, used to fund us, the Yayasan Hasanah has started to fund musicians to play in vaccination centres, which I think is a brilliant idea, um, it's mostly just instrumental music because they all have to wear their masks, right. So, I think some people are, you can see them already saying, right, you know, we can't let the situation go on. We have to do something.

So there is a collective awareness that amongst the foundations, amongst the government agencies that look at creative arts to do something about it. So I think



people are starting to wake up from their 'Oh, what are we going to do? What's going on? What's happening?' and this state of flux. I think people are starting to be able to kind of surf the flux, if I may use that term.

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Stephanie Fortunato: I think that's a great way to describe that. (laughs)
I love the musicians at the vaccines sites though. Like talk about building in, designing in hope uh, in that moment.

Jia-Ping Lee: Isn't it great?

Stephanie Fortunato: And I, you know, actually, in thinking about that, thinking about, you know, your own placemaking work, what are some of the methods that you're using now to engage communities that when you can't have that meal around the table, you know, how are you bringing people together?

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Jia-Ping Lee: Yeah. So, um, I've set up the Placemaking Malaysia group, and it's under the auspices of the Malaysian Institute of Planners. And what we're trying to do is use collective voices to start educating planners and those that work in local government to consider placemaking, uh, as a viable inclusion into their everyday work.

So one of the things we've been doing is we've just created this Inclusive City series, um, of which we basically invited those that are involved in teaching those on the neurodiversity spectrum – the autism spectrum, and how do we make cities better for them, right. So, um, from some Tempatico's point of view is that I'm purely doing education and awareness work. So I talked to a lot of university students, I'm working with heritage groups to say, how can we then boost up the educational content of heritage work and preservation work?

Um, so everything is all created online. I'm also working with STIPO, who are based in Amsterdam to create handbooks, to look at creating handbooks for placemakers. So all of this is happening in the digital's place. Unfortunately, you know, I mean, I would love to go out there, but yeah, you know, we get arrested if we step out and, you know, start talking to strangers.

Stephanie Fortunato: Well, we don't want that!

Jia-Ping Lee: No, that makes it hard, right?

Stephanie Fortunato: Number one barrier. (laughs)

Jia-Ping Lee: Yes, yeah.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Stephanie Fortunato: Well, I know we have to focus, but I want to ask about this. So in thinking about how do you design cities for people on the autism spectrum – cities are so stimulating, what are some of the things that you're piloting? What are you, what are you hearing?



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Jia-Ping Lee: So, one of the things that came out from that discussion, was that the local government and the planners immediately jumped on playgrounds, because there's a lot of park spaces. And a lot of times parks are due for renewal, like certain areas or parks get renewed.

And so one of the things that I'm going to bring on the table with my team is, could we look at having a competition to design playgrounds that could include those on the autism spectrum, right. And also we spoke about how is there a quiet places, or could we do a map of quiet places that people can go? And the next stage would be, could we then lobby for trains to have lower lighting and less noise?

So I think it's the start of a conversation. And I think that from here we can then migrate to, or even expand for those that are less abled, because the city is really not friendly for those who are less abled. And there's all of these other issues. I think that, you know, placemaking work is never done. There's always something that pops up and it pops up in the strangest places with people. And, you know, we talk about serendipity and it really is, you know, when the time is right for that idea to come, it just comes in droves.

So as soon as I hit the autism button, everything, you know, then came together. It was like, you know, people were really excited and they were, planners were saying, oh my goodness, you know, we've ignored this group of community for so long. And you know, we really, we feel really bad about it. Let's see what we can do.

And then to marry that with the design community, I think that this is a huge collaborative potential for them to design something that is simple yet effective. So yeah, I think I'm excited about that and, and I think it's time to get everybody out of their funk from all of this lockdown.

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Stephanie Fortunato: I agree, I agree. I mean, I think, you know, what those playgrounds, like one of the things is that it won't just be people who have autism who will enjoy those playgrounds, right. That's for everyone.

Jia-Ping Lee: Yes.

Stephanie Fortunato: And so if we can think about placemaking as caretaking for community, I feel like we could apply that same kind of approach to the mental health crisis that is unfolding right now into some of the other, you know, challenging social issues that, that COVID has unfortunately forced us to reckon with the new ways.

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Jia-Ping Lee: Yeah. So I, I just, um, basically, uh, one of my colleagues in Hong Kong had this competition to design public toilets. And that was one of the, my key thing to kind of solve was public toilets that were safe. Because –

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Stephanie Fortunato: Jia-Ping, this is one of my biggest challenges. I am, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt, but this is a huge part of my conversations. Yes. Every, every week. So, so tell me more, tell me more. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt.



[00:31:25]

Jia-Ping Lee: No, no, no. I'm glad you're excited because I think that, you know, people are too precious about toilets. I don't know what it is. And what's even more urgent is that a lot of old shophouses do not have working toilets. And then you compound this with old shop lots that have been turned into living quarters for the migrant workers.

And there's uh, so where you could fit normally five people in this shophouse, they're fitting 20 people in the shop house. And can you imagine 20 people without a working toilet, right.

Stephanie Fortunato: Oh gosh, oh.

Jia-Ping Lee: Yeah, so we spend millions of dollars trying to clean up the river and trying to clean up and manage the affluence. And then what do we do? We forget that, you know, there are a huge number of people in the city who have no access to toilets.

Stephanie Fortunato: It's like the building blocks, right? I mean that, that's the basic need in any, in any community. Wow.

Jia-Ping Lee: Correct, yeah.

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Stephanie Fortunato: I mean, it's amazing actually, to it, you know, I think that we're all hyper aware of our need to wash hands right now. And so that access to water and to public toilets and, you know, thinking about the other pieces of sanitation and communities, that really is where we should almost always be starting and then layering in, uh, from there.

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Jia-Ping Lee: Yeah. I think, you know, there's all of this focus on smart cities. I mean, I really don't, I can't relate to smart cities if we're having toilet issues and sanitation issues. So, you know, unless we can have a smart toilet that solves all these problems, then yay, you know, I'm all for smart cities. But at the moment, I think that smart cities are just bells and whistles. But you know, they're covering other things that are much more vital.

Stephanie Fortunato: Our basic needs. (laughs)

Jia-Ping Lee: Yes! Like, you know, can we have places where people can buy food that's affordable? Can we allow NGOs to go in and set up food trucks to give away food rather than sell food? You know, all of these things. And it's almost like where we're regressing as a society. Um, we haven't solved much of the issues out there.

And one of the things that's the beauty about placemaking, is that it gives a window to everyone because placemaking is not rocket science. It's about, you know, as a human being, what do you see you can do? What can you contribute in this society? And you can go and do it, even if it's just as simple as writing a letter um, to say, can we have this to, you know, fundraising for food distributions to those who are in need.

And I think the young generation are so much more aware of their own power. I'm really, really optimistic about self-organised placemakers.



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Jia-Ping Lee: Um, four years ago I put together a, a landscaping gardening activists – urban farming activists, together with Think City and KL City Hall. And they've managed to set up this farm called Kebun-Kebun Bangsar, along, underneath electron, electric pylons. And in three years it has, it's now become self-sustaining in terms of funding. And they've just announced that they're giving away 40,000 ringgit of their collected funds to feed the poor. And so this is just amazing. This is what groundswell movements do or self-organised communities do.

They, I mean, they've collected all this money from donations of people visiting the park and selling, you know, feed for their animals.

And they're using this money from what they've collected to give back. So they've been, you know, since the last two years, they've been giving all their food – the vegetables are fresh vegetables to homes and communities in need, and now they're giving money and that just blows my mind.

[00:35:22]

Stephanie Fortunato: It's such a great collaboration, right? From an introduction, from a connection that you were able to make. And it's just amazing how that sense of belonging and you know, wanting to share, can infuse really a whole action there.

Jia-Ping Lee: Yeah. There's hope. That's what I mean by there's always hope, right?

Stephanie Fortunato: Yes. And that's what we need. I have to say that when I first read that sentence, I was like, I want that. I want hope in every place I go, you know, I want to experience joy and optimism about what's possible and, and certainly your work, um, and, and what you do to bring communities together, to think about how they can bring their whole selves to a room and then how they can really find small ways that can change their neighbourhoods, their, their places around them. That seems to me some of the keys to thinking about the evolution of our cities post pandemic um, and I wonder if you have any projections for our future cities?

[00:36:22]

Jia-Ping Lee: Yeah. So I refer again to SDGs and how they have a grand vision of leaving no one behind. And I feel that it's not just about leaving no one behind, it's about leaving no one and no living thing, no living being behind. Because the whole crisis that we are now facing in terms of the climate crisis, as well as crisis in cities, is because we have disconnected ourselves from everything. And because when we disconnect, then we say, well, whatever I do has no consequence. And what we've seen is all of this disconnect has led us to this crisis. So I want to really then tell people, actually, everything you do has a consequence.

So be very mindful of what you do and educate yourself as much as possible, you know? And there's so much out there that you can educate yourself and also empowering yourself.

[00:37:18]

Stephanie Fortunato: Do you find that you bring that educational perspective into your branding work that you're doing to help shift culture?



[00:37:28]

Jia-Ping Lee: Absolutely. You know, whenever I go into a corporate place or I have a corporate client, one of the first things I'd say is, okay, what's your ESG statement? And, you know, what do you give back in terms of the corporation, because that's how you attract the next generation of talent. Um, so I do that subtly, but I always have to say, I understand everyone needs to make a profit because, you know, if you're not making a profit, then you shouldn't be in business. So there's always, again, the gentle balance.

And it's about a place of non-judgment where you kind of bring the C-suites through to say, don't do too grandiose a programme, just start with little things, you know? So I had one client who started with making sure that the female employees could wear pants, right. It just started with something as simple as that. Or they could just get rid of uniforms altogether and people could just wear what they wanted.

And from that mindset change came, oh, let's just take over the whole, the whole square uh, we'll take it over from the municipal council. And so we will manage it. We will maintain it and we will clean it, right?

Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah. Real corporate responsibility.

Jia-Ping Lee: Yeah. And it starts with something really small, but once they can see how easy it is to change, then they think, oh, well, the next step doesn't seem so hard, right?

Stephanie Fortunato: Yup. And that leadership, right, doesn't come just from the top of those C-suites, it has to come from the employees who want to wear pants to work! Something simple as that. (laughs)

Jia-Ping Lee: Yes.

[00:39:05]

Stephanie Fortunato: No, I mean, I just think, Jia-Ping, you really must spend a lot of time sort of balancing the economics of your work and your client's goals with your deep understanding of what communities want and need to thrive. I've really appreciated your perspective on the possibilities for really creating hope. Um, and that hope that can extend beyond just your city but throughout the world. So thank you for that.

[00:39:35]

Jia-Ping Lee: Oh, most welcome. And, you know, I hope that this recording inspires someone else. And then the hope just snowballs from there, right. That's the most one can hope for.

[00:39:45]

Stephanie Fortunato: Thank you so much, Jia-Ping. Listeners, if you want more, check out www.thethreebells.net to find external references and other resources linked to this episode and to Jia-Ping's work, but first stick around for a conversation between myself and Adrian Ellis, as we explore the key takeaways and actionable ideas from this conversation.

[00:40:06]

MUSIC TRANSITION



[00:40:11]

Stephanie Fortunato: Hello, Adrian.

[00:40:13]

Adrian Ellis: Hello.

Stephanie Fortunato: How are you doing today?

[00:40:15]

Adrian Ellis: Stephanie, I am very well. And uh, I have just listened to a fascinating conversation that you had, and I am ready to talk about it.

[00:40:25]

Stephanie Fortunato: That's great. Yeah, it was, Jia-Ping Lee has such an interesting career and such a compelling voice. And so what, what did the interview – what, what are some of the things that it brought up for you?

[00:40:36]

Adrian Ellis: Well, first of all, it brought a very vivid memory of her. The first time, the first time I came across Think City was, we did some work with the organisation that spawned it, which is Khazanah, in Kuala Lumpur. This is probably, I don't know, about five or six years ago and I hadn't come across Think City.

And we were doing some plan on a big public space, a park in the centre of the city and they were working with uh, Think City on the community engagement exercise. And I thought, wow, this is incredibly sophisticated. And it was indeed sophisticated. And it was one of their first projects in Kuala Lumpur after having sort of established Think City in its methodology in Georgetown.

And so, uh, and I looked at some of their literature and thought, wow, this is, this is really interesting. So, we invited her to the GCDN convening in Singapore in 2019, and she gave a great account, but I remember the next day having coffee with her and her telling me that Khazanah had done a pivot with respect to basically Think City's agenda and the extent to which it needed to work on income generation – a predictable dilemma.

And uh, I think that she was thinking, well, I'm here to do a particular form of work rather than sort of raise consulting fees. So she was already, I think, thinking of some of the ideas that have, you know, that she has now been working on for the intervening few years. And so it was really interesting hearing how, how that developed.

[00:42:06]

Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah, I was unfamiliar with Jia-Ping's work before this interview cause I had missed that convening unfortunately, and I found it really fascinating the way that she had applied so many of the same ideas about how to create inclusive community spaces, no matter what the setting was that she was working, whether it was government or, or her own consulting firm, that she was really thinking about how to create spaces in which people were on equal footing and could bring their whole selves to, to the room to be able to make change.



And actually in thinking about how we make change, that is something I wanted to talk to you about, this idea that she brought to the room about hope. And do you think it is possible for us to design hope into these public processes?

[00:42:55]

Adrian Ellis: I do actually, and I don't think I've thought about it terribly hard until I heard her. I think the vocabulary is unusual. There's nothing wrong with it being unusual. I think it's quite arresting and I find it completely sort of, um, completely persuasive.

Stephanie Fortunato: I, you surprise me.

[00:43:13]

Adrian Ellis: I surprise myself.

Stephanie Fortunato: Uh, I have to say I did not expect that from the skeptic.

Adrian Ellis: Well, yeah, it's a bit like strategic plan, you know, there are people that go through these strategic planning processes and you look at them and they're, they're sort of looking with a glazed and bored look, and you realise that the reason is they do not believe in the possibility of change.

And so they think that the discussions about futures are a complete waste of time because there isn't an alternative future. And if you don't believe that you have any agency, either individually or collectively, what the hell is the point of going through a planning process in which you're trying to, you know, invent alternative futures?

Well, I think there's something similar about, about hope in a community planning process. Why would you go into a community planning process and waste time, money, who knows, and emotional reserves, if you didn't believe in the possibility of an alternative, more benign scenario, whatever that scenario is.

So I think that actually without the hope and the possibility of change and the sense of agency that it brings, then community planning has no sort of real purchase on, on people's minds. And what she talked about implicitly was some of the conditions that you need to create in order for people to be in the right state of mind to think intelligently and optimistically about the future.

And one of those was clearly trust. And I thought that it was fascinating the way she, she spoke about trust. I mean, in consulting, if there isn't trust between the consultant and the consultee, life is hell, because everybody's suspicious, they're going back to the contract. They're thinking, you know, why is this guy doing this and not that, instead of them thinking about, collectively about the problem. It's, it's the same in community planning. Except the dynamics are probably more complicated because there are more parties. So how do you create trust? How do you manufacture something like trust, which is, which is very volatile and easily destroyed, et cetera.

And, and her answer was A) it takes a while, but B) food, you know, build a relationship before you inject substance into it. And we have to remind ourselves of that because everybody feels so pressured and timelines are so pressured that building in to projects, the timetable and the resources to build trust is, is sort of, totally easily forgotten when you're putting together time sheets and putting together, you know, critical path timetable and all the rest of it.



[00:45:40]

Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah. As you're saying, with the resources side of things, you know, clearly Jia-Ping found that she needed to work in a different context because the resources had changed and that structure can make it hard to really keep hope at the centre of the conversation because it is aspirational, but it can sometimes be up against the reality of not having the resources to be able to complete the vision as community members may have projected.

[00:46:10]

MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:46:15]

Adrian Ellis: Another thing, I, I'm not, I'm not sure where this goes, but the ESG framework that she referenced, I think is potentially very important uh, and is coming up in conversations more and more frequently.

Stephanie Fortunato: Tell me more about that.

Adrian Ellis: Well, you know, the background is its environmental, social and governance framework, and it's a framework that is increasingly adopted in financial reporting and in reporting mostly in the private sector.

But I think it's spilling over um, uh, basically, it's capitalism's way of trying to self-adjust and say that we have environmental responsibilities, we have community responsibilities, et cetera. And in the land of contracts and metrics, we need to report out on these. So alongside, you know, our financial returns, we've got to give an account of ourselves: what we're doing environmentally, what we're doing socially and their value.

Apart from the intrinsic value of companies, thinking more intelligently about their responsibilities is that it provides some sort of standard accounting mechanism or standard way of reporting out um, so that you can basically compare things. And the question is, is this relevant to not-for-profits in general and the cultural sector in general should a cultural institution whose responsibilities are usually defined by their mission and in their bylaws, et cetera? Should they be reporting out more generally and systematically about their environmental, social, and governance uh, responsibilities and how they dispatch them?

The short answer is yes, we all think they should, but the longer answer is okay, and then what? And what the ESG framework does is create at least the possibility of not having to spend the next 20 years, like, fumbling around trying to develop your own KPIs, but adopting a framework that creates a sort of dialogue and compatibility, not just within the cultural sector, but beyond it. Beyond the not-for-profit sector into a sort of global accountability. And that's what that's about. And I think it's a, I think it's kind of interesting idea. And you know, it's certainly a timely one. So I was very interested that she had picked up on that too.

[00:48:25]

Stephanie Fortunato: It reminded me a little bit of what Diane Ragsdale was talking about in terms of economics, aesthetics and ethics, and thinking about the applications



for cultural institutions and, and being honest about the decisions that they weren't being – that were being made.

[00:48:38]

Adrian Ellis: Yeah.

Stephanie Fortunato: And so I think what you're suggesting is that there's a possibility of taking that framework and creating some standardisation. I wonder though, that is actually realistic across time and place?

Adrian Ellis: Well, I know she's had something interesting to say about that too, which is, you know, start modestly.

I think that sometimes we're so intimidated by, you know, the perfect answer that we don't – we're too embarrassed to fumble a bad one, or fumble a modest one. And she gave great modest example of a company where their first act was to ensure that it was okay for women to wear pants. That was a small victory, but you could build on that.

[00:49:23]

Stephanie Fortunato: This is like one of those strategic planning tricks, or – I don't want to say tricks, but the idea of having a, an early and easy win baked into the strategic planning process, that way people can feel like, yes, we're making progress right away, right? And sort of that idea of incremental change as empowering the community to take responsibility and accountability for the, the end goal.

So I think you're right. I think, you know, it's good to have these baby steps towards bigger, more ambitious goals. And I think, you know, also – and I'm going to talk about public toilets again, but you know, that is one of those big ideas that actually does need to be baked into all sorts of all sorts of placemaking projects.

But can be a real win, right? It's such a very tangible way of showing that, that there is change happening on the ground.

[00:50:19]

Adrian Ellis: Uh, yeah, absolutely. And it does sort of bring up the issue of public spaces for whom, which is another thing. And it's one that as a sort of old white male, it's quite easy to be highly unsensitised to the sort of privileged old white male. In other words, well, these spaces are pretty comfortable for me, I don't really have a problem.

Well, they were probably designed by somebody like me, for somebody like me. So I think that the, the idea that we approach planning and placemaking through a completely different lens of, for whom and what are the things that make that space, not just acceptable, but enjoyable and comfortable and uh, expansive for a far, far different demographic than the people who are necessarily currently using or probably designed it. And that includes the number of toilets. It includes, you know, all sorts of things that we could list very easily, but are not currently in, you know, the planning framework.

Stephanie Fortunato: Defining success by really thinking about basic needs.

Adrian Ellis: For whom.

[00:51:30]



Stephanie Fortunato: For whom, that's right. And thinking about values, I think it's like, you know, it's the, it's defining success by values which is something that I think we're hearing from almost everyone that we've interviewed through this podcast.

[00:51:42]

Stephanie Fortunato: And I think really starts to talk about the way that personal lived experience does have a new perch in these processes. And so whether it's thinking about your own experience, right, and the bias that you might be bringing to the situation and sort of checking that from the beginning and, or thinking about who's missing from those conversations.

I think there's a hyper-awareness now that's really valuable and it will result in better public spaces – public spaces that, that do feel welcoming and have a sense of inclusivity that, that perhaps we haven't experienced in our cities in the past.

[00:52:25]

Adrian Ellis: I very much agree. And I think that her emphasis on the personal is extremely interesting because it's a way, not of sort of injecting subjectivity into a discussion which is otherwise objective, but the pointing out that what people pretend is objective, is not objective. It's the rarefication or the formalisation of one group's perspective on a situation and the language sort of disguises that and neutralises that.

So, when you assert different personal perspectives, what you're really trying to do is just broaden the lens a bit, because it's already been personalised. You're just sort of, introducing – not subjectivity versus objectivity, but the degree of inter-subjectivity about it.

And that's not only okay, you need that perspective in order to sort of jolt us into looking at things afresh. So, she has absolutely baked that into her approach. She's not the first, but she's one of the people that I've come across who've, um, very confidently asserted the personal needs to inform decision-making, and the vocabulary the personal needs to inform it in a way that it doesn't currently.

[00:53:37]

Stephanie Fortunato: Such empathy, such compassionate way of looking at any project and any community that you might be approaching. Do we have anything else, any other key takeaways that we want to get into here?

[00:53:52]

Adrian Ellis: So the only other thing that I just noticed – which I hadn't really focused on, was just how wild her operating environment is. So, COVID is raging and I know you recorded that a couple of weeks ago, but I looked up yesterday, the figures are pretty spectacular still alas, and there is a political crisis of real significance uh, in which parliament has been suspended and it's unlikely to be convened in the foreseeable future and that's having an immediate impact on governance, the quality of decision making um, the speed at which vaccines are being distributed, et cetera.

So, you know, in the context of her comments about hope, she has a great expression, which was um, uh, surfing the flux, which is just, you know, how, how are you coping? Well, we're just sort of improvising in this pretty extraordinary environment. It's not one that I had, I'd really focused on, but it does underscore, I think, that the long tail of COVID is going to be rattling around for a while uh, with all sorts of uh, ramifications that



are very different in different countries. And, and what is quote, “normal”, unquote, is still very unclear.

[00:54:59]

Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah, I was a little taken aback, I have to say, listening to Jia-Ping talk about the situation on, in Malaysia right now with COVID, you know, you realise that we're all in different places coming out of this and, hearing, you know, about the, that some of the crises that is causing among the populations and the instability and the mistrust of government.

There's so many vulnerabilities in that situation. So I agree with you. I think, you know, having hope be the rallying cry, it's, it's critically important if we're going to have a new normal that is better, that is, you know, more values driven, it is more about people. And you know, the personal experience and how we can use that understanding to imagine a better world.

[00:55:49]

Stephanie Fortunato: I know that's incredibly optimistic, Adrian, and probably makes you roll your eyes. But I think it is possible when there are practitioners like Jia-Ping who are reminding us of the possibilities of, really rigorous and focused attention to that, the goal of hope and our own role and responsibility in fostering that in our communities.

Adrian Ellis: I agree.

Stephanie Fortunato: Well, Adrian, thank you so much for speaking with me today about Jia-Ping and introducing me to her work. And I can't wait to talk to you again soon.

Adrian Ellis: I'm looking forward to it. Take care.

[00:56:24]

Stephanie Fortunato: Uh, thank you so much, Adrian. And thank you again, Jia-Ping. The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting and supported by The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network. The podcast and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net.

And if you haven't already done so, please subscribe to our feed and rate us on your podcast listening platform of choice. My name is Stephanie Fortunato. Thank you so much for being with us today. And I look forward to joining you again soon.

[00:56:53]

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