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## Episode Information

Topic: Urban Design Processes

Hosts: Ian M. Cook and Kate McGinn

Guest: Florian Streng

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## Transcript

[Music]

### Episode Introduction (0:12 – 1:40)

[Dial tone]

Ian: Kate, do you ever think about how everything is put together?

Kate: That's almost all I ever think about.

Ian: Like why this microphone is shaped the way it shaped?

Kate: Monthly.

Ian: Like why the city is designed the way it is?

Kate: Daily.

Ian: Like why we put together the structure of this podcast the way we did?

Kate: Literally my every waking minute.

Ian: Good, because I decided to reach out to our audience and organise some participatory planning sessions looking into how we put the podcast together and seeing what they want on this podcast, Urban Arena, a podcast about sustainable and just cities.

Kate: That's what you were up to this summer? I thought you told me you went the summer sleeping in a hammock and swimming in the Danube.

Ian: I can multitask Kate. Let me open the envelope with the result of this process.

Kate: What did it say?

Ian: Oh, it was terrible. Actually, it turns out our audience wants us to design a podcast with Less Ian and more Kate.

Kate: Really?

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Ian: Yeah, they said they want us to put together a podcast on urban design thinking processes in which, and I quote, “Kate interviews someone like Florian Streng, a man who thinks about process design, urban research, spatial strategies and co-planning in neighbourhoods and cities.

Kate: That is a very, very specific request.

Ian: Well, the audience is always right. You better go and do it then.

Kate: On it!

[Music]

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### Arriving at Urban Design (1:40 – 5:30)

Kate: Florian, thank you so much for joining us at the Urban Arena podcast. I would love to start at the very, very beginning, and you have an undergraduate degree in economics, but then you kind of took a path into urban design. Would love to learn how you made that transition and what was the point in your life when you became interested in urban design?

Florian: Um, first, great to be here. Well, that's that's far back. Actually, my first degree was not economics, it was economic psychology. So it was a psychology degree. But we didn't have the clinical stuff but we focussed on systemic issues on how people interact in the business world. And I did focus on the economic side more than the, let's call it small business side. So, what I was interested in then was already systemic conditions and consequences of different things and how they interact. So I looked at behavioural economics and how people do not always act as rational as they hope and how that, yeah, what consequences that cost by these flaws and this biases. So that's where I started. That was my undergrad, which I finished 2009-2010.

And then I left my studies and I'm not sure maybe some of you know, leaving university, but knowing that you won't be working in that one particular job, that you interested in other fields and you're interested in working at, fields that are in between different fields, and so I started looking at actually renewable energies and I started looking at sustainable issues in society, so that was not really what I was trained for. But I started working in a project around electric mobility. These mobility things led me to cities and then cities going back to my initial motivation for this part of psychology, in cities, I looked at the systemic issues, how different areas can counteract, how they can influence. And then through mobility, yeah, I stumbled into urban issues and started making my own small projects there.

Kate: I think this gives me a good kind of understanding of your path to urban design, which is a quite distinctive one, I think, and kind of following the trend of your distinctive way of getting into urban design, I also think you have quite a distinctive understanding of what urban design is meant for and how you understand the city as a concept.

Florian: That's a good point, and I think every one of us wears his or her own glasses and thereby you bring your own perspective. And when I think about, and I aim at, making cities for people, then my particular glasses, it's always thinking in processes. It is not so much thinking of a specific form of a specific outcome, how an architect would like to give shape to a neighbourhood to a block to a house sometimes. I'd rather be the one who, who likes to contribute what kind of process with, whatever specific outcome then later might be there, but what process can bring the different stakeholders together? What process can ensure participation? As good as we can achieve it in this certain project and how to have as many voices heard as possible, and for that, I, together with my very small firm, with my two colleagues who actually do, are architects, together, yeah we think about projects as to be process, people, form, all that together. That's maybe my approach.

### Potsdam Example (5:31 – 12:26)

Kate: Mm. Mm. Would love to switch kind of to maybe more practical work. You worked on a city planning project in Potsdam. Could you expand on what- what the city project was and what your role in that was?

Florian: Yeah, of course. I was asked to support the city in a, in a certain development project in one suburb. That's the, who of you know is Potsdam, might know that it's a rich city. It's a super beautiful, historic inner city. It's maybe, I think they call themselves sometimes like city of the rich and the beautiful. But then I have one planner and she was working there, I think, for 40 years in administration until last year. And she said about the suburb that we were working in. So if Potsdam is the city of the rich and the beautiful, then definitely we are working with the beautiful here because it's the most disadvantaged neighbourhood. It is home to 9000 inhabitants. It is former GDR prefab settlement, so basically housing blocks go out into the landscape in the green. There are some advantages to it, but it's suburb like a city in the city, separate for itself.

As I said, the socially most weak residents of the city live there. And then this city thought about, well, let's renovate houses. Let's rethink also public spaces here. Let's invest something and make it better. And I really think that administration here has the goal to improve something for the people. And I was asked to support in designing a process for that, to work closely and to co-design closely with very different stakeholder groups present there, as you might imagine. In this kind of context there's many of also social enterprises being active there, but also, of course, not only working with the stakeholders would be interesting, but also working with the residents themselves, including them in a process that was kind of the starting point two and a half years ago, organising a co-planning conference. And ever since, over the last two and a half years, I've been from time to time. I hopped into that suburb again and tried to be partner for this process of including as many as possible in these planning efforts.

Kate: Mhmm, mhmm. So, to the process that you kind of help develop in Potsdam was this multi-stakeholder process to urban design?

Florian: Definitely. Definitely the one responsible on the city side for that kind of steering the process is, well, I think the administration is doing a very good job there, but it's also super complex. So I was maybe a little bit of the creative outsider coming in and then, yeah, designing and facilitating and then also moderating like a process that brings together these different groups discussing first, of course, the target, the vision. And it

was me and a team then bringing in certain methods of co-planning, of collaboration, thinking of tools, of how we can kind of raise the right questions, how we can reframe and how you also bring together then 50 to 60 people who most of them are planning amateurs, but nevertheless great experts in their fields, experts about the suburb, about this area, how you bring them together in a productive manner so that in the end, first there's a vision, then from the vision, and that's then the plan- planning logic of the city, from the vision, they derive the targets, from the targets, they went into measures, of course, measures they calculated how much might that cost, they went into the budgeting, and then back and forth, and it is us then sometimes helping them to reframe also the different scales of the questions not to get lost into, now we have these 56 sub-projects and that they together will make a great process, and sometimes it's also necessary to to kind of jump back and ask the big question again and see if that still runs in the right direction. And as it, properly as you can hear, and yeah, it's a complex planning project. And sometimes, of course, we were in danger to get lost in administrative activities.

Kate: As I think all, all projects have a tendency to to fall victim to. But I wanted to shed some more light on this process from the point of view of a resident of this suburb. So say I was a resident of the suburb, how would the city of Potsdam, in the making of this project, interact with me?

Florian: [Laugh] very good, you put your finger in the wound. I have to say, although I really like that project, and I am totally sure that we could contribute some valuable methods and some process thinking into this design planning process, I am also aware that, well, on this inclusion element on this aspect of participation, I think it was not as complete as I would have wished for. So that first. So how would the city have interacted with you? Well, we had some- the most participation that was part of this project, I have to say, is with probably advocacy planning style. So we had in these, let's say, 50 participants in one of these planning conferences, maybe only five to max 10 were residents themselves. Most were people who do social work in that area and kind of were there to speak for the citizens, for the residents to take their perspective, but out of their professional lives, working there every day.

So that was part of kind of the element of participation, but for the residents themselves, that was your question, well, through- um through, how to call them, different offices working their social work enterprises being present there, they would tell their residents they interact with that this conference's happening, and they would invite them to come, but unfortunately there was not an invitation to everyone. There was not a letter being put in the letterbox of every one of the 9000 and invited them in. But it was rather like a planning conference with a lot of professionals being present and only a few residents that I have to admit that. Does that answer your question a little bit?

### Challenges to Resident Participation in Urban Design (12:27 – 21:48)

Kate: No, it does. It does. My follow up question is why? So I would assume that I think there are people within that project who had a desire to have a lot of residents involved. But were there some some challenges in accomplishing that or why wasn't that executed upon?

Florian: Let's be, let's be honest about this. So it was not our own activist project, but in a way we tried, as holistic as possible, as inclusive as possible, but to be a service provider

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for the city, that we have to admit. And I'm totally sure that, I mean, this is great people, but if you look at the whole, I think every actor or every stakeholder has his or her inner logic. So if the city, which is famous for other things than this suburb. But it has this problematic suburb, the city looks at that one to improve situation there. The housing companies who, luckily most of the housing estate in this area is public so it is not to be managed by the means of max profit, but of course, they have the planning logic and they they want to have a smooth process.

So then it's us coming in trying to knead this together, which is also the, especially then trying to include the citizens side the residents side, but we can propose let's make a real public, a real resident focussed planning conference but it might just not fit the planning process of the city then. Also, that's also that we all have to acknowledge if we open up, if we ask the open questions to everyone there, then we would have to have a platform to deal with the answers. We couldn't just ask the question and say thank you and then jump back onto the, maybe agile, super effective planning process and just ignore what they told us. So it is this intermediate thing that we try to include as many voices as possible, without that we are too deconstructive to the higher means in the eyes of the city administration. That's some reflections about that. Sorry, that I can't be more precise. It's just, it is, it's complex. I can't put it into better words. Sorry.

Kate: No, no, no, no. I think this is that's a really appropriate answer and really interesting to hear. I would also think, you know, if I, if I were an urban planner really trying to get residents involved, I think there's an issue of just efficiency. And so I bet there's a timeline where you are running against a deadline and, you know, making the effort to really reach out to people who are going to be ultimately, you know, the recipients of this urban design process or this form or shape, reaching out to those people is, takes a lot of time and takes a lot of energy and maybe there is just the budget isn't suited for that.

Florian: It's great that you mentioned that because I wanted to mention the term of outreach participation, which of course, would be the best if we could really knock doors, if we could really start conversation, if we could, really, interact with the people that are there that, later, have to live in the consequences that are, you know, content to this planning that would be the best. But then we really would have to, and maybe that leads over to how I understand my role, or our role, very often, which is translating, translating in between the worlds. And then if, if we were to translate the whole planning process, into the residents perspective, explain everything in detail, make them first understand how it goes, understand where we are in the process, that would have to come first and then they could maybe formulate their questions, their needs, their wishes.

But that, to make it a complete, inclusive process that would, would be definitely great efforts. Unfortunately, in this process, we couldn't make it as complete as I wish to, wish it to be. But yeah, this translation role is super important and we try to make it as good as possible. And we, we work on going from one planning conference to the next, we aim and having more residents there, may be more than just 10 or 20% residents present within the participants, but it's not too easy, as you say. If it's about budgeting, if it's about a planning process with a tight timeline, then yeah.

Kate: Mm-Hmm. And so in addition to kind of this translating role that you have, I think there's another role of – and you can feel free to push back on this – but I think there's

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another role where, maybe a resident in this specific suburb of Potsdam doesn't have the same goals as the city of Potsdam itself or the environmentalist who's in charge of environmental challenges in Potsdam. So there are kind of different goals and different ambitions with some other urban design projects like that. How do you make sure that, you know, one doesn't beat out the other?

Florian: Definitely. That's totally right. To put it in my own words, and please tell me if I understood you correctly, even if we would have resources, time and everything to listen to all of the residents, these 9000 resident- residents there, they would not speak with one voice. So we would probably get 9000 voices, 5000 different wishes, most of them contradicting and then listening to the side of the officials, the organised- let's call them the organised stakeholders, might them be units of administration, housing companies, social workers, social enterprises being present there, and there's definitely different voices also sometimes pulling in different directions.

And you're totally right. We also have the department and for the environment and climate protection and the Department of the City present there, of course, pushing into the direction that, where then the housing companies would sometimes want to step back and say, well, we can't do this here in this way. So all these different voices, what did we do? going back to the very beginning of the process where we onboarded, it was the second planning conference, where we worked on a vision that we tried to have all voices, so as much as possible, the residents voices included, when we really sketched together, so to say, a vision of the suburb we've chosen. And that was also proposition by, by the city our client to to take the year 2030 and think about ideas of how, how is the city, how is this part of the city to look like in 2030?

And we came to that with a team, to this planning conference, also an illustrator, and we've chosen the the tool of real illustration, of illustrating 10 different things, 10 different angles taken onto that suburb. And these 10 different illustrations, which was, by the way, a great method of having amateurs, having non-professionals talk about it and understand it because it's there in an image and you can just discuss that image and you can discuss details of that image. And parallel to these 10 sketches, we had ten chapters of the so-called Vision of the Suburb. And so these 10 chapters for 10 different topics, these illustrations, they were in agreement of everyone in the room.

As we all know, a vision, especially if it's about 10 years from now, is unclear. Like, it doesn't tell you how to reach that goal doesn't tell you anything about the path. So then we, of course, kind of took that and then defined measures to reach that. But I think, yeah, come back to your question, I think working with illustrations, discussing images is a way of including many.

Kate: Mm-Hmm. Mm-Hmm. And makes- maybe makes it more tangible than kind of this abstract theoretical, you know, what's the purpose of the city? What, what? What should the neighbourhood look like, kind of, conversations. Absolutely. I think that makes a lot of sense. And as you said, I mean, there's- there's so many different factors and different opinions and different almost agendas, you know, involved in collaborative city development. But you know, I think the alternative where a few make the decision for many isn't the solution. So it really is about kind of, you know, working on the process of

collaborative city development and making sure that that process is genuine and thoughtful and still effective and, you know, hopefully time efficient.

Florian: I like that summary. Yeah, that's what I aim at.

### The Future of City Design (21:49 – 24:08)

Kate: If I, if I could just ask you about kind of the future of how you see cities in helping create more just and sustainable spaces, what do you think city design would look like or what do you hope it looks like in the future?

Florian: That's a good question, and maybe it doesn't come as a surprise, but if I speak of urban design, design, the term design and urban design, I understand not so much as form, but rather I understand as a verb. So the design in urban design for me is an activity. Thereby, I don't have the one pathway, of course, I don't have the one coherent idea of how that might look like, but I feel with this, that's my perspective due to how I work, but I feel that this collaborative design effort, bringing multi-stakeholder constellations onto one table into one room, I feel that is necessary.

And I have to say I have not worked with these kinds of methods, but when I heard how, how this citizen assembly, I think in France, recently came up with very ambitious goals about how to change society and how to change economy. And I mean, the tool of citizens assembly not only in France, where it was about climate, but of randomly selecting citizens, bringing them together and then setting an ambitious goal, giving them skills of collaboration, because you would have facilitators in the room, you would have planners in the room, translators so to say, holistic designers, and then letting a very mixed group of, potentially everyone, because it's randomly selected, let them discuss the big challenges and kind of the big answers that we have to give. I feel that could really be a way forward, and I really, I would love, looking at my personal professional next years to to try out the tool of citizen assembly because I think that that could be super interesting way to go. That's one thought. Maybe you have, you yourself have ideas about other methods.

### Experiments in City Development (20:09 – 31:39)

Kate: No, I think that's interesting. So I, um, I have a- I have a keen passion for product design, and it's interesting to see the kind of the similarities of how urban design thinks about issues and how, you know, a product developer would think about a certain application or certain technology to kind of cater to customer needs, right? They do a lot of AB testing. There is consumer interviews, there's consumer experiments where, where consumers, you know, use certain tools and then the the researcher and the product developer, they, they see how that consumer uses the tool. And there's a lot of kind of back and forth to to create something that is again genuinely appropriate for that consumer or for that customer.

And so I see a lot of similarities between that and how someone would use a city, a space, a neighbourhood. And that hasn't traditionally necessarily been the case, right? I think we definitely see the city still as like the static thing where you will. Then you get accustomed to it. You change as a result of the city, but the city doesn't change as a result of you. And then if you don't like it, you can leave. Or at least that's kind of, I think, how



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people currently see cities. And the fact that that doesn't need to be the case necessarily, I think, is quite a hopeful one.

Florian: Yeah, I like what you're saying because I told you I did this before I went to urban design, I did this one year of design thinking, of design methodology and thinking a lot about design and design theory and of course, also UX testing, etc. I can really connect to that. And if I want to really have a parallel to city, then it's actually maybe it's time that we established the trend of 'user' in the city and like the user of the city, not only the residents who lives there, but the user. Someone who has wishes, has needs, wants to use it, and then stepping back to that, to this kind of design approach that was mentioning over and over, including many, as many as possible in the design process, then we have to set- the user of the city has to be the co-producer as well.

And if we have this thinking of what you describe from product design, for example, then we come to super interesting things because, um actually, my- my thesis, finishing my, my second time university, I was researching about experiments in city development, about actually the activity of experimenting, And then you come to the point that you have to accept. But cities are too big, like making AB testing. We can't build the neighbourhood in this way once and in that way as a version B and then we test, the city is not a laboratory. It is not a laboratory can where we can control all other factors and make specific tests. And also, I think what is different to testing in the laboratory is, that actually, people are reactive. So even if you would, kind of, your version of the city would be wrong, people are creative, people adapt, people change what they see and what they dislike. So then we come to a point that really thinking about real experiments like laboratory style and the idea of modern, science of modernity, it doesn't really apply to cities.

But nevertheless, we should definitely – and that's how it's connected to me – we should definitely think about how can we, nevertheless, experiment in cities and then we come to temporary interventions. We come to small scale installations that we confront city dwellers with or that we even create together with the people maybe in public space and we let the people, the users interact with it and we observe, and we observe also our neighbourhoods of today. If we, we can read the kind of – even if it's the city that is never meant to be an experiment – we can read, we can make urban research and read the city as if it was to be an experiment and learn out of it. And then at the next projects that we built, even if there's not enough money to build a version A and a version B, try to learn out of what is there and improve and speak about failures also and discuss that with the people. I definitely think, yeah, we need ways to experiment more and be thoughtful about the process, once again,

Kate: Thoughtfulness is absolutely key. Yeah, yeah. And I would think that, I think, learning from other cities and their failures and their successes is another way to kind of, you know, more struggle to use the word test, but, you know, test what solutions and what mechanism and what form is useful and what is not or do you not see that? Do you think city development should be more of an independent process? You know, with with that community specifically,

Florian: I mean, we could now discuss the value of best practise research [Laughs], super nerdy discussion. No, definitely, I agree. As I think we should be thoughtful with the term laboratory because who are we to put city dwellers into a laboratory and then who is the

researcher, who is the, who's the guy organising the lab? And so I think laboratory is inadequate; tests, well, why not speaking about, yeah, the verb again, test-ing and then understanding. Yeah, even it is test to be tests like temporary interventions that we see in public space, tactical urbanism, we see testing efforts everywhere, we can kind of read them out. We can kind of try to understand them as experiments and then, def- we definitely yeah, why not understanding it as tests.

And even if like a suburb fails, even if something in a big settlement doesn't work at all, we can also try to learn from it as a failed test and then as it was never organised in a scientific manner, we would have to zoom out and think, okay, if this was a test, what was the question? What was th- what's the hypothesis? So what to learn from it and reflect about this and then translate it into your design doing of today and your future projects. Yeah, let's definitely do that. That's what we have to go, I think.

Kate: And I think there is a lot of work done by thought leaders like yourself in using these types of tools and these types of of approaches to create more just and sustainable cities. So, you know, I guess from a personal view, I am quite optimistic about kind of urban design being more participatory, being more agile, adapting and solving some of these huge climate change, social inequality, community cohesion challenges that we see today.

Florian: Yeah, that's a good, good point to mention here. Definitely.

Kate: Well, Florian, we will be tracking all your work at BAO, and we're really looking forward to kind of seeing you further shape urban design of various cities and maybe your own as well, Berlin. Thank you so much for for for chatting with us today.

Florian: Thank you very much, yeah. It was a pleasure.

[Music]

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### Post-Interview Discussion (31:40 – 35:55)

Kate: So, Ian, now that I was the podcaster, what do you think about the podcast?

Ian: I thought was great. Really interesting. Like, I know Florian met him before, and he's super nice guy and very thoughtful guy. And I think it was really nice how he was spending a lot of time really thinking about the sort of the difficulties in the limits of participation right? Because, or when he gets involved in the design process, because I think sometimes its sort of used as a word, oh we want more participation in urban design, or we want more participation in anything. But that's like just participation can mean many different things, and it's very time consuming and it's very expensive.

And sometimes I think we ask a lot of inhabitants in cities if we say, okay, we want you to be really involved in, you know, this, this and this, you know, and sometimes people may – and it's a totally legitimate thing to think to, to- believe if you're living somewhere – actually, you know what? Sometimes I want to live in a city where experts have thought things through in a meaningful way and only ask me relevant things that I actually have time to think about and be involved with and just want things to work well. That might

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not be all people, that might be some people. So I think like it's good- I really enjoyed how how he thought about like the sort of the complexities of what participation actually means.

Kate: Absolutely. And with participation, I think comes, you know, thousands or hundreds of different ideas and different desires from what you want to get out of a city or a neighbourhood. And, and again, I mean, it comes with a huge challenge of having to kind of square all those different opinions and all those different desires with one another, which is a real challenge. So I absolutely agree that this is a big problem. But, of course, the flip side where a few decide for many isn't necessarily-

Ian: No for sure. And that's why you need to think a lot about process. And that's why it's interesting to think about processing urban design, like when you bring people in, how you bring them in and all these things is super important, but not even like just relating to participation, but just in general, right? And I thought it was also very interesting thing that he's always about thinking about everything is a verb, you know, like it's like constantly doing things and that's what we always have to think about. Partly because cities aren't static as well, right? And you always have to think about how any sort of process of design fits into other moving parts which are constantly changing and constantly moving, which is like, you know, spinning lots and lots of different plates at once. But that's why it's really yeah. Yes, it is vital to have like to have people like Florian thinking through design processes and how they function at different scales and at different moments as well, and being super reflexive about it when things work, when things don't work and so on.

Kate: Absolutely. And I think that's what I really appreciated with Florian was that he was just so honest about kind of what went- what didn't go, what went well and how to improve that process for the for the next stage. Because I think for something as as vital as a city, if you're doing urban planning, you know, you have a lot of decisions to make that are going to impact a lot of people. And so I think it's hard to maybe admit failure in some ways because the consequences are just so drastic. So I did appreciate that he was kind of open about, about what worked and what didn't work and how other cities and other urban designers could learn from, from his work.

Ian: Mm-Hmm. Mm-Hmm. And thinking about like process and design, one of the things that we did start to do in terms of process and design in this podcast was ask people to give submissions, ask our listeners to give submissions, like very short sort of UrbanA correspondence, Urban Arena correspondence, and we have one more again this month. And this one- this time is going to be from Sophia Silverton and she is going to play out the podcast. But before she does, how can people get in touch with us if they have any comments and questions and if they want to be a Urban Arena correspondent, how can they get in touch with us about that as well?

Kate: Yes, you can email us through the contact form found at our website [UrbanArena.EU](http://UrbanArena.EU), or you can email us at [UrbanA@ceu.edu](mailto:UrbanA@ceu.edu). And we're also on social media. You can find us on Twitter or Instagram at the handle @arena\_urban.

Ian: Alrighty. So let's listen to Sophia.

[Music]

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### Guest Contribution (35:56 – 37:23)

Sophia: When I imagine the ideal sustainable and just city I, first of all, think about a city as a place where decision making in both public and private spheres includes environmental and social equity concerns as very important considerations. So it thinks of them as a lens that's applied on top of other issues or within other sectors, which would otherwise not consider sustainability and justice. So it becomes more intersectional in that way. I see that as being a really important part of a sustainable and just city.

I also think that a city like that would need to be quite inclusive in policymaking and make an effort to reduce barriers to participation in- in doing so, since initiatives for sustainable and just cities need to be informed by real priorities and concerns of the people living there. And finally, I think that this kind of city would be a really active and engaged one where citizens are empowered to make real change. So that's really exciting. So in summary, for my answer to what is a sustainable and just city, I see it as one where decision making silos have become more interconnected. I see it as a city that listens to its people and one that activates and empowers.

[Music]

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### Disclaimer

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