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## Episode Information

Topic: Shipping

Hosts: Ian M. Cook, Kate McGinn

Guest: Elisabeth Schober, University of Oslo

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## Transcript

[Music]

### Episode Introduction (0:11 – 2:08)

[Knocking sound]

Ian: Oh, my, what is that noise in my head?

Kate: I don't think so. I think I can hear it as well. I mean, I think it might be in my head because it is- I don't know my head is pounding I had a really, really heavy night. I am never drinking Palinka again. I don't remember what happened in the last 12 hours. I don't- I'd like to know up in the last 12 hours because it seems that we are trapped inside a metal container on a ship.

Kate: Oh my gosh. Well, this is definitely not the best situation to be in. But we are professionals and we have a podcast to make – the Urban Arena podcast about sustainable and just cities. Being trapped inside a container should not stop us.

Ian: Yeah, you're right. And now that you mention the podcast, I'm starting to remember the beginning of the evening and what went wrong. I mean, the container story started because I went to meet Elisabeth Schober-

Kate: You mean Elisabeth Schober, the associate professor at the Department of Social Anthropology from the University of Oslo?

Ian: The very one! You've heard of her, too. We met because I we went for a tour around Rotterdam Harbour. I wanted to speak to her because I want to understand how global maritime trade constrains or enables our quest for sustainable and just cities. And after I finished speaking to her then I had a couple of overpriced pints of Dutch lager. And then, yeah after, I have no idea.

Kate: Well, I don't like the overpriced bit, but at least the lager was good Dutch beer?

Ian: No, it was Heineken.

Kate: Oh well, look, we still have a recorder in your bag and we can listen and then see what happened.

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Ian: Actually you know what my my memory is slowly coming back to me. I mean, while speaking to Elizabeth, the announcements on the ships were like really annoying. They kept coming over and over again, like the tour guide announcement. Now you're looking at this, now you're looking at that, and it came in every single language, first in Dutch then in English and in German then in French. It was mad! You know what, enough for me explaining it to you. Listen to this.

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### Touring the Rotterdam Port (2:09 – 8:52)

Ian: So, Eli, welcome to the Urban Arenas' podcast, um, maybe just for those people who can't see the wonderful things we can see. Can you tell us where we are and what we're doing?

Elisabeth: Right. So we're in the centre of Rotterdam on the speedo tour boat that will take us out into the-

[Background sound of tour guide announcement]

[Ian and Elisabeth laughing]

Elisabeth: She will talk a lot over us, I can already tell. In the Port of Rotterdam- [More announcement sound] All right, so we're pottering along the port- [Announcement]. Yes, we're pottering along Rotterdam at the moment we'll be heading out to the various container ports in a bit.

Ian: And so Rotterdam famous- sort of famous old port city, and you're someone who researches ports or maritime- ma-ri-time anthropology. Um, I'm wondering like the link between ports and cities and thinking about, okay, Rotterdam, the famous old port, but I'm wondering how- how much now are ports part of cities? I mean, are we seeing the end of port cities in such where ports are central to city life?

Eli: Yes. Essentially, there's been a huge transformation is also connected to containerisation, which we can talk about in a bit. Basically, cities have increasingly become delinked from the ports that used to be much more central inside the city. So of course, you still have, for instance, recreational harbour facilities in quite a lot of places where people can have their own private boats anchored. And then, you know, so there's a lot of maritime action left in cities, but it's usually not related to cargo, basically, the larger shipping of, of the commodities that we need in our daily lives. So all of these things usually happen at ports that are further outside of the city increasingly.

There's a few exceptions in the world; Hamburg, for instance, and then also Singapore. But here in Rotterdam, as you will see, it will take us quite a while to drive out of the city. Most of the cargo action happens is actually outside of the city by now. Very few of the people working on board of the container vessels that we will see in a bit will actually even make it into the city, because they're usually stuck inside of the port because they would be primarily from Southeast Asia, so especially Filipino sailors are very popular, so- and they wouldn't necessarily get their papers in time to even leave the port. So basically, you know, they would just be stuck inside the port, maybe in a little room with

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a few computers and sort of pass the time there if they get off the ship. And so it's a very different experience from what it used to be pre container.

Ian: Sort of boring, boring in a way, if you think about it, you have these amazing port cities that we think of, we think of them being so exciting because the areas around the port where places of vice and danger, because you know, or whatever, this was romanticised because you had people from all over the world mixing in ports. But now you're seeing because of container ship, basically, sailors are kept inside a port, which is separate from the actual life of a city.

Eli: And because, you know, the ships have grown so large and are transporting so many of these containers that you see everywhere here. In essence, you need more and more space. So that's why also, it's been pushing out of the city increasingly in places like Rotterdam, but in obviously a lot of other places as well that you see this disconnection between port and city. Uh, so yeah, basically people who work on these cargo vessels are usually trapped inside of these ports that are very far away from the city by now. So they don't really affect city life in the way that they used to be.

Ian: So what's surprising to me when I when I'm looking at the dry docks that we just passed and also here these containers, and I'm sure maybe this isn't even such a large amount, but just the enormity of everything, you know. Just so much of everything is just mind blowing because you don't have any idea of that from being in the city of Rotterdam itself. Um is Europe still like a leading player in the sort of maritime trade? Or where is, you know, what's- what are the sort of the global trends in container ship movement and so on?

Eli: So basically, that's the main premise for this project called Ports that I'm going to lead from next year onwards, is also to look at how the centre of gravity is moving eastwards, so away from Europe and North America into Asia. So this is what you're seeing here is the 14th largest port in the world. It's the largest in Europe, but again, it's sort of, I mean, you can really be in awe of the dimensions that you see laid out in front of you. But once you're actually in Asia, this is still very small by comparison. So it's- the largest ports in the world are now in China, in Singapore, South Korea, and in Europe, we basically have Rotterdam as the major player, and they've got a few smaller quotation marks "ports" like Hamburg or Antwerp.

Our project also involves Piraeus, which is sort of an up-and-coming container port; and it's up and coming primarily because it was bought up by the Chinese shipping company of COSCO. And so within the last 10 years or so, they've extremely expanded their movement of containers because they've become part of the, what the Chinese call the Belt and Road Initiative. So basically, there are large scale infrastructure attempts to sort of increase the efficiency of their own trading patterns with Europe in particular. So you can see with Piraeus, in a sense, as a good example of how not only Europe is being provincialized in terms of maritime trade, but we're also being literally used by China as sort of a bridgehead in order to smooth, smooth over their own trading capacity.

So that's quite a significant shift that we've seen over the last 10-20 years happening. In the port of Rotterdam, 12 million containers are moved per year, and just looked up the statistics for Singapore and in Singapore it's 36.6 million per year. And Singapore is the second largest in the world. So you can get a measure of again, this being the largest port

in Europe, but at the same time, how much the show has already moved elsewhere in terms of container movement and the centre of gravity of the maritime industry.

### Shipping and the Environment (8:53 – 17:05)

Ian: Thinking in environmental terms, we're screwed right because global trade is just- is increasing. A lot of it isn't consumed in every year. We've seen consumer goods, which are for the most part not necess- necessities of life. So I don't know, like, um yeah, do we- if we want to actually make the world an environmentally sound place, we have to, what? End shipping?

Eli: Well, I mean, first of all, there's obviously the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of shipping, which are tremendous and the kind of- yeah the kind of fuel that's being used on board of container ships. But there's also the obvious, you know, consumer culture that is fuelling this industry that is a question to- to tackle in the future.

[Announcement]

Eli: I just read an article the other day which wa- actually written by a person in the industry, in shipping, who was complaining about how Amazon just introduced a two-hour promise to their consumers, saying, if you order food with us, we will deliver it within two hours to your doorstep.

Ian: Wow. This is- this is in which country?

Eli: This is in the United States, but of course, there's the danger and the worry now that this is a phenomenon that will spread to other places like Europe, that people expect to have their stuff delivered to their doorsteps within an extremely short timespan. And so basically this, uh, this industry person was saying, well, if we do this and if this, if this is really the trend that we're going to- towards, then we're probably going to end up destroying this planet even quicker than we all anticipate because this is not sustainable.

And yet at the same time, you know, this is- this is clearly something that Amazon and- has done their math on, that this is paying off for them, you know? And there's also clearly a desire amongst consumers to have their stuff delivered to their doorstep in such a short time fashion. So, but of course, what does that mean? You know that we assume that whatever we order is going to be coming to us in such a short time span, I mean, we are massively overlooking the ecological footprint of, of- of these practises.

[Announcement]

Eli: You know, we've talked a lot during the workshop about organic farming, urban gardening, where does your food come from? But I think the question of the supply chain is often left behind. I was part of a working group where we actually talked to supply chains as well. So that was quite interesting and sort of exchanging ideas and exchanging some names of projects that are dealing with these questions. But it's I think the biggest challenge really is how do you scale up initiatives like transporting organic food with sail ships? There's- there's a lot of- well a handful of new projects that sort of try to have organic produce delivered not via container ships, but via sort of older ways of transporting goods like, yeah, sail ships. But the issue is really, of course, how do you scale

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this up to actually feed entire cities, you know, entire populations, not just a few wealthy consumers who are willing to also pay for the price tag of having their things arrive at their doorstep in more environmentally conscious ways?

Ian: So in the very first podcast we spoke to, Orsi Lazányi, and she was involved in a cargo bike initiative where they were linking up organic farms with- local organic farms or urban gardens, or basically delivering a food boxes to people. But that's people riding cargo bikes these very, very small scale and I asked the- do you want to scale up? And she said, no, we can be copied like but like, just no way of scaling up. So I'm wondering about this question, and when we're thinking about needing to scale up and we have like, look, we can see lots of very interesting initiatives that trying to tackle um, you know, trying to be outside the mainstream economy and do something on the edge. I'm not 100% sure if they always are outside the economy, and maybe they'd like to believe so, but certainly at least at the edge of, um, the mainstream economy. But then the question is like how? Or is there anything or is any talk about trying to green um, um, you know, maritime trade? Or is it simply just not a question that ever comes up?

Eli: Well, for instance, I was at the new shipping sort of trade maritime trade conference in the last year, and there was a lot of discussions there happening around CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. So this is an issue that's very much on the agenda at the moment amongst the big players as well, because the IMO, the International Maritime Association, they're very much pushing also for a reduction of the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of the entire industry. So I think the goal is to by 2050 to halve the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and they're using 2008 as their, you know, 100% sort of level. So of course, which in itself is a bit of a problem because in the meantime, you know, the output has, has gone up since 2008, but even that is for, for many industry players seems to be a very difficult goal to achieve because- which a lot of it has to do with sort of technology and the problem of how do you move away from the crude oil based engines that are currently in use?

Because of course, that's first of all, the technology used to be in place, but then also the, the willingness to invest in new, greener vessels, which you know, will be a huge investment for, for the biggest players. And then there's, of course, also the question of the mid-sized and smaller shipping companies. What will they do if they can't, you know, if it's between investing in greener solutions or going out of business? They will continue, of course, with what's currently working for them. So, so this is really a a very big and difficult industry to bring on board when it comes to more sustainable solutions.

Um, I've read somewhere, I think they have the same CO<sub>2</sub> emissions as all of Germany has. And I mean, just the port itself here of Rotterdam actually has between 10 and 20% of the electricity use of all of the Netherlands is actually used just here at the port area. I mean, you cannot forget about the big players if you want to make a significant change, you know, I mean, grassroots initiatives are extremely important, but if you don't tackle the fact that you know, 90% of everything that we consume actually comes to us via ships and you know, that's, that's a fact that you can't walk away from. So we have to start looking at the supply chains and at logistics and at how things are actually coming to our doorstep, the chain of, you know, transportation involved in getting your cell phone, in getting this microphone, in getting this vase, you know the flowers. Most of these things, the chairs, the tables, these things will all be transported one way or another via ship at some segment of the chain. So if we don't look at the environmental impact that that

particular way of transportation has, you know, there's no point to what we're doing in some ways.

[Announcement]

### The Future of Ports in Europe (17:06 – 21:58)

Ian: Okay, Eli so we just got off the boat, did you have a nice tour?

Eli: Oh, you know, I always love to be on the water. So, yeah, it was lovely.

Ian: It's a little bit too short. And we got interrupted a lot by four languages worth of tour guide announcements. But yeah, so now, now, now we're back on dry land, walking along the dock in Rotterdam. What can you imagine? In Europe specifically I'm talking. I know more of your research is based in Asia, but what can you imagine the future of ports in in Europe? Do you think there's going to be like a, a centralisation so fewer and fewer ports with a Megaport? Or is it going to be more a decentralisation? And yeah, so what's what's, what's your predictions for the future?

Eli: Well, I think decentralisation is probably not the way forward given the way the industry works at the moment. But who knows? I mean, that's the beauty of the future. We just don't know. But I think I think what we will see if the contemporary constellation of capitalism is any prediction, we will probably see more of sort of China grabbing ports like they did in Piraeus and turning European ports into spaces where they have their own terminals or even own the port in order to transport their goods more smoothly. So that will be interesting. They've been making quite a few inroads into Italy in addition to Greece recently, which of course, I mean, it changes also the political dynamics. You know, what is the role of China vis-a-vis these governments where they come and bring huge investments into these spaces, which might have been not necessarily abandoned, but often quite neglected?

So they've recently. Also, there's been a lot of discussions around Trieste, sort of. The Port of Trieste has been, it was a huge port during the Hapsburg Empire, but in the meantime has been very much outcompeted by other ports in the Mediterranean area. But in recent years again, there's been quite a bit of interest by the Chinese to have things up and running again. And so I think there's, there's a lot to watch there in terms of East Asian investment in European ports and what will happen there.

Ian: And are these private companies are these state backed companies or state owned companies?

Eli: COSCO is sort of the the Chinese- that's a state company, basically, state shipping.

Ian: Yeah, maybe lots of people have made this observation, but just because I'm not so familiar with topic came to mind now. But it does seem like an interesting historical mirroring. You know, when you have companies like the East India Company going in like building ports, you know, in Asia now you have Asian companies coming in and building ports in Europe.

Eli: I think- let's, let's just go back to Piraeus, the example, because I think that Piraeus is good to think with in that regard, because it, uh, it opens up a lot of questions around

sovereignty locally that maybe the Greek state doesn't necessarily want to address. But I think when you follow a bit also in terms of the mobilisation of workers who were very much opposed to this privatisation. And you know, you can see that there's also some concerns over the Nation-State that play into it, and then of course, you have groups like the Golden Dawn coming into the area of Piraeus and mobilising people around the port on the basis of "we've just been sold out to the Chinese." It's a very uncomfortable thing to discuss, but I think the politics around ports and the issue of sovereignty, you know, when it comes to global capitalism is, is really interesting.

I mean, Rotterdam too sort of; I mean there's a lot of- this is the heartland of some far-right politics. As much as, you know, when you look at another research side that I'm interested in currently is Malmö, where you had- which was dominated by a big shipyard which moved out of the area of more or less in the late 1990s 2000s. Moved, also, they moved their infrastructure, sold it to East Asia. The- the, the big crane that was sort of overlooking Malmö was sold off to a Korean company. And of course, this is also again, Malmö is, you know, a city that's rapidly deindustrialising, but at the same time, when you look at Malmö and its hinterlands, it's very much the core of the far right of Sweden. And so I mean, there is- there are some political tendencies that you also have to look at when you look at maritime industries and the way that they're moving eastwards, you know.

### Ports from an Anthropological Perspective (21:59 – 24:00)

Ian: Hmm. Interesting. And I guess like so my, my final question, which I tried to ask you in about two or three times but it failed is like, what is- what is an anthropologist for those people who don't maybe understand what contemporary anthropology means, what's an anthropologist doing looking at all this?

Eli: Yes, as I think I also tried to explain about, there's been a lot of attempts by human geographers, by sociologists and historians to work with the topic of, you know, maritime trade, of shipping, of logistics recently. And increasingly, I mean, there has been some fantastic literature produced in those realms. But I do think that anthropologists can bring a lot to the table because we do go to places ideally for a longer time and we spend more time talking to people on the ground and sort of experiencing ports, cities, and also, you know, other ancillary industries related to, to the maritime world like ships, shipbuilding sort of, you know, the entire chain around maritime industries. So we're trying to approach these aspects via an ethnographic method of, you know, talking to people, being there, being close to the ground, exploring the stories behind the industry, talking to people rather than just looking at big data.

Ian: Great. Well, we look forward to reading all the results of that in two- or three-years time?

Eli: Four or five [laugh]

Ian: Four- or five years' time. I hope you enjoyed your tour today. I hope I've been, I've been a- have been a pleasant and clement participant on your tour. Okay, thank you so much Eli for coming on the podcast!

Eli: Yeah, thank you too.



[Music]

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### Post-Interview Discussion (24:01 – 32:56)

Ian: Well, Kate, we are still trapped inside this container, and I hope one day we'll be able to get out of it.

Kate: Hopefully!

Ian: Hopefully, but it doesn't mean we'll be bored. I mean, even though it's pitch black and all we have for entertainment is the interview I made with Eli, because we can talk about that very interview. Yeah. Did you like it? What was interesting?

Kate: Yes. And this is such an interesting topic. It's something that we don't really talk about that often. I mean, it's easy to think about sustainability when you're trying to use a reusable straw or look at the cutlery you're using when you're going out to eat. But something like shipping is very distant from kind of our day-to-day way of thinking, but so important and really touches everything that we consume.

Ian: Mm-Hmm. Mm-Hmm. And what about it exactly then? Like, I mean, what were the things in it that you think we should think about a little bit more? Both me and you and maybe with the people at home as well?

Kate: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I mean, one of the biggest questions is what can we do within the midst of this crisis? Again, it's- this is, this is a very difficult thing to escape. You can't necessarily just say, I'm not going to consume anything that has ever been shipped, ever, because that's just not a sustainable way to live. And so, you know, the big question is what can be done about this big environmental catastrophe? I mean, I was looking at the at the statistics and you know, right now, ships generate around 3% of global greenhouse gas emissions per year, and the EU estimates that it'll be around one fifth of global emissions by 2050. So if we don't do anything now, this is going to be a serious problem.

Elisabeth did talk about kind of, you know, companies' roles in this and especially Amazon, with its new two-hour shipping policy in the US. There are two opinions or two, two comments to be made. You know, a) Amazon does have a responsibility; it's one of the biggest players in this industry, and Jeff Bezos just recently decided to give \$10 billion to fight climate change. But yeah, well, I mean, how can that solve the environmental catastrophe, that is, that's Amazon's creating? So there's that side. There's also the side of businesses are going to do what consumers demand. And so if it's not Amazon, it's just going to be another firm that takes advantage of this, of this demand from society. So is this really companies doing? Is this, is this really where companies should be the faulty one?

Ian: I mean, they, yeah, and of course, probably both of us, both customers and the companies. But I guess what companies do is they instil in us a certain, a certain expectation that things can be done in a certain way. So if, you know, the idea of getting

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something within two hours after you order it to your house, if that's now, what's going to be pushed in America by Amazon, then people will get used to and people expect it.

So the same way that maybe like five years ago, even 10 years ago, people just didn't expect to be able to just order some online and have it the next day, you know, but now we've come to expect this. So, so they've actually they've actually encultured a certain, yeah, a certain demand on the side of the customer to have this instant- instantaneous, almost instantaneous product arrived to their door. Where we never would have thought if you'd asked people 20 years ago, 30 years ago, would- is this so important? People would have been like, probably not. You know, like is it- is it such a big thing to have to wait for the weekend, to go to the shop, to buy your clothes or your music? But now it's like we- we want to instantly, and that desire to want to instantly has to be created from somewhere. And I think that the companies like Amazon and others have played a big part in shaping the contours of our desire. I mean, I'm not sure it's a thing that we really would've wanted so much anyway, I don't know.

Kate: I can't wait, you know, in 10 years, we'll have drones giving us things within 30 minutes of when we order so.

Ian: I mean, like, like the same way, the same way that we order food, we'll expect other things just to arrive. With click of the drone and dropped it in, you know, in our backyard or whatever.

Kate: I just still, I'm not sure that, that demand or that- that, you know, that idea is just coming from companies. I mean, companies are made up of humans. Humans think of this. They want this. And so it's- I think it's really the individual who's like thinking of kind of that type of future and demands it and then companies are just serving a need.

Ian: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Well, yeah, I- I'm- we're going to disagree on that I think. Because I think, I know I mean, I just think- I think if you place too much stuff always on- on consumers all the time, then it creates a lot of shame or whatever in people like environmental shame that we have when we do things that are not, you know, environmentally sustainable or just. But these things are only enabled or constrained by the, the structures of the company, you know, or their delivery mechanisms or whatever. That's, you know, without those, we wouldn't be able to want it, you know?

Kate: Yeah Absolutely, absolutely. And you know, if Amazon makes one step in the right direction, that's a huge, huge difference that the world sees compared to you and I deciding to do a certain thing and seeing what kind of environmental impact that will have.

Ian: Mm hmm.

Kate: Absolutely, absolutely. Another thing I thought was very interesting that Elisabeth mentioned was kind of this imperialist attitude towards ports. I think I find it very interesting that ports have this political power over certain countries. So when a country comes in like China buys a port in Greece, then there's tremendous political influence associated with that. Is that comparable to kind of the, the way any type of investment comes into a country as in any type of country can come in by a company in another

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country and then have economic influence? But obviously also political influence? Is the port issue a bigger imperialist concern? That's my question.

Ian: Yes. Yes, actually, because I think it's like a key infrastructure. And maybe this is why because with airports or seaports, it's actually quite interesting that- that you would allow a port to be run by a foreign entity because this is what's coming in and out of your country, okay, you might be then controlling in some way the customs or the or the borders that go with it, but this sort of key infrastructure that controls entry and exit into a, into a country gives, gives those, gives those companies a lot of power.

I mean, in the colonial period, the East India company from, from the UK, they understood that very clearly. You know, like this is why, this is when, okay, there was no, of course, flights at the time, but like the seaports were so important for British colonialism in India because they basically controlled the, the, the economic and also the infrastructure, and then, so the economic capabilities, if you like, of the, of India or the subcontinent at the time, and also these key infrastructure that they also then were developing. Which once you start to develop infrastructure, you develop it for your own interests as well. And so not for the interests of the country, but for the interests of your company. And that, and then that allowed in the long run the UK or Britain rather to, to, uh, to take over large, large parts of the subcontinent.

Kate: Although, I mean, there is there's economic power that comes and then I mean, imagine a port that's- a port in Greece that's not doing very well. If they didn't get that outside investment. Maybe they'd be losing economic power for the individual. And so that's a concern in itself. So is this better than, you know, no investment coming in?

Ian: Oh, for sure. I mean, but you're asking like, I'm not saying it's better or worse, but, but I'm just saying, like, you ask, like, what's the motivation behind the, behind the, you know, state owned companies doing these things? Two things. One, of course, is to make money, but another is, of course, to, to have control and to exercise, to exercise control. I mean, China is doing massive infrastructure projects in Africa, but then also in the Balkans because they want to have a political power. And I mean, this is- this is I think it's pretty clear this is that this is their logic. If somebody is listening from the Chinese state, how can they, how can they write to us and tell us that it's just, that we're, that we're, we're wrong with our worries?

Kate: Yes, we would love to hear from you. You can email us through the contact form found at our website [Urban-Arena.EU](http://Urban-Arena.EU) or at [UrbanA@ceu.edu](mailto:UrbanA@ceu.edu). And you can also find us on Twitter or Instagram at the handle [@arena\\_urban](https://twitter.com/arena_urban).

Ian: Yeah, and we should tell everybody who does listen and likes this podcast, the place where you do listen to this podcast. Please rate us and review us. Especially if you're going to say something positive. That's not just because we want to feel good about ourselves. We're full of self-confidence and we know we're brilliant. It's so that more people can find us. It's the way, yeah, the way the- way the system works is if- if things are getting lots of reviews and likes, then then it appears higher up in the charts and then more people can find us. So if you do like us, spread the word by telling people about us, but also by rating and reviewing us as well.

Kate: Please do.

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Ian: All right. That is it from us this time.

[Sound of door hinges squeaking]

Ian: I can, oh, the, the containers opening!

Kate: Oh my gosh!

[Music]

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### Disclaimer

This podcast is part of the three-year project UrbanA – Urban Arenas for Sustainable and Just Cities. It was funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme.