

Document 4: Ben Newell Transcript

Podcast: The Placemakers

Episode: Ben Newell – Authentic Places & Context

Host: Stephen Burton

Guest: Ben Newell, Principal at Arcadia Landscape Architecture

Stephen Burton: Today we're talking to Ben Newell. Ben is a principal with Arcadia Landscape Architecture here in Queensland, Australia. Ben is a registered landscape architect with over 20 years of experience, including projects in Australia, the Middle East, and China. Ben, welcome to the Placemakers.

Ben Newell: Thanks, Stephen. Great to be here.

Stephen Burton: So Ben, what do you think is the most important ingredient to creating a successful public place?

Ben Newell: Look, Stephen, I think the most important ingredient is **people**. Without people, a place really isn't a place. It's just a space. So for me, creating spaces that people feel comfortable in, that they want to inhabit, return to, and bring their friends to—that's really the key.

Stephen Burton: How do you go about including people in your design process?

Ben Newell: It varies. Sometimes we have extensive community consultation to find out aspirations. Other times it's more about observing how people use existing spaces and trying to understand what makes those spaces work or not work.

Stephen Burton: How did your experience in the Middle East and China shape your approach?

Ben Newell: Working in the Middle East was very different. We were building cities from scratch in the desert—starting from a grain of sand. Looking back, there wasn't really a focus on genuine placemaking; it was more about speed and quantity rather than quality. I think it made me appreciate the importance of **context**. When I came back to Australia, I really started to focus on designing places that were grounded in their local context—using local materials, plants, and responding to the local climate.

Stephen Burton: What does an "authentic" place mean to you?

Ben Newell: An authentic place is one that feels like it belongs. It doesn't feel like it's been dropped in from outer space. It responds to the history, culture, and physical environment. For example, the Barangaroo project in Sydney tried to reconnect the city with the harbor, using sandstone and native vegetation to feel distinctly Sydney.

Stephen Burton: Do you find clients are receptive to this approach?

Ben Newell: Generally, yes. More clients understand the value of good placemaking. They realize it adds economic, social, and environmental value. Studies show it creates an uplift in property values and better social outcomes.

Stephen Burton: When you look at places you admire, is there a unifying feature?

Ben Newell: It's often the small things—the fine grain. A beautiful piece of art in a laneway, or blending new fabric with old. Places like the High Line in New York or Fish Lane in Brisbane repurpose existing infrastructure to bring people back. It's about adaptive reuse and bringing out the character of a place.

Stephen Burton: What do you think is the biggest challenge facing the industry?

Ben Newell: Getting the right team together from the start. It's about collaboration between architects, landscape architects, placemaking specialists, engineers, artists, and the community. You need that melting pot of ideas.

Stephen Burton: Ben, thanks so much for sharing your experience and knowledge with us today.