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Podcast: The Placemakers

Episode: Lauren Newton – Landscape Architecture & Gender Diversity

Host: Stephen Burton

Guest: Lauren Newton, Landscape Architect and Associate Director at AECOM

Stephen Burton: Today we're talking to Lauren Newton. Lauren is a landscape architect and a current Associate Director at AECOM in Queensland, Australia. Lauren has held a number of senior design roles since the mid-2000s. She's been involved as a jury chair for the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects and supports organizations that champion the role of women in the design and construction industry. Today Lauren is joining us to talk about the role landscape architects play in placemaking, the role of women and gender diversity in the industry, and what it takes to make successful public places. So Lauren, thanks for being here.

Lauren Newton: Thanks so much. I'm so pumped. What an introduction.

Stephen Burton: I'm going to dive straight in. What do you think is the most important ingredient for creating a successful public place?

Lauren Newton: It's such a good question. It comes down to one common denominator: **people**. Every single time. That's probably the answer that a lot of people might give, and they should, because people are at the center of all we do.

Stephen Burton: When you think about a successful public place, what does success mean to you?

Lauren Newton: It's less about what it means to me and more about what it means to all those stakeholders who have been involved in the process. All great design has a methodology. But then once you start to identify who the key end-users or key stakeholders are, you really need to **ask** them. I love a good collaborative workshop—lots of drawing pens, safe space for people to contribute. It's important to remember this rule of thumb: two ears, one mouth. Listen more than we speak. Ask: "What does project success look like for you?"

Stephen Burton: When you're talking about asking people, are you talking about the end-users? And what process do you go through to bring them into the design process?

Lauren Newton: It depends on the project. A methodology I've found useful is a collaborative approach with your client and stakeholder groups to identify who those core end-users are. Then establish a series of events or workshops to talk about what is important to that community. Who are the people coming to visit that space and how are

they going to feel in that space?

Stephen Burton: What happens with the information you gather from those workshops?

Lauren Newton: Data is critical. Distilling the information you receive is really important so you can record that and come up with a response. It's important to use language and activities that can talk to everybody—from primary school students to professionals. You've got to get a diverse range to understand what all the different users are looking for.

Stephen Burton: Then you sift through the data and make design decisions about how to express those desires from the community?

Lauren Newton: Absolutely. You've done your listening component. As landscape architects, a big part of our role is to listen and observe. Placemaking or place curation has really evolved. It's about the intangible things—social equity, how we feel in these spaces. Do we feel safe? Comfortable? Design cues are born of how we want to feel in a space. Do we have enough shade? Seating? Do they promote healthy social interaction?

Stephen Burton: I wonder if landscape architecture *is* the same as placemaking?

Lauren Newton: I think they're one and the same. I don't know if it's just the process that I'm wedded to, but placemaking might have a different lens regarding intangible things like social equity. But ultimately, design cues are born of how we want to feel.

Stephen Burton: I want to pivot to something I know you're passionate about: supporting organizations that champion the role of women in the design industry. Can you tell me a bit about that?

Lauren Newton: I'm a supporter of all great people. But a really pivotal point for me came just after I had my daughter Florence, a little over five years ago. I've always been a passionate landscape architect. But there have been times I've had to look left and right and realize there was no one there like me to help me. I started to think: "Where did all the senior women go?" At that point, I was mid-30s, returning to work. I sat down with my wonderful mentor, Brent O'Neil. He helped me realize that **I am not a white middle-aged man**. I know that sounds obvious looking at me! But my whole career, I had tried to think like, act like, design like, and present like a middle-aged man, because they were my mentors and bosses. Coming up with that realization was life-changing. It allowed me to ask: who am I and what can I bring to a project? I'm an expressive personality. I am a woman. I can come at designs with my lived experiences.

Stephen Burton: How can we do a better job of supporting women in the design industry so we have more women in senior positions?

Lauren Newton: Hire more women. Put us in decision-making roles. You've got to be the change you want to see. It is important to lead by example to our up-and-coming female (and male) landscape architects. I think in Queensland we're close to a 50/50 split now in

landscape architecture. But if you look at women in senior positions versus mid-range positions, I don't think that split is 50/50 yet. We just have to keep mentoring, training, and putting in the time and energy to our next generation of female leaders to empower them to have a voice.

Stephen Burton: Lauren, thank you so much for joining us today on the Placemakers.