

Document 5: Dr. Nick Stevens Transcript

Podcast: The Placemakers

Episode: Dr. Nick Stevens – Education, Data & Public Space

Host: Stephen Burton

Guest: Dr. Nick Stevens, Program Coordinator of Urban Design and Town Planning at USC

Stephen Burton: Today we're talking to Dr. Nick Stevens. Nick is a social scientist and an urbanist with a background in horticulture, landscape architecture, and town planning. He is the Program Coordinator of Urban Design and Town Planning at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) and co-lead of the Bioclimatic and Sociotechnical Cities Lab. Nick, welcome.

Nick Stevens: Thanks Stephen. Terrific to be here.

Stephen Burton: How did you end up in education when you started off working with your hands in the dirt?

Nick Stevens: It's a long journey. It starts with an interest in gardening from my mother and grandmother. I wasn't very good at school initially, failed horticultural college first semester, then worked my way through TAFE. It's always been an inquiry—wanting to learn more and make a difference. I ended up in education, which is the best job in the world. My expectation in higher education is that we need to do better than we have been, particularly regarding urban development. If I can inspire students to think about the complexity of the world, I've won.

Stephen Burton: When you say we need to do better, what do you mean?

Nick Stevens: We continue to make the mistakes of the past—the "predict and provide" mentality. We face the sixth industrial revolution with massive environmental and technological changes, yet we are muddling through. We know what to do at a strategic level (e.g., keeping temperature under 2 degrees), but it's not happening at the coal face. We need to design the designers of the future now.

Stephen Burton: Is that part of the work with the Bioclimatic Lab?

Nick Stevens: Yes. The BASC Lab (Bioclimatic and Sociotechnical Cities Lab) is a research, training, and engagement vehicle. We teach Urban Economics, Climate Theory, and Health and Wellbeing for Just Cities—next-generation understandings we don't see enough in practice.

Stephen Burton: Are we doing enough to incorporate the effects of heat and human comfort in public space design?

Nick Stevens: We need a lot more attention here. Survey work shows urban designers and architects understand their role in mitigating heat, but **planners** often struggle to see their role. They see their intent as strategic, but they need to think about breeze corridors and green infrastructure integration. We need to bring these disciplines closer together.

Stephen Burton: What is the most important ingredient to creating a successful public place?

Nick Stevens: Ideally, it's awareness of the **complexity of public space**. Thinking about how space has a range of roles for a range of people at different times. The three biggest health issues in Australia are arthritis, heart disease, and mental health. We aren't designing public spaces well for mental health or cognitive impairment (aging population). We need to design more inclusively and empathetically.

Stephen Burton: Are governments asking for this?

Nick Stevens: The intent is there in strategic documents, but the articulation in tender documents is often missing. We need to measure performance and get the evidence.

Stephen Burton: What data should we be looking for?

Nick Stevens: Physical data (sensors, heat, movement) is the low-hanging fruit. But we need data to change the paradigm—to view public space as an important community resource, not just space left over after planning. We rarely go back and measure success. We investigate accidents (what went wrong), but rarely investigate what went right.

Stephen Burton: Final question: do you have a parting message for your young students?

Nick Stevens: Listen carefully. But always **step up for what's right**. Put yourself forward in terms of the right decision to make. If design compromise happens, at least you've had your valid say about what the right thing to do was.

Stephen Burton: Nick, thank you so much for being on the Placemakers today.

Nick Stevens: It was a pleasure. Thank you.