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## Document 16: Nina Sharp Transcript

Podcast: The Placemakers

Episode: Nina Sharp – 300,000 Streets & Street Regeneration

Host: Stephen Burton

Guest: Nina Sharp, Lead Convener of 300,000 Streets, Regen Melbourne

**Stephen Burton:** Today we're talking with Nina Sharp. Nina leads an initiative called **300,000 Streets**, which is an "Earthshot" within an organization known as Regen Melbourne. The initiative aims to transform Melbourne's 300,000 streets into a thriving network of regenerative spaces. The work aspires to engage Melbourne citizens to actively participate in creating climate-resilient neighborhoods. Nina has previously worked as Head of Impact at a social enterprise, she's explored regenerative agriculture and community leadership, and she's an advocate for the way that we can create change by connecting people, purpose, and place. Nina, welcome to the Placemakers.

**Nina Sharp:** Thanks for having me.

**Stephen Burton:** Can you tell me, what is an **Earthshot**?

**Nina Sharp:** Regen Melbourne is a not-for-profit organization in pursuit of a regenerative Melbourne. One of the ways we lead towards a regenerative city is through what we call Earthshots. Our Earthshots are a declaration of intent, designed to address complex social and ecological challenges that we experience in urban settings. Their mission-led approaches lend from the concept of a "moonshot," where it takes different types of stakeholders, partnerships, research, and innovation to come together to solve the level of complexity required to drive towards regeneration.

In Regen Melbourne, we have three live Earthshots:

1. **Swimmable Birrarung:** To make the Yarra River swimmable.
2. **Nourished Neighborhoods:** Around food systems, for Greater Melbourne to have access to healthy, affordable, and locally produced food.
3. **300,000 Streets:** Which I am the lead convener of.

**Stephen Burton:** Where did this idea of 300,000 streets come from? That sounds absolutely enormous.

**Nina Sharp:** We started looking at the street as a useful exploration for an Earthshot. We went through a 12-month sense-making process, speaking to stakeholders across the city. What we

saw was a shared belief that people want regeneration for our streets. There are isolated efforts happening—government strategies, council strategies—but a lot of those efforts are happening in silos. We're not great at pausing, sharing, sometimes scaling where appropriate, or enabling replication.

The "300,000" is roughly how many streets there are across Greater Melbourne. By viewing the streets of Greater Melbourne as a **network**, we can see them as an interconnected web. We can learn at the systemic level whilst also dropping down to the hyper-local street level.

**Stephen Burton:** Why streets? Why are streets so important that we need to focus our attention on them?

**Nina Sharp:** Streets are super interesting. Lots of our daily life is lived on the street. It's where we emerge from our private settings into the public sphere—where we come out of our own self-interest and into the collective mindset of building community.

But streets are also highly regulated. There's a lot of risk and public safety concerns that land on the street. What we often see in the city setting is that **car is king**. Over a number of decades, we have shifted into a very car-centric society. So the potential of the street as public space is compromised because it is dominated by cars.

One of the frameworks we use is the **Doughnut Economics** framework—striving for a safe and just space for people and planet. When you consider the planetary boundaries, a lot of them land on the street: biodiversity loss, air pollution, water quality can all be solved for by looking at the street as the unit for change.

**Stephen Burton:** You mentioned biodiversity. How can changing a street have an impact on biodiversity?

**Nina Sharp:** There's not one way we regenerate streets—there are many. Some are participatory, some are regulatory. Thinking about biodiversity, we look at the **verge** or the **nature strip** as an opportunity.

If people are enabled to plant out their street verge, not only are they creating habitat for bees, birds, and insects, but they're also improving soil quality, potentially improving the conditions for street trees (providing shade), and they are **gardening in their street**. They are meeting their neighbors, they are out in a public-facing environment connecting with one another.

At a more regulatory level, we're working on the Melbourne Biodiversity Network with office architects and the University of Melbourne. This looks at publicly owned land that is underutilized—owned by water utilities or state government—that is currently just grass maintained by lawn mowing. The potential there is to improve those conditions by planting indigenous plants and enabling public access through active transport networks. This project

looks at a large corridor at the Greater Melbourne scale as a networked corridor.

**Stephen Burton:** What are some of the other aspirations you have for streets?

**Nina Sharp:** Central to achieving 300,000 streets is enabling **democratic participation** and building **agency** in people. We advocate for people to have agency to represent their street and speak up on the lived experience of the street so that it can play a role in decision making.

Street transformation is a priority for government decision-makers, but for that to be done really well, we argue that it must enable democratic participation at multiple points and in meaningful ways. This helps decisions land well—so it's not a surprise or polarizing—but also opens up the potential for community members to play a role in the maintenance of those sites. If people have been consulted and enabled and played a highly participatory role, perhaps they'll look after that street tree, water it, and it will have a longer life.

**Stephen Burton:** What are some of the mechanisms you use to get people involved in managing their local street?

**Nina Sharp:** There are lots of different ways. We talk about building enabling conditions—finance and capital, research, storytelling and narrative, new forms of governance, and measurement. Street transformation needs to include all of those.

For example, we're experimenting with how capital flows to communities through a tool called **Hum**. It's a distributed grant-making tool developed by a New Zealand company called The Wellbeing Protocol. It creates a high-trust funding environment where funders fund a community organization with an aligned vision, and then enable a voting community to build out ideas for activations on the street. The community members themselves vote on how the money is spent.

Another element is **measurement**. We're working with economist Catherine Trebeck on a concept of "cornerstone indicators." Shifting away from technical ways we measure streets (like traffic volume) into more participatory measures—such as **girls riding bikes**.

If we see more girls riding bikes in our streets, what does that tell us about street transformation? It tells us families can afford bikes, but most importantly, that parents deem streets safe enough for their children to ride to school. The outcome is healthy, active children engaged in active transport.

**Stephen Burton:** That relates back to the original idea of placemaking—grassroots action, tactical urbanism. What are some of the success stories you've had so far?

**Nina Sharp:** There's great momentum happening across the city—from precinct conversations to activations. We're finding that people find this aspiration inspiring, but they

can also see *themselves* in the mission.

We're having conversations with lots of different stakeholders—councils, placemakers, community organizations, local conveners. 300,000 Streets seems to resonate well citywide.

**Stephen Burton:** What do you think is the most important ingredient for creating a successful public place or street?

**Nina Sharp:** I couldn't pinpoint one ingredient, but I think definitely **streets that feel safe**. We spent a lot of time last year asking people what they would like to see on their street. No matter where we were across Greater Melbourne, the themes were similar:

- Green, leafy streets (biodiversity)
- Streets where kids can play safely and ride bikes
- Places for people to stop and be (rather than just transient spaces of movement)
- Streets full of laughter
- Empowered local decision making

What that taught us was **what people value** about their street. We've summarized that into a set of community values. The hard work now is to help those communities hold tight to those values when decisions are being made.

**Stephen Burton:** The issue of car parking is always contentious. How do you deal with that?

**Nina Sharp:** Parking is contentious. But a lot of the work we strive to do is to evoke **imagination**. To think beyond the status quo, beyond how we live our lives now in this car-centric society, and to imagine the possibilities. To think about what the street *could* be. That change is possible and not as scary as we think it might be. The outcomes are far more beneficial.

**Stephen Burton:** If you could recommend someone go out into their street and make one change to make it a better place, what would it be?

**Nina Sharp:** I think the simplest thing people can do is to **be a really good neighbor**. It seems simple—just say hi, chat to your neighbor, let them know your name. But what that leads to is **community resilience**.

In times of disaster and trouble, if we haven't got community resilience, everything crumbles. If we can start by being a good neighbor, our streets automatically start improving. That can result in food sharing, planting out verges, public surveillance (safety), WhatsApp groups, and just general care at the center.

**Stephen Burton:** Just local community building at its most basic level.

**Nina Sharp:** That's right. Yeah, exactly.

**Stephen Burton:** Nina, thank you for joining us today. I wish you all the very best on this incredibly ambitious and important project in Melbourne.

**Nina Sharp:** Thanks so much for having me.

**Stephen Burton:** Thanks for listening to the Placemakers.