Episode transcript: Corey Gray

The Placemakers, with Corey Gray on smart cities

Speakers: Stephen Burton (host), Corey Gray (guest)

Stephen (host): Today we're talking to Corey Gray. Corey has spent over 30 years in the intelligent buildings and infrastructure space, delivering end to end engineered solutions for smart buildings, infrastructure and smart cities. Founding his first company in Australia in 1993, Corey established a smart cities practice in 2009 before taking the company public in 2020 and later exiting the organisation. A recognised global authority on smart cities, technology, arts, culture, ethics and philosophy, he is a highly sought after keynote speaker on the global events tour. He makes regular media appearances and is a board advisor to several technology startups. Corey is also an award winning fine art painter, and in 2022 co-founded Switch Productions, whose first film, [title unclear], which translates as Dipped in Black, won 14 international film awards, including the prestigious Teddy and Silver Bear Awards at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2024. Corey was also a former high level AFL player for the Sturt Football Club in South Australia. Corey is currently the chair and president of the Smart Cities Council, and under his leadership, the council has expanded from a Washington based private sector advocacy group to become the world's leading cross-sector smart cities organisation, coordinating the world's leading thinkers, actors and projects across six continents. Corey, welcome to The Placemakers.

Corey (guest): Thanks, Stephen. You're making me feel old and tired listening to all that you've just said about me. But I appreciate the time that's gone into assembling that story. Turning 54 on Friday, so I do feel a lot of that time and effort.

Stephen (host): Well, happy birthday for Friday. I'm turning an undisclosed number tomorrow. But I guess you must be an Aries.

Corey (guest): Let's not talk about astrology. I saw someone in Barcelona recently. A guy was trying to pick up the lady working the breakfast reception at the hotel there during the Smart City World Expo, and he finally said, tell me your star sign and I'll see if we're compatible. And she said, if you believe in astrology, we're not compatible.

Stephen (host): That's a great callback.

Corey (guest): The whole of the room just exploded in laughter. It was one of the best takedowns I've seen in the last 12 months.

Stephen (host): That's awesome. I feel like maybe she's been asked that question before.

Corey (guest): Yeah, you can see it was boiling up inside of her that this guy would just not quit.

Stephen (host): So Corey, you're obviously a man with many talents and many passions and many skills. I'm interested to know more about who you are, really, and where you came from. Could you tell us a little bit about your genesis?

Corey (guest): Yeah, I can. So my mother was a daughter of Maltese migrants that grew up in a rural community about an hour and a half, or back then two hours, north of Adelaide. She had six brothers and sisters living on a farm out there. And my father was one of two kids from Scottish English migrants, who had one brother and grew up in the city. And he wanted to be an artist, and in fact became a science teacher, because back then, after two world wars and a Great Depression, telling your parents you were going to be an artist was an easy way to get a clip behind the ear. So he became a schoolmaster at the school that he went to and taught there for 43 years, and then got cancer and died. And that was his life. And so one of the last conversations that we had was him saying, you know, don't die with the music inside you, type of thing. And that was 22 years ago this year. And so I was fortunate enough to get an education through a scholarship, effectively, in the city and had some amazing teachers and came to love art and literature, but also science and technology and sports, as you've alluded to. But back then everyone kept saying to you, you have to choose a job. You can't just choose things you like, and then you have to pick one thing. It was incomprehensible that you might want to be interested in art and science and sports. You had to pick one. And I probably spent 25 years of my life just trying to deal with the fact that I found them all interesting and, as you've alluded to, moved between them, from professional sports into engineering and science and technology, and then ultimately into fine art again, and filmmaking. But that was a fairly long spiritual journey, I have to say.

Stephen (host): Yes. And a complicated one, having a foot in many worlds. And I don't know what that's like. Where do you find yourself today? How would you characterise what it is that you're doing today?

Corey (guest): I don't know if it's a function of age, or having seven kids, or having done a lot and got things right and got things wrong. But there's a time I still feel that, I see that life. You're old when you spend more time looking back than looking forward. That, to me. And that can happen to you when you're 18. And I know people who I still see from my school who talk about 1989 and beating Rostrevor by two points in the rain at some footy game, and all they're doing is looking back. And I just recently, Tom Gleghorn, an artistic mentor of mine, died at 100 plus, and he was still looking forward to his next painting, and he'd still drink a bottle of red before lunch. And, you know, be pumping out amazing art, and he'd never stop looking forward. So I'm grounding myself a little bit in trying to be a little bit more present and trying to do things that are impactful, not in a conceited, leave a legacy way. So my name's on the building of a university, but that tree that you plant that everyone talks about, whose shade you'll never stand in, that sort of stuff. For me, art is that. Things that changed my life when I was young were books that were written 500 years before I was born. And so that level of contribution that you can make to people and life, I

think is incredibly important. You know, sitting and picking up Montaigne and picking up Shakespeare and reading Zeno and Plato and Aristophanes and Ovid, these sort of things are just amazing legacy. And more of my time is focused on how we can deal with that, and then how we can bring the two core tenets of truth and beauty back into society, that, you know, Dickinson and Yeats and others spoke so eloquently of, that we seem to have forgotten.

Stephen (host): Is your pursuit of that mainly these days manifesting through your art practice, or is it through your other work that you do, or is it all of the above?

Corey (guest): There's a common set of values and vision to all of it. They're just different modalities. Through the Smart Cities Council, we have enormous agency. 200,000 people a month visit our website, a million-plus people a month watch our video blog. So there's a certain level of responsibility that comes with that. And we're pivoting our positioning to be values and mission led rather than technology driven, like a lot of similar organisations seem to be. So yesterday I was talking with the minister, Kofi, from Tuvalu, who have launched a digital nation program. Now Tuvalu is the third smallest nation on earth, 9,300 people. People are leaving because of climate change, lack of economic opportunity. But how do you preserve culture, language, clothes, food, songs, stories? So we're launching a First Nations task force at the moment to create a framework for that. How come, if all the conventional metrics that people espouse in government stand up about living longer than ever and being wealthier than ever, are people in the West unhappier and unhealthier than ever? We have a pandemic of mental health issues. 73 percent of Australians and Americans are overweight or obese. Something's not working. So we're launching a wellbeing initiative called Healthspan, which is designed to provide a better understanding and insight into what the fundamentals of a thriving community are, beyond what percentage 5G coverage, and how mature is your AI deployment program, all this sort of vendor led narrative. So homelessness in San Francisco, for example, where I spend most of my time in a year, is another pandemic, and fentanyl abuse. And 80 percent of the people there have more money than the five billion poorest people on the planet. So how does that make any sort of sense? So these more behavioural science, philosophical discussions we're bringing into it. We know that our happiest moments are with our friends and family, eating nice food, drinking nice drinks, singing songs, telling stories in a beautiful place and laughing. And none of that has been in the discussion. And we're bringing it into the spotlight at the moment as an organisation. Film is something I constantly talk internationally about, the role of narrative. People crave a story. It is in our nature to tell stories and want to be told stories, and to love and be inspired and be sad and forgive and recover. And so urban narrative is another part that we've brought into SCC. But that's also the story of the art I paint. If you think about painting and technology, the day a camera was invented, all art should have stopped if it was about just replicating an image. But the reality is, art is not about what you see, it's how you look at it. This is the secret of art. And it took me, as a child loving Caravaggio and Vermeer and some of the absolute giants of realism of the day, it took me 25 years to realise that art is

about explaining to people how you see something, not what it is. And that's the difference between science and art. And it's an important fundamental distinction. And I enjoy being able to approach that investigative and self-revelatory process through different means, of film and painting.

Stephen (host): Obviously a lot to unpack there. I'm interested in that relationship between the philosophy and ethics and social wellbeing and how you bring that into the work you guys do at the Smart Cities Council. Can you tell us a little bit about what the council is and why people should be involved in it or interested in it?

Corey (guest): Yeah. So Smart Cities Council is a DC based, Washington DC based organisation involved in, from a public sector perspective, helping cities understand and assess where they are, providing them with data, insights and enablement to transform into appropriate directions for private sector. Of course, it involves, let's say, accreditation, validation. And then they're in business to make money. And everyone knows there are social, economic and environmental drivers. So we are a convener and partner of cities globally, private sector and academia. We're delivering programs around education. We're involved in events and delivering thought leadership and cutting edge information around policy positioning, technology innovation, use cases. And at the moment that inevitably lands into a place around ethics. I presented a piece at the OECD in Paris recently at their fifth roundtable on smart cities about that traditional stoic view of: understand what you can and can't control, and then apply your values carefully to those very few small things you can influence. And so ethics and AI has become a huge discussion point. I think a vacuum in narrative between government and citizens has been eroding trust. Humans operate on trust. There are three things that you can't compel anyone to do, and it's to trust you, respect you and to love you. And we're struggling to identify not just good from bad, but fact from fiction anymore. There's a deliberate process of mis and disinformation that governments in many places are using at a high level to fabricate narratives and fabricate the causality of their actions. And so building a process around ethics, and building awareness and understanding, in a world where we're doubling the body of knowledge that's been recorded in the history of the planet every 18 months. Now, there's so much information that people can't find the wheat from the chaff, as they say. So this is a huge existential moment for humanity, I think. And the same with jobs. What job will I have? Everyone's pinned their self-worth onto what job title they have, what company they work for, how much money they earn, what sort of car they drive, what house they live in. And realistically, generative AI could remove 40 to 60 percent of all jobs right now if they weren't being held onto by people with vested interests. And there's going to be an existential moment also for education, where we go from having trained people since the industrial revolution around convergent thinking and process and conformity, into creative thought. These are going to be the high value new jobs: ethics, philosophy. What data set do I need? What questions should I ask? Not just infinitely processing data and presuming you get a valid, reliable causal data set that's going to give you a positive outcome.

Stephen (host): The types of things you're talking about might not be things that people necessarily associate with the smart cities mandate. It sounds like you guys are going about it in a much different way. Can you tell us about how some of those ideas that you're talking about are finding expression on the ground, in cities and in people's lives, in a practical sense?

Corey (guest): Yeah. I mean, people realise it's not working. People aren't happy. There's this, Scott Galloway talks about it. Well, he says, after about 10 or 12 million dollars, every dollar you get has no real incremental change to your life. It might make your boat a bit bigger or your house a bit larger, but the disparity of wealth in this world now is extreme, and the disparity of power. So people understand it empirically. And this is a two faced thing, by the way. There's the economic north, as we're meant to call it now. It's not the West anymore, apparently. And then there's the developing nations, and what used to be called the third world, the economic south. So this is very two faced. If you're in Africa, out of 1.4 billion people, 600 million of you don't have electricity. If you're in India, 900 million of you don't have access to a flushing toilet. This is the reality and the disparity of the world. And then don't even start me on what's happening in Gaza, in Syria and Iran, and all of that human tragedy at an unimaginable scale. So we sort of have three playbooks. One is with the economic south, another one is in the reconstruction of places. I left Ukraine out of that, by the way. I'm sorry. And soon you can add Cuba and Venezuela. So it's a three paced approach for us, but everyone knows it's not working. People are having an existential crisis. People are asking questions, what is my life about anymore? When John Proctor stands at the end of The Crucible on the gallows, in that Arthur Miller play, and he says, if I lose my name, what do I have left? People are having that kind of moment where they're just losing a sense of meaning. People need meaning and purpose. And the idea now that their job as being a conveyancer, and balancing all the different taxes when you buy and sell a house, is not even a job anymore because it gets done in a billionth of a second by a computer. Well, people value things for how much time they put into it. If someone's going to say, well, what now? How do I earn money? What's my meaning? And I think it could be one of the best things that's ever happened, this AI crunch, let's call it, where people suddenly have to rediscover their humanity. And the question that I keep challenging people with is, ask what AI can't do, not what it can do. And that's where you find your humanity. That's where you'll reposition yourself. And that's what we're pursuing as an organisation, really.

Stephen (host): What are some of the insights that you've come across in your work with smart cities in terms of things that you think are really vital that people working in the urban sector know, in terms of designers, placemakers, policy makers? What are some of those key things that you wish they knew and wish they practised in reality?

Corey (guest): I guess you touch on another really interesting point there in terms of urban design, because again, with new modalities for mobility, urban design is going to change dramatically in the next 20 years. When vertical transportation became a

thing, suddenly the rich went from living on the bottom to living on the top, because they wanted the views. The whole urban landscape changed. And now what we're going to see with things like eVTOL and drones is that people and freight are going to start landing on the top of buildings again, because it's sensible. So buildings are going to turn upside down again. You're going to see a 60 to 70 percent reduction of cars in public spaces and on streets. So there's going to be a whole lot of urban reforestation. There's a whole lot of opportunity to capture a significant portion of the urban landscape and redeploy it. And let's hope we get it right. There's so much we could do to reintroduce nature. We know inherently that things like biophilic design and bio urbanism, that humans have a natural affinity to nature, the change of the light from the sunrise to the sunset, from the colour, from the warm to the white, and these types of things. And just walking with the earth on the beach, with the sand between your toes and all that sort of stuff. Humans have better outcomes with that. And so there is a really strong move, not just around things like mental health and ethics, but in urban design, that allows people to have an enjoyable journey to walk from place A to place B, rather than go into an underground to take the time. Like when you walk through Vienna, it's very different than walking through East LA. It's beautiful. There's music, there's parks, there's art, there's sculptures, there's architecture. It becomes enjoyable. And if we think about the way we live our lives, we want to spend as much time as possible doing the things we want to do. So good urban design also rebuilds communities, because people come into public spaces, they talk, they get to know each other. They trust one another. They interact, they start to create. They start to have shared ownership of their community, not just their space. So the space is a launching point for community. And the connectivity of people and places is really important. No better example than 65,000 years of continuous civilisation of Australia's First Nations people. They have the most profound connection to place of any culture that's been documented in any meaningful way.

Stephen (host): What do you think the relationship is between public space, public places, and democracy?

Corey (guest): Well, the founding place of democracy was the Agora, wasn't it? The Greeks created it in their public square. The whole concept of the Agora was the public meeting place. That was the foundational moment for democracy, bringing people together and having a place where people want to be and where people feel safe and where people feel enabled. We call it... when we launched our strategic plan this year, public sector have a certain set of needs. Private sector has a certain set of needs. And I was going to speak at this thing called Dubai Tech Tuesdays at the end of November. And for some reason the people in the back of the [unclear] I was talking to about Rumi, he said, you know, beyond right and wrong, there's a garden. I'll meet you there. Never more have we needed to be cognisant of that as a proposition, where everyone's going to have different needs, positions, views, but in the garden, we just need to set them aside and play to a different set of rules which can, as far as possible, respect that and understand that and just get along in a

beautiful place. And so that's actually become the core tenet of our strategic plan this year, which is that people meet in the garden at SCC. That's where we meet. You park your prejudices and everything else and you engage, cross sector, for the betterment around a certain set of values of communities and the places where they live. And so that's been really powerful and has resonated really well with our core stakeholders.

Stephen (host): Love that concept of the garden. As someone who splits his time between the US and Australia, it must be almost impossible not to make some observations about the different ways public spaces are used in both of these countries. When I look at what's going on in the US, not just now, but often at times throughout history, public space seems to be so contested. It's the place where expression happens, where protest happens, where, you know, people are rounded up and put into places and incarcerated. It seems to be a much more contested environment than it is here in Australia. Can you tell us about some of the observations you may have made between what goes on in those two countries, in public places?

Corey (guest): Yeah. I tend to think about two models. Australia is a hybrid model. The more land you have, like America, Canada, Australia, the more profligate you can be with that space. If you're under immense pressure... I mean, people think about America as 330-something million people in New York and LA and all that, but there's nine cities in America with more than a million people. There's 18,500 little towns. It is not what the external perception is. And I'll give you another example. My kids love sport and American culture, if that's a thing, I would have a strong argument that it might not be. But when I asked my kids what percentage of Americans, and my kids are from 21 down to three, so I'm really counting my 21 year old to my 13 year old, what percentage of Americans are of African descendancy, they said 70 percent, because that's what they see, because they watch sports. And in a basketball team, almost everyone's black. If you look at music, apart from country, almost everyone's black. And so there's a perception. I would use that as a good barometer for America. I spend three to four months a year in Silicon Valley, in the Bay Area. And America is very different from what it looks like. America isn't one place. America isn't one belief system. It's 50 places and a thousand different belief systems. But in terms of how space is deployed, Australia has a hybrid of the European model and the US model. And the reason culture is different in Europe is that these cities were designed 1,000 to 1,500 years ago, some older, and everyone would meet around a square, whether it's a plaza or a place or a piazza or a plaza, everyone would meet and you would have restaurants, you would have offices, you would have rich people, you would have poor people. So society was far more homogeneous. You needed to be able to walk and get anything you needed, from a doctor to a school to a boulangerie to a charcuterie to a patisserie. Everything needed to be accessible. So communities mixed, necessarily, because of the urban design strategy that was required then. Whereas now in a place like America, if you're rich, you work here and you live in this gated community there, and you recreate in that exclusive suburb

there with fine dining restaurants and, you know, haute couture and high fashion and all of that. So in Paris, you're on Avenue Montaigne, and you're living in and around the sixteenth there, and that's where you live. But still in Paris, that mixes up, right? Because you can walk next door. So there's these two modes of locating people by socioeconomic worth. And then there's long transits between where they work and recreate that are required. You're always in and around the Bay Area, travelling long distances from San Fran down to the Valley and around and back. And so it creates a lot of burden and inefficiency in infrastructure and inefficiency in time. And then it creates a lot of stress because people spend so much time moving around. So there's a certain philosophy around urban design that's sort of failing in that US model. And also people don't see public spaces as their own. You've got a choice to drop the trash on the ground or to put it in the rubbish bin or the garbage can, or whatever word you want for trash or garbage or rubbish. In Copenhagen, where I stay, by the Tivoli, every day there's a group of elderly, retired people who go out and pick up any tourist trash and put it in the bin. They own that place. They feel like it's theirs and they respect it and they protect it. Whereas you don't see that so much in large parts of Australia now, and in the US almost anywhere. No one cares. As long as the trash is on the other side of the line of their property, they don't care if it's there. As long as that homeless person is down the street, they don't care. And it's the problem of this sort of acquisitive and endlessly competitive economic approach, that if you're not winning, you're losing. This very binary approach creates a sense of, if it's not mine, I don't care. If it's theirs and I can get it, I'll take it. It's becoming very psychologically toxic.

Stephen (host): But your point is well made that urban design is fundamental in the way people consider and form those views and values over time. I think you're touching on a few of the fundamental problems that as urban designers, we need to address, which is this idea of ownership and advocacy of our public spaces. And how do we bring that back into the projects that we're delivering, and how do we bring that back into our communities? And just as you were talking about San Francisco then, I was reflecting on my time when I was living for a short period of time in New York City. And one of the things I loved about New York City was everybody gets on the subway and everybody is together. It doesn't matter if you've got two dollars to your name or you're sitting next to the guy from Wall Street reading the Times, who's making a million dollars a month, everybody is together. There's this egalitarianism about public transport, and you miss out on that in car centric cities, because everybody's just in their little metal tubes, going to work, getting back in, going home again. And I think people don't think about the value of that connectivity and that shared sense of belonging that you get when you're compressed into a space like the subway.

Corey (guest): Yeah. And New York's obviously an anomaly because of how condensed Manhattan Island is, but with that comes this sense of community that people even outside there who've never been there seem to understand, as you say, from rich to poor. I'm a New Yorker. It's like a football team. People will wear it on

their sleeve. I'm a New Yorker. And it has a certain feeling to it. And it has a certain identity to it that you've identified well. I mean, there's a diaspora of, obviously, the Italians and the Irish, and then more recently Eastern Europeans and the subcontinental community. But you see this real identity of New York, where people adopt it. You go to other places and people try to preserve their own culture and their own traditions in a new place, and then you become a fragmented society. You need, as a community... It comes back to the storytelling. There's a compelling narrative around New York that people want to be a part of. It's why they're there. Barcelona has it, with the exception of the rest of Spain that aren't Catalan. People go there because there's a certain cultural identity that it has. And the cities that most attract people, I use the example often, they're like a bad girlfriend. When you're 20, you know you shouldn't go back, but you keep going there knowing you'll get a bit more damage. But somehow it's enriching and it's exciting. For me, Istanbul is that city. Istanbul makes no sense at all. It's totally nuts. The politics of it is crazy. The infrastructure of it is moribund. I love that place. I fly Turkish Airlines nearly everywhere in the world. If I can, I'll fly 10 extra hours if I can have two days with my mates in Istanbul. It's just amazing, so culturally rich, a beautiful, historic city. You just stand there and you feel soaked in privilege, in history. But it makes no sense.

Stephen (host): It sounds amazing. I'm going to have to add it to the list. So Corey, last question for today. A little bit of a pivot here. As someone who has clearly been successful in standing across different fields in his life, whether that be filmmaking, fine art, technology, science, ethics, morality, philosophy, what advice do you give, particularly to young people who are really interested in adopting this kind of multimodal, multidisciplinary focus in their life, but yet they're being forced and focused into these little boxes where they have to be this, they have to be that? How can we stand across all of these fields and offer something greater to humanity?

Corey (guest): So the answer isn't follow your passion. And I think, again, Scott Galloway speaks well to that. Said no one, it's easy to identify your passions once you're financially independent. You need to have a sense of independence. I think understand the things that are valuable to you. Be open minded. I get in trouble with this all the time with my family, but I say to everyone, if you want to have the broadest perspective, you can travel well and often, speak another language, play a musical instrument. This will give your mind the most plasticity of all, to start to think about things and see things in different ways. And then pursue truth and beauty obsessively. Just focus on that. Be brave enough and be honest with yourself and others in the same way. And then things just, all the most important things I've ever done in my life were not even intended or foreseen or planned for. And it's like, what did Lennon say? Life's what happens to you while you're busy making other plans. For me, the film we made just came out. We had four other films we were going to make. And we made this film because the second we saw it, we didn't ask, what's it going to cost? How much time is it going to take? We said, that's a beautiful story. We're making this film and we'll work the rest out. Things just become apparent to you in moments. And the questions you're asking, like I said, are well made, because

my oldest child is a daughter who's 21. She's just started an internship in her last year of university. I've got a 19 year old who took a year off between school and just put a band together that's killing it. You know, just suddenly taught himself the guitar when no one knew what the hell he was going to do. And now he's got this band that's crushing it. And then I've got three kids who are fully into sports, and then an eight year old and a nearly four year old. So we're constantly having that discussion in this house. And that's what I would say to anyone, just be as honest as you can possibly be. People will exploit you, but that's better than, you know, to segue to the end, being like my dad and dying with the music still in you.

Stephen (host): Corey, a wonderful conversation today. Thank you so much for sharing, and thank you for being here today on The Placemakers.

Corey (guest): Thanks, Stephen. I've really enjoyed it.