

## Document 15: Victoria Jones Transcript

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**Podcast:** The Placemakers **Episode:** Victoria Jones – Public Art & Designing for Happiness  
**Host:** Stephen Burton **Guest:** Victoria Jones, Director of T Projects

**Stephen Burton:** Today we're talking to Victoria Jones. Victoria has worked in the creative industries in both the UK and Australia for over 20 years. She has led the commissioning of over 100 site-specific art commissions, managed large art collections, devised participatory programs, and curated multiple exhibition spaces. She has led creative projects for Transport for London, the National Health Service, Melbourne Metro Tunnel, and the Level Crossing Removal Project in Victoria. Her work has received awards and accolades including those from the International Academy for Design and Health. Victoria, thank you for joining us today on the Placemakers.

**Victoria Jones:** Thank you for inviting me.

**Stephen Burton:** I'm curious to know, you've had a lengthy career in the creative industries. How did you find your way into this field? What was the interest for you?

**Victoria Jones:** Well, I actually started out a very long time ago as an artist. Prior to that, I tried to go to university and get what my granny would have called a "proper education." A year into university, I realized it just wasn't for me. I dropped out, went to a TAFE college in Glasgow, built a portfolio, and ended up getting into the Glasgow School of Art, which I loved.

I studied Fine Art and Sculpture, but I always had a more grounded approach to art. I was interested in art for everyone, not just the elite. I wasn't interested in over-intellectualized art. That's why I love **public art**. It's democratic. It's for everyone. It doesn't come with snobbery. I often call it the "gateway drug" to art because it might be the only art some people ever experience—something they see in a roundabout or a train station. I think it's very powerful.

**Stephen Burton:** I like the description of public art being democratic. I think that's a fundamental element of placemaking—putting the community in the center of the process. What do you think the role of public art is in the placemaking world?

**Victoria Jones:** I think public art has a crucial and unique role in our public places. In Australia, there is so much building going on—new train stations, healthcare facilities, precincts—and very quickly they can all look the same. You could be in Brisbane, Perth, Melbourne, or Sydney. Public art can make a place stand out. It makes it unique.

For me, great public art must have a connection to **people and place**. It's important that the artist has considered the people and the place the work will live within. I'm not a big supporter of "plonk art"—versions of something that are just dropped everywhere.

**Stephen Burton:** What about the role for the community in the creation of public art? How does that work? Is it done well?

**Victoria Jones:** That's a really interesting question. I've oscillated on this. I believe public art should reflect people and place, but I often hear people say, "The community has to be consulted." And while I don't disagree, I think we have to be careful.

We don't go out to the public and ask their opinion on the drainage system or the structural engineering. There is a difficulty when we ask the public about art or design because everyone has an opinion, but it's often a knee-jerk reaction not based on knowledge or education.

It's like walking into a cafe—you don't expect to like every drink on the menu. Some people like coffee, some like milkshakes. If I commission an artwork and *everyone* loves it, to me that's almost a failure because it's probably quite vanilla. You want a range of emotions.

I think we need **better engagement**, not just consultation. If you just show people an artwork and say "what do you think?" without context, you'll get a superficial response. But if you explain the artist's intention, the story, the "why," you get a truer, deeper response.

**Stephen Burton:** Why don't we have more public art? What are some of the challenges in bringing this stuff into the public domain?

**Victoria Jones:** There's a lot of bad practice out there. When things go wrong—when an artist doesn't know what they're doing, or a project falls apart and ends up in court—it damages the reputation of the whole industry.

Commissioning public art isn't easy. It gets rocky. You need skin like a rhino. But when it goes wrong, nobody talks about it. I think if you're going to embark on this, get someone who has done it before. The role of the public art curator is almost like a translator. You have to speak to engineers, architects, artists, and the community, and they all speak different languages.

**Stephen Burton:** You mentioned a mentoring program you've been running. Can you tell us about that?

**Victoria Jones:** Yes, we started a **Public Art Mentoring Program**. I saw so many artists struggling when dealing with construction teams or large infrastructure projects. They'd never been spoken to in that way, or they were fearful of the contracts and the risk.

We created a program that includes a commissioner, curator, architect, landscape architect, artist, business coach, lawyer, engineer, and fabricator. We have nine presentations from experts in those fields. It's very honest and blunt. We talk about the warts and all—what happens when it goes wrong, how to price things, how not to get ripped off.

The feedback has been phenomenal. Artists come out feeling empowered and confident. They understand the process and the scoring systems used in tenders. We're actually thinking about rolling it out overseas next year because there's interest from places where local artists don't have public art experience.

**Stephen Burton:** That sounds like a fantastic resource. Victoria, the last question for today: What do you think is the most important ingredient for creating a successful public place?

**Victoria Jones:** Honestly, I think you have to think about **people**—what they need and what they want.

I was at a master planning review recently, and we were shown these sexy, sophisticated drawings of a new precinct. But they had overlooked basics. There were no clear lines of sight from one major anchor point to another. I pointed it out, and they asked why it mattered. I said, "Well, I'm a female. If I'm walking there at night, I want to see where I'm going and who is coming towards me."

It's about safety, but also about function and behavior. Urban design sometimes overlooks how people will actually *feel* and *use* a space in favor of how it looks in a 3D render. If we **design for behaviors** and **design for happiness**—for people to feel safe, secure, and welcome—then we build communities. People will want to come into these public places.

**Stephen Burton:** "Design for happiness." That is such a nice phrase and a great place to leave our conversation. Thank you very much, Victoria, for sharing your insights today.

**Victoria Jones:** Thank you for having me.

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