

Today's guest is Wanda Della Costa, architect, educator and proud member of the Saddle Lake Cree Nation. Wanda is the founder of Tower Architecture Collective, a cross-border design practice licensed in both Canada and the United States. Her work centers on indigenous place keeping and life centered design, bringing culture, community and land into the heart of architecture. She's also the founding director of the Indigenous Design Collaborative at Arizona State University, which is a community driven design and research center that advances indigenous design, leadership and impact. She was named a Yerba Buena Center for the Arts one hundred honoree, which is a distinction that celebrates cultural leaders who are reshaping design and advancing social equity. Wanda, welcome to the Placemakers. Thank you. Can we just go a little bit back in time, given that I'm in Australia and you have a deep connection to Canada, can you tell us a little bit about what the Saddle Lake Cree Nation is, and perhaps a little bit about what First Nations culture more broadly is like in Canada. Absolutely. So my earliest memories are up on the we call it the rez, the reserve, and it's essentially a designated piece of land where originally the Canadian government used to parcel out pieces of land where indigenous people would go and reside. It was, I think, you know, it was obviously a way to control us back in the day. You know, you'd have to get a pass to leave the reserve. And they wanted to make sure that you stayed on the reserve. But now it's kind of become almost like a protective enclave where people love being out there because it is a unified, cohesive group of all of their kinship and family living in this tract of land. And so it was an absolutely wonderful place to be involved. You know, my grandmother, my mother, where she grew up. No running water, you know, not a whole lot of money. But it was absolutely wonderful. It was a beautiful place that had a beautiful spirit, a lot of really supportive relatives, a lot of fun horses, fields to run in and hay bales and and, uh, old barn buildings to play on. It was fabulous. And so what happened between then and now? Like, how did you go from that background to being an architect and educator and a leader in your field? Yeah. One of the biggest, I guess, transformations in my life, in the journey that happened to me is, was a backpacking trip. And I was inspired by two gals that worked beside me at the local hardware store, and they started talking about buying this Lonely Planet guide, and they were going to go on this great big journey. And I thought, well, nobody in my neighborhood goes on a big journey to Australia. But I was very curious and, um, I wanted to try it. And so they left one year and I left in, uh, two thousand year was that oh, I think it's seventeen, nineteen ninety when I left go on this journey. I was a young, very young girl by myself. I couldn't find a friend to go with me, knowing where I grew up, had money to go on a trip, and I saved like four or five thousand dollars, which, as you can imagine, wasn't a whole lot of money. And so I ended up working everywhere. And that six month trip that I was on ended up turning into seven years. And I was just fascinated by culture. And it was through those that journey and that exploration that I fell in love with cities and how people inhabit cities and how people inhabit buildings and what makes a good building. But I was also very intrigued by, um, that journey. I saw a lot of culture around the world. And you know, when I come back and think about my grandmother, my mother's house on the rez, I really felt like there was something missing. There were so many really beautifully articulated cultures that were still expressing who they are. And they're in there, the visual design of their communities and their buildings, but also their value systems and their, you know, their belief systems were still intact. And I felt like architecture is such a beautiful vessel to tell so many stories through that it would be the perfect medium to make an exploration. And did you return to Canada to study architecture? After about seven years? Yeah, I ended up coming back. I had my undergraduate degree in sociology. Native studies. And then I ended up turning around and starting the Masters of Architecture in nineteen ninety seven. Yeah. And so your practice now, from what I understand, is focused on connecting First Nations cultural stories to the built environment. Would that be a fair assessment of the type of work that you do? Yep, yep. Absolutely. And what is the process around that? I know in Australia we have a process to speak with First Nations people to understand their stories and then work with them to help express those stories in the built environment. But from what I see in Canada, you guys seem to be just so much better at doing that and so much more advanced compared to us. What's the process around that? What is it that you guys. What is it that you guys do right, that we can learn from? You know what I think is really different. And I think, you know, part of my practice is here in the US where I am now. And I do even see a difference between the US. I mean, clearly now there's a big difference. But in. The Canadian approach to diversity is one of inclusion. So we. Because it's cold and nobody really wants to live there. We've been. We've just always been really welcoming to anyone who wants to come and work and pay taxes so we can, you know, pave the roads and turn the keep the lights on. And so it's always had this sort of really beautiful inclusion around it. And to the point where in the last, I would say five or so years, the government has integrated a policy that requires an indigenous architect as part of every major urban development. So it's even ingrained in the policy. And so I attribute just, you know, the cold, white north

as part of the beauty of how open and inclusive Canada is. But I think it's also comes down to the policies, which are really progressive in itself. And so when you get that sort of supportive foundation of a country, you can really move the needle on a lot of things. Wow. That is an incredibly progressive policy. Has that led to an explosion of young First Nations people wanting to study architecture as a career? Because you can imagine that, you know, there's a small. I think when I graduated, I was number seven. I was the first woman in Canada to graduate or become an architect in a First Nations architect in Canada. And now at this point, I would say there are probably thirty, thirty five or so, which is incredible because that was just twenty years ago. Right? And so people start to see role models out there like, oh, well, if she can do it or I can do it too. And so the government's also been great at promoting and giving kudos to all of these, all of this kind of new inventive work that's coming out of the field of indigenous design. So I also attribute a lot of the organizations in the government to help promote and publicize and to build that language of what it means to be an indigenous architect, what it brings to our communities, and how it makes our environment a little bit different. Yeah. So what are some of those ways that First Nations stories are expressed in the built environment? And how does that further the cause of reconciliation and understanding? Yeah, and I think, um, in terms of our process, there's a lot of, you know, we develop, we develop methods in conjunction with our communities. And so I always call our methods their living because as soon as we're taught a better way to do something, we switch and we pivot. And so a lot of this work is really built on partnering very closely with our communities to really understand. But if you think about what the the base purpose of this work is, I think that's really important because it helps center why we do some of the things that we do. Obviously, it's rooted in participatory design. It's about authenticity. There's been a lot of kind of stereotypical cliché, you know, stuff that's come out in the in the world of not only just design, but also fashion and art. And we really want to really make it authentic. And at the same time, we're also looking to make spaces that incorporate indigenous people and how they use spaces. Right now, sixty percent of indigenous people worldwide live in urban centers. Well, what does that mean? How does it change the city? What do they need in terms of functionality? You know, if they want to have a powwow or a ceremony or sweat lodge, a sweat dance, how do we, uh, make spaces more functional? And then the last thing that I think this work does, um, before I get into the process is it starts to, I think, start a dialogue between cultures. And so I think one of the powerful things for me about this work is how this vessel of architecture can really lift up culture in so many different ways. So with that in mind, you know, it's rooted in participatory design. It's aiming to amplify an authenticity that hasn't been previously done. It's enhancing the functionality of those cultural spaces, and it's fostering a cross-cultural understanding. So in order to do all of that heavy lifting, we developed something called the indigenous Peacekeeping framework. And it's again, as I mentioned, the living model. It has five phases. We start with an alignment phase, which we think is really important because there's often very broad and nonspatial aspirations connected to a project that we want to really understand. Like maybe it's about job creation, or maybe it's about utilizing material that is local and has a spiritual significance, but we don't know until we start that alignment process. The second phase is place based research. So we'll just go go to our drawing board and spend like two or three days, sometimes a single day, doing research about those communities so that we have a little bit of cultural fluency. After that, we do what's called an engagement, where we'll actually sit our user groups in a room and really try and understand and really do our best to listen. You know, we have little quirky rules in our firm. We have a ninety over ten rule where ninety percent of the time that you're in community should be spent listening and ten percent talking. It's hard for architects that that's the fourth that the engagement phase. And we're learning now that engagement phase is starting to, I think, solve it to something else. We're now calling it almost a validation because people are starting to get fatigued by just being asked questions. So that's the the case. Then we get into co-design, which we are designing in collaboration with our communities. And then the final phase is we we're trying to figure out how to celebrate because we get so much information, transcripts and stories, and we go to the archives and we do research and we have all this beautiful abundance of information. I don't want to just put it in a database and file it away. And so we got into the habit of wrapping it up into a little storybook and giving it back almost as a leave behind to our communities. And so that's the, those are the five phases that we typically embark on in a project. What a beautiful process. Is that applicable across different First Nations groups within Canada or more broadly, even in the US? Or does it need to be tailored depending on the group you're working with? Well, all the work has to be tailored, but the idea behind Ipcf is that is that it actually can apply to any community. We've been asked by. I kid you not, indigenous people in India, Hawaii, Middle East, South America, Mexico who are all very interested in taking that model and testing it out for projects in their home community. And so I think it has very broad applicability. Fortunately, it sounds like an incredible. You talk

about place keeping. That's not a term necessarily that we use a lot in Australia. Can you tell me what place keeping means? Yeah, we think about place keeping. As you know, it's a contrary term to place making. And I think it was more of a, a reaction to that language that someone from outside could come in and make a place. I can't make a place. The place was already there, right? It was already there. I'm just coming in, trying to understand it, trying to uplift the beauty and the magic that is that place. Whether it's the context, the landscape, the color of the sky, the, you know, know, materiality and how it sits in the landscape. And so I can only keep what was already there. I can't make it. And so for us, the term place keeping is really about, I guess, uplifting. What is special about a place and making sure that we keep those memories alive for the generations going forward. Some of the outcomes from that process that you've been involved with that you're really proud of. I think for me, you know, the work this work is, as you can imagine, is, is not about it's never about the money. You don't get into architecture because you want to make money. You get into it, you know, because obviously you have a creative slant to you. But I think what what I hear from our the people who work in this firm with alongside me and half are non-Indigenous, half are indigenous. It's really about the reaction from our community members who finally see themselves visibly represented in architecture. Whereas before we had this sort of generic, monochromatic, homogenous kind of aesthetic style in architecture, particularly resulting from that era of modernism. And it was so hard to move away from that. But given this big backpacking trip I did, I realized that there's way more interesting stuff. If we lean in to that creativity that comes from all of those cultures overseas, we create, there's almost like a newness of seeds of inspiration to create something visually not only authentic, but also very interesting and very contextual. I was interested to talk a little bit about the co-design process that you mentioned in your, in your place keeping framework, the co-design process with indigenous people. What does that look like and how does that actually work? Is there challenges around speaking different languages in terms of outcomes and collaboration models? I mean, what are some of the, what are some of the things you've had to iron out along the way in that, in that co-design process? Yeah. One of the, one of the big, I guess, helping, helping the tools that help us along the way. We've established something called design drivers. So when we do our place based research and we do an engagement or a shortened process of validation to make sure that we understand and we think we're, we have a grasp on kind of what could be authentic seeds of this creation. We will create a series of design drivers. So they're about, I don't know, four, sometimes five could be six big kind of North Stars that centered not only us, but obviously they're vetted by the team, but all of the team of consultants that we're working with. There might be other architects, there might be engineers. It could be the final contractor. They become the message that we put forward to that entire team, hey, these are the four things that we're trying to achieve and we explain why we're trying to achieve it and how in the building it's enacted or it comes to life. And we do that to kind of center those those drivers and make sure that they don't fall off. So that is one of our tools that we've used along the way. And this helps because, you know, sometimes you get out on the field and the contractor starts to build something. They don't know why. There's funny lines on the floor going in. Not perfect directions. Right? And they've they've asked me for hey, can I just straighten these lines out for you? I'm like, no, you can't. This is a teaching that you're trying to straighten out and it belongs to the stars and the solstice sunrise or something, right? Something really powerful and profound. And so that education process and that alignment with that larger consultant team during design has been really, really helpful. I'll bet. And so you split your time between Canada and also in Arizona. Can you tell us a little bit about the work that you do in Arizona? Sure. We started this little the Phoenix office started as a design research firm. This was where the hub of the research was undertaken. As you know, I teach at ASU just down the street. And so we lean in very heavily to culture in this office. And so right now we're working with the Mellon Foundation on a large grant, which has to do with developing commemorative themes to honor the indigenous people of the city of Phoenix for the future. So very different. We're working a lot with indigenous artists. We're working a lot with community members, you know, our tribes and just bringing having conversations, doing listening tours. And so I would say the difference is, you know, while Canada is pumping with a number of projects, this office is really pushing the envelope in terms of innovation. What's next? Research, the sort of ingenuity, the engine behind the work that we're doing in both offices. What are some of the differences that you notice between the US and Canada in terms of place keeping and the telling of First Nations stories? You know, obviously the Canada is very progressive in the way they they look at this work and there's other countries around the world. I know New Zealand is doing quite a bit of work in very, very. They have a very strong foundation for this type of work in New Zealand, in America, I think, um, you know, notwithstanding the new administration, it is just a little bit, I think behind where we're at in Canada, and I'm guessing I actually attribute that to our success because I came here just kind of oblivious and I was like, oh, right, this is how we do it in Canada.

Everyone is honored and everyone's respected, and we have to be inclusive to everyone. That wasn't typical down here when I came. And so I actually think it's working for us. And I think it's how we landed a grant by the largest arts granting institution in America, the Mellon Foundation, because they see us as an anomaly. I come from a very different, um, way of including people, which is the Canadian way. And so I hope that this work here in the US changes helps to kind of productively disrupt the field. And so the more, the more we can do to put, you know, cool things, brave designs out into the world. I think it will help elevate and kind of start those conversations rolling in. What are some, what are some of the challenges that you face in doing more of this work? And what are some of the things perhaps that could be done differently or done better if you could wave a magic wand? What are some of the changes that you would make? I mean, if I would have four times as many indigenous architects in the field, I think it would be lovely. And those indigenous architects need to have, you know, it takes a long time to become skilled. You know, eight or ten years before you can really run something on your own. And so somehow a shortcut. So like a fast track, expedited process. So they can become really advanced really fast. And I think it's possible. You know, I think we could build like a. What do you call it? Like almost like a mentorship, a formal mentorship system where we fast track young indigenous grads from around the world. I think that would be a tremendously helpful addition and or an add to the field. But I also think we're, we're aiming to educate. Also, the other side of the coin are the allies, the champions that help us. And there's so many that support this work. Most firms in North America are very interested in learning how to do this work. So we built a series of modules that are available on our website that are designed to help designers and architects, planners and policy makers really understand how we do our work. And I think that education piece is really critical to just get people moving in another way. From my observations, what's going on in Canada and even parts of the US is so much more advanced in terms of cultural storytelling in built form compared to what we're doing here in Australia. I think it's fair to say that we are very, very behind and we have a lot to learn, and that's why I suppose I wanted to speak to you today. What are some of the things that you think we need to be better at doing? What are some of the fundamentals that we need to get right here in Australia in order to see more representation of Australian First Nations voices and culture in our built communities? Yeah. Well, I think number one goes back to having more indigenous designers. You know, they, they, we need them to come out so that they can make the, that field, right? Because it's brand new. We all have oral traditions, most indigenous people around the world. There's nothing written I can't even when I teach at the university, there's not there's no book to go to to tell a story of original architecture. It's all been written, you know, by anthropologists, you know, a hundred years ago. And of course, it's not fully accurate. So I think we need those indigenous that lived experience that comes from people who know the community and lived in community. I think that's number one. Number two, I think we need to dive deeper into science, the science part of built environment. So environmental psychology to understand how environments affect us. You know, we can no longer just create these purely formal inventions that we think can stand the test of time when they're really just an external beautiful shell, but it's empty in terms of the relatability, the inclusion, the culture, the warmth it has. There's so many times that, you know, these beautiful objects are created, but for who? It's, it's more of an art. And I think there's room for those types of projects to create just a big, beautiful blob of thing. Absolutely. But I think right now, with all of the beautiful diversity in our world, like if we lean in to research based methodologies, to human centered design, to evidence based design, you know, the science behind this work, I think we will very quickly see that there is an alternate path. And last question for today. I wanted to see if people are looking to get their hands on some of the resources that you've mentioned today, the place keeping framework, some of the other things, perhaps some of the work you're doing in Arizona with the university, how can they go about doing that? Our website is new, uh, triple w dot com or Tor.com. And on there, there's a link where we have some resources that people can access. It's been a really illuminating conversation. I've learnt so much today. Thank you so much for joining us today on the Placemakers. Any time.