

# Mind: Design and Creativity in the City Transcript

## 0:00 Stance Podcast

Have you ever thought about the connection between wellbeing, urban spaces and neuroscience? How does the way we design our cities impact on our mental health? In this feature, we've partnered with UP Projects to bring together the work of practitioners from across the world. We spotlight a growing number of international designers, architects and artists who are responding to this very question. With the help of new scientific developments harnessed from our mind. I went to find out more. Living in the city, it's busy, exciting, loud and extremely stimulating. But how does living here impact on our health and how it's designed? The public health challenge posed by mental health hardly needs an introduction with the ubiquity of mental illness. The growing evidence of the disruptive role environmental factors can have on mental stability has sparked a new generation of scientists, architects and policymakers who are trying to work out how to design the cities for the future or improve our existing urban spaces. They are borrowing approaches from sources as diverse as neuroscience, and the way children learn through play to improve our mental health in our cities. I began by meeting public health specialist Rachel Tom in London's Lower Marsh in Waterloo.

## 1:45 Rachel Tom

Lower Marsh is a street that is pretty good for walking, there isn't too much traffic. There's some sirens in the background. So, we're close to traffic, but we're not actually in it.

## 1:58 Stance Podcast

No, actually, it's surprisingly quiet.

## 2:00 Rachel Tom

So, there are shops and cafes and pubs of all different types on this street. Vehicles can use the street for deliveries, which is really important for keeping those businesses alive, but they don't dominate the area. They're cheap eateries, which is helpful. There are workplaces. And in fact, having workplaces close to people's homes, is really important for health, because there's such a strong correlation between having a job and being healthy, physically and mentally. So, if we create what we call compact, complete neighbourhoods where you've got all sorts of different uses...

### **2:42 Stance Podcast**

...in one street or ones...

### **2:43 Rachel Tom**

...in one area, then there's a much higher chance of people being able to access jobs, walk to work, and both of those things are unbelievable for health. And one indicator of whether we're doing a good job is what's different types of people we see using a place, if you see young and old, if you see rich and poor using a place, then that's a really, really good sign that it's working for everyone. But I'm not sure we've got the full demographic spectrum here on Lower Marsh. But there is stuff that caters for different people with different needs. And that's a really good start.

### **3:21 Stance Podcast**

In terms of like policy and government and that kind of thing. Do you think that when we think about building our new towns, there's so many things we need to think about? Do you think that health is something that's in the centre? Should it be more in the centre?

### **3:30 Rachel Tom**

Oh yeah, there are loads of issues to take into account in planning, new environments, new neighbourhoods, when we're creating big new developments, we are shaping places that people will use probably for hundreds of years to come. Because once this stuff is built, it's quite difficult to - and expensive to change it. Lots of things to take into account and I think health could and should be more centre stage and that thinking.

### **4:01 Stance Podcast**

You know, in terms of your career, you've designed streets, for instance, and public spaces, you know, from the UK, Ireland, but also in Indian and Nepal. What was that like? And then you've also come back here, and then you're doing what you're doing now? How has that informed your practice that kind of international global perspective?

### **4:17 Rachel Tom**

Yeah. So, what I found working on projects in India and Nepal, is that a lot of the issues are universal. And that creating places where people from all walks of life, from all with all ages, all backgrounds and all income levels, is really important. And

that there can be lots of vested interests, there can be power struggles, there can be arguments that can be short termism. All of these things affect projects everywhere in the world.

#### **4:49 Stance Podcast**

So, we're looking at kind of mental health and if you look at mental health, the statistics are terrifying, especially when you look at a place like big cities, if you are from a low income background, so the lowest 20% income, you're two to three times more likely to suffer mental health and statistic, which is shocking is that if you're a child as well, you're three times more likely. So what do you think the role is people that work within your field that they can do for those types of people? How are we targeting that kind of inequality? Obviously, it's important that we have healthy talents for everybody, but for the ones that are worst off, I suppose, in terms of priorities, we have what are people thinking on the ground, in terms of working?

#### **5:29 Rachel Tom**

So, in the worlds of the built environment, we don't talk as much as we should about tackling inequalities. And I think that we should do because every time we create a place, we are making it easy for some people, and maybe making it not quite so easy for other people to use those places to feel comfortable to get around. So, we need to make that issue explicit - talk about it. We need to recognise that we have a role to play in creating places where everyone can thrive, whatever your background, and if your child growing up on the 16th floor without a balcony or a garden, you need a place to run around outside and get dirty and burn off that energy and mess around with your friends.

#### **6:21 Stance Podcast**

Do you think that hasn't been at the centre? So much in terms of like thinking about spaces and design?

#### **6:28 Rachel Tom**

What's good now, I think is that we're seeing more and more evidence come through of the consequences for people in terms of their physical health and their mental health. And with that information, we can now design in a more conscious way. We're also maybe becoming a little bit more empathetic and understanding of issues like mental health. And people do want to play their part and do want to do the right thing.

## 7:02 Stance Podcast

So how are architects responding to the realisation that many urban spaces breed mental stress, and what can be done to offer people experiences that alleviate rather than aggravate Itai Palti is an architect and the Founder of Conscious Cities, a movement that puts people back in the centre of the way we develop cities.

## 7:27 Itai Palti

For me, it was important to try and back up those decisions, or maybe inform those decisions by an evidence base by what research is out there. And when I started looking and speaking to psychologists and neuroscientists, it became very clear that there already is a very rich body of knowledge. And there's a huge potential through the behavioural sciences, to step up the efforts to understand how the built environment affects us and use that as part of our design process. And so, I think that that's kind of what led me to work with psychologists, neuroscientists, and carry out studies. And a lot of my work is, is based around the efforts to streamline the adoption of new knowledge coming from science into the design process, making methodologies that make it easier for designers and architects to take up those insights. The work of Conscious Cities, I obviously, I find it very exciting, because I'm doing it, but it has an interesting impact on the building industry, in terms of the connections that it's creating between academia and industry. So those carrying out the research about how the environment affects us, and those that have the power and the means to implement that kind of insight to create better environments. So, both in the conferences and the - we recently had a festival in London, and the publications that we push out. That's all related to changing the building industry. Now Conscious Cities is a movement. So, there are other people that can do Conscious Cities events and have done Conscious Cities events. And I think it's important for other people to have that agency and to feel that they can own and be part of that conversation to. So in no way do I think that Conscious Cities is an organisation. By contrast, Conscious Cities as a movement is open for other people to take on and to make it their own as well. And I think that's, that's really important because there has a lot of potential for people to improve their built environment. And I think that's something that a lot of us can connect to, doesn't matter if we actually are architects or were in in the building industry or researchers. I think everyone has an interest in creating a better built environment, for ourselves and for future generations, obviously. And so for example, one project that that I worked on is Urban Thinkscape in Philadelphia. And that project takes the science of playful learning, which means that children learn better. So, they consolidate memory, better when their experience is framed, as play. So, we got a plot of land which was on a - at a junction on a street corner, in a neighbourhood called Belmont in Philadelphia, that plot was chosen for a specific reason that there

was a bus stop right next to it. So, when you are trying to create opportunities within urban landscape, for types of interactions, for types of experiences, the best way to distribute that kind of experience isn't actually as a destination. So, we didn't want people to have to, to arrive to this place, but actually to embed it within the everyday lives of the people living in the neighbourhoods. So, use the time that the families were waiting for bus at their bus stop, instead of waiting, and the parent would be on the phone and the child probably staring at something bored, we use that - we hijacked that time to make it - to give an opportunity for that experience to play and learn.

#### **11:18 Stance Podcast**

And another thing that you kind of see and read about a lot is when sort of, you know, developers, designers, architects go into an area to develop an area or change it slightly. And how there seems to be a disconnect between that and actually talking to everyday people who are in these areas to make sure that all communities, new and old, feel welcome in those spaces. Do you think that the sort of developers, designers, architects, all of those people who are redesigning areas are speaking to people enough? Do we have a good system right now?

#### **11:56 Itai Palti**

To different extents is the answer. So, there are developers, and I guess we would call them patrons, and sometimes it comes from government or local authorities that do have a high level of engagement with the community. And there are ones that don't. And I think that the question is, how do we encourage, first of all, more engagement with the community, but the right kind of engagement. Because a lot of the time, what you get is you might have a community engagement event happening from a developer. And then the people who can make it to these events end up going, often that's not necessarily a very good representation of the population or the interests of that population. And a lot of the time, I think what happens in in these events is that developers or whoever the building side are, look for indications or proof of ideas that they already hold. And...

#### **12:57 Stance Podcast**

...what do you mean by that?

#### **12:59 Itai Palti**

...they might ask the community certain questions and receive a number of responses. But we have a natural bias to look for the responses that reinforce

viewpoint in any case. So that's quite a human problem. I'm not saying that's a very intentional thing on the side of developers, but we look for we look for ideas that reinforce the ideas we already have. And so, if you come with a proposal to a community, you might already be looking for the kind of comments that are positive towards that and reinforce the decisions that you've already made. So, there's a kind of question of whether the type of community engagement that we have at the moment is an effective one to get the community's interests across well.

### **13:46 Stance Podcast**

And when you know, developers and designers are in an area, do you think that the kind of human centred approach which I think connects to what you're doing and conscious cities, and you're doing lots of kind of groundwork, speaking to people, do you think that human centred approach is at the heart of what they're doing?

### **14:02 Itai Palti**

I think architects often start with a very human centred intention in their design. But the economics of a project often push it to another direction. And I think, really, the, what we need to be questioning is what are the mechanisms that deviate a design from being human centred to, to non-human centred. And I think there are a number of, let's say, stresses on some on the side of the developers that that cause that. So, for example, developers aren't often tied in, in the long term, to a to a project, which means often they might design it in a way that would sell apartments relatively quickly, and then they can leave the project. And what that means is that the long term effects of an environment in the space less taken into account. So, the developers that are tied into projects that for longer term, so they need to what they call "future proof" that project, which means being able for it to be competitive in a market in the long term of, let's say, 20 to 30 years. And that relationship, that long term relationship between developer and property gives a, let's say, greater focus on the human aspects or the human centred aspects of that project. So, what are the long term effects of being in this environment? What does 20 years feel like in this environment? And what are the cognitive behavioural physiological effects of it? The same with schools, or hospitals - you're talking about the long term performance of this place? And when your measures are related to human outputs? So, in schools, it's, you know, what are the learning outcomes of children in hospitals, its recovery times, you have a better incentive to design for human outputs to design in a human centred way? Because your returns in the long term are a lot better when you're tied in.

### **16:06 Stance Podcast**

That was Itai Palti from Conscious Cities. This is the sound of someone feeling happy in California, the US

### **16:13 Audio**

[*Music*]

### **16:20 Stance Podcast**

What about this?

### **16:22 Audio**

[*Indistinct noise*] "This is a Northern Line train terminating at Morden"

### **16:29 Stance Podcast**

That's the sound of someone who's feeling anxious in London, UK. These are a few of tens of thousands of recordings uploaded to Urban Mind, a recently launched app aimed at understanding how urban and rural living is affecting mental wellbeing. I've downloaded the app and being prompted to record my feelings, the sounds, locations where I am three times a day amassed an array of questions from how I feel, whether I feel safe at night, as well as charting my general mood, how I spend my time, and how I rate my day. This is all anonymous, and after two weeks, I'm sent a detailed report, which will also feed into the work of neuroscientists. This is a research project by King's College London which is being led by neuroscientist Andrea Bocelli, as well as landscape architects J&L Gibbons and Arts Foundation Nomad Projects, he told me what he hopes it would achieve.

### **17:21 Andrea Bocelli**

The motivation for this project is that it's well known that if you live in an urban environment, your likelihood of developing a mental health condition is much higher than if you live in a rural environment. This is something people have known for a long time. And we also know that living in an urban environment has a measurable impact on people's brain. So, for example, there is there is a region within the so called limbic system that is responsible for responding to stress. And this region shows heightened reactivity, heightened response to stressful stimuli, in those people who grow up in urban environments and leave in urban environments for a long time. So we know there is also a measurable neurobiological effect. What we do not know is what are the mechanisms? Why is it that if you grow up in an urban environment, you are at greater risk of developing a mental condition? How

is this association mediated? So, the aim of the urban mind project is to try and understand the mechanisms, the specific factors that link the urban environment with poor mental health.

#### **18:31 Stance Podcast**

So the people behind that you're all together creativeness. You tell me a bit more about it.

#### **18:36 Andrea Bocelli**

This is really important because the factors that affect mental health are very multifaceted. They're very diverse. So, we need to move on from the traditional view of mental health as something that is dealt with within the doctor's office. Because the way a town might be planned the way a school might be organised, the way a workplace is run. So, there are many factors within society that affect mental health. And they're not necessarily factors that clinicians doctors can impact on directly. So, in order to promote mental health, support people with mental health issues, it's really important to adopt a multidisciplinary cross disciplinary approach. If we are to use the results to grow healthier cities, of course, it's key to collaborate with urban planners and designers, architects, with campaigners would with also politicians, make them aware of what the evidence base is so that they can take that on board.

#### **19:44 Stance Podcast**

Do you think that's why people are talking more about neuroscience now, people seem to be like a lot more interested in it. Do you think it's because there's just so much more data coming out now that there's only so much the people in charge or policymakers can ignore that this is actually proof I'm going to be harmful?

#### **20:01 Andrea Bocelli**

I think we neuroscience, we have to be careful because there is a tendency within the media within society to over interpret, overestimate what neuroscientific data actually tells us. And the issue in neuroscience is that the data looks very objective, because we're measuring brain activity, we're measuring brain structure. So that gives people a sense, reassuring sense of reliability and validity. But in fact, there are all sorts of neurological issues, all sorts of issues with the interpretation of the neuroscientific findings, which maybe the general public are not aware of. So what neuroscience can tell us is certainly valuable, but it's not going to be able to answer all the questions and especially when it comes to impact, we need to work with



urban planners and designers, with politicians, with architects to be able to then implement the findings into practice. Within the literature, there is a great emphasis on the detrimental effects of living in cities, somehow, urban environments are almost perceived as a risk factor for all sorts of mental health issues. Actually, living in an urban environment can be great for so many reasons. I can give you a few examples. If you come from a minority and an ethnic minority or you come to a city, you will be able to mix with people who come from that minority or share the same interests with you. And that can be very empowering can be very meaningful for a lot of people who would have been quite isolated elsewhere. Also, urban environments have offer incredible opportunities for work compared to non-urban environments. And we all know that work is incredibly important for mental health. So, these are just two examples of how moving from rural to urban environment can actually benefit people's mental health. So, it wouldn't be simplistic it would be reductionist to think about urban environments as a dangerous place where people become ill. In fact, they offer many, many benefits. So, we hope that the results will also be relevant and useful from different perspectives. So, from my own perspective, the perspective of a neuroscientist and a clinical psychologist, I hope that the results will help us design and develop better interventions.

#### **22:44 Stance Podcast**

Andrea talked about the built environment is detrimental for some it also empowering for others. We explore this paradox further with Barbadian artists Mark King whose recent work look on me and be renewed, commissioned by UP Projects in partnership with Science Gallery London, explores the psychological impacts of the city from the perspective of people with lived experience of addiction and recovery from substance use. I caught up with Mark to find out more about this participatory project and his collaboration with Dr. John Marsden, Professor of addiction psychology at King's College London.

#### **23:24 Mark King**

Call me and be renewed consists of three components, a site-specific installation, in the Science Gallery, ground floor windows, and installation. On the second floor of the gallery in the *Hooked* exhibition, where a hanging custom made boiler suit is suspended within three polyhedral structures. This stands in front of a large vinyl wall, which features a pattern that was created by referencing the co-producer photos. The project was developed through a series of process led workshops, where the group explored the presence of visible and invisible patterns in our daily lives. And the three workshop sessions included garment customization, a photography field day in London Bridge, where I handed out disposable cameras to seven of the co-producers. Then on the third day, there was an analysis session

where Dr. Marsden came in and met the co-producers and considered the cognitive impact of the built environment by talking them through what motivated them to photograph their environment and you know, just focus on what they chose to photograph, in London Bridge and through that process that really uncovered underlying patterns of behaviour uncovered aspects of their past and aspects of their recovery. So, taking it back, even to just their childhood.

#### **24:54 Stance Podcast**

You mentioned three components - what's the third?

#### **24:57 Mark King**

The third component is online and encourages people from around the world to take photos of their immediate surroundings, be it rural or urban, and include the hashtag #LLMABR. And these photos can be shared anywhere from Twitter to Facebook and Instagram. And I will be searching this hashtag and referencing these photos to create new patterns that go back into the digital environment. And these patterns will mainly live on the project Instagram page, which is at @L\_O\_M\_A\_B\_R. And they will also be shared across multiple platforms. So please get out there take photos of your immediate surroundings and include the hashtag, and I will create patterns by referencing them.

#### **26:02 Stance Podcast**

Andreas talked about interventions, Itai talked about data driven research, whilst Rachel talked about practical ways to improve our public spaces. And Mark talked about visible and invisible patterns that exist in our daily lives and the cognitive impact of our built environment. At a time when our understanding of mental health continues to grow. And at the same time, designers are shaping our cities for centuries to come, there's a growing demand put humans not for profit at the heart of design. And the challenge seems to me will be connecting up the different agendas from architects to developers to policymakers. So, we can all attempt to understand the cities we live in in order to create meaningful change that benefits our mental health. We continue to look at how our cities can be moulded to fulfil the needs of their inhabitants. But this time we look at how this can be done from the ground up. How can people themselves be fully involved in urban innovation, so that the new space is created reflect the needs of the communities they're meant to serve rather than the theoretical or academic models favoured by the innovators themselves? I went to Store Store in the new development in Coals Drop Yard in Kings Cross to speak to Kevin green and Stine Keinicke. They've been doing this kind of thing for years - but this project is brand new.

**27:25 Stine Keinicke**

So maybe we can divide and conquer. So, some of us, we are inside of Store Store, which is a space where we do after school clubs for students at local state schools. And then we also have a design shop where we sell the work of the students and work from artists and designers that run the workshops. Art and design education is very, it's kind of like a privileged thing. Art Education is quite expensive in London. And this is a way to kind of bring young people in who have that interest or without having to pay money for it, basically. So, we are also here to help them to whatever they want to apply for. And this space, we have here Store Store, it's also this space, so we want actually them to claim the space a bit and be in here, not only when we have the after school club, but whenever they want to come by.

**28:29 Audience Member**

My name is Tyrone.

**28:30 Stance Podcast**

Hi, and were you here last week as well?

**28:33 Audience Member**

Yeah, I was here for the first session.

**28:35 Stance Podcast**

Tell me, how do you like it here at store? How do you find it? Are you from a local area as well?

**28:40 Audience Member**

No, I'm from East London. So far, I'm enjoying the experience. It's also helping me with my knowledge of engineering and textiles.

**28:48 Stance Podcast**

So what are you doing right now?

**28:50 Audience Member**

So, we have our templates which have already been soldered, which then later on but I then strip the ends of some pieces of wire, which will then be soldered on to my template and then connected up to the power supply so that the electrolysis can then take place...

**29:10 Stance Podcast**

...and it looks really beautiful as well.

**29:12 Audience Member**

No, it does. And it's combining science as well. So there's a lot more to design than just creating.

**29:19 Stance Podcast**

Thank you.

**29:21 Audience Member**

It's fun. It's interesting. I go to school round here. So I just come here after school. Before I haven't really like worked in product project design, or like had experience in it. But this is like opened my eyes to the area of engineering.

**29:33 Audience Member**

I'm Naymore.

**29:35 Stance Podcast**

And are you from around here?

**29:36 Audience Member**

I live around the corner so it's quite easy to get here.

**29:40 Stance Podcast**

And so you live around here you know this area quite well. What do you think of it?

**29:42 Audience Member**

I think it's nice because when I first moved into this area there was lots of construction, so I didn't see anything, and now like everything's opening up. It's really nice seeing the area. *[Inaudible]*

### **29:55 Stance Podcast**

How have you found it like working with these young people?

### **29:57 Kevin Green**

My experience is they are excellent students who have a lot of drive, a lot of energy. A lot of good ideas is often better ideas than some of my university students. So, it's rewarding in the sense that they teach me about stuff. They're constantly bringing new ideas to the table that we're able to test out. And so someday, what it's, it's a really useful thing. I think it works both ways.

### **30:23 Stance Podcast**

It's clear this project improves how the community connects to new development like this. But once a project like Store is established, then what? How can it be sustainable, and for how long? And how does this type of engagement continue to adapt to reflect the ways in which people in place change over time? Torange Khonsari from public works, which is an art and architecture collective based in London, have been trying to do this for almost 20 years, and she has this advice for people trying to engage in a genuine way.

### **30:53 Torange Khonsari**

We started actually a majority of our work being participatory, or socially engaged art commissions, smaller ones. We quite rarely do one off commissions like that unless they tap into existing projects that we're already doing long term. And the reason for that was that at one point, about five or six years ago, we realised that if you are socially engaged in a context, especially in very difficult contexts, deprived contexts, then you know, you have enough money for a commission, which is maybe at most a year long, it really takes a lot of time and energy for you to actually get people involved in a meaningful way. And then the project would just stop, and you would, you know, and we felt like this was just really uncomfortable and really unethical somehow to then just leave that project. So that's kind of a really interesting dilemma that we have had to deal with over the years as well.

### **32:02 Stance Podcast**

It would be lovely if you could tell me a bit about some of the projects that you've worked on and some of the communities that you've worked with as well.

### **32:10 Torange Khonsari**

I was approached by a community group in Bow. They wanted to take over their high street in a way and really start to have self-governing power over how their neighbourhood gets developed, and so on. And the way that we usually work, and that's where the art influences come in. In this situation, I took over a really small plot of land legally, and I built with my students, we built a temporary structure, we ran a lot of events, and kind of created what we thought was more like something like a public living room, if you like. And through that, we also started to then find out what people actually wanted. And so, the temporary architecture was a design piece is, I suppose, an architectural piece. And that then has given us enough evidence for us to turn that space now into a permanent building for the community. And so that space then becomes a public asset - a community asset.

### **33:12 Stance Podcast**

So when you say, enough evidence, so that's for local government, for you to then say to them this is...

### **33:17 Torange Khonsari**

...or the landowners, so in a way, you can't just kind of at the beginning, just go and say can I take this land to for community assets? You know, if they feel they would privatise it, you know, so, so what we're really interested in at the moment, which maybe is a bit activist is that we're really interested in a positive way to secure public land. In this kind of wave of privatisation of land. I suppose a lot of projects that we're working on at the moment, are really long-term projects that we've been involved in for four or five years.

### **33:58 Stance Podcast**

Speaking to Torange, I began to see that at the heart of these technical, logical advances and academic approaches to improving our mental health, by making better use of our spaces is people. If we're not talking to communities and finding out what they want and need, we're missing out on some potentially powerful solutions for the future.