Future of Infrastructure podcast

Episode 17 – How art is driving change in Philadelphia

Jeremy Goldberg (host)

Jane Golden (guest)

Running time: 22:43

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Welcome to the future of infrastructure. I’m Jeremy Goldberg, Worldwide Director of Critical Infrastructure at Microsoft. And I’m on a journey to learn more about how infrastructure is being built around the world by talking with public servants, philanthropist, artists and place makers who have spent their lives working in the public interest. This is a series to help us build things and plan for the future while putting people first.

“Art has the ability to convey emotions, ideas and experiences in a way that words alone cannot. It can be a powerful tool for self-expression and communication, especially for those who may not have access to other forms of representation or have been marginalized by society.”

Jane Golden, those are your words, aren’t they?

**JANE GOLDEN:** Yes, they are.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** It is an absolute pleasure to be here with you at South by Southwest in Austin, Texas. I believe this is your first time here.

**JANE GOLDEN:** It is, and I’m so excited. I can’t believe that I’ve always thought about coming here. But we applied to have a panel and got accepted, and here we are. And yesterday’s session went really well.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Yeah, I’ve heard great things. And some of my colleagues were able to attend your session yesterday with Emily Yates from SEPTA. And before we dive in to your experience and your takeaways already from being here at South by Southwest. For those who are not familiar with the work that you do in the city of Philadelphia, or your background and your career, share with us a bit about who you are and what you do, and what inspires you to continue to drive change through the arts in Philadelphia.

**JANE GOLDEN:** Okay. Well, first, thank you for having me on today. So, I grew up at the Jersey Shore, parents, fabulous parents. My dad was a businessman, and my mom was an artist. So, I think I got both sets of genes. And I painted from the time I was young. My parents talked to me a lot about social realism, about the artists who painted during the WPA.

I ended up going to college at Stanford University. And there, I started painting larger and larger, and I ended up moving to LA after I graduated. I was a double major at Stanford, political science and fine art, because I thought I’d probably go to law school. So, my painting professors were like, “You just have to get like a job that’s boring and go paint.” I was like, “Okay, that’s sort of odd advice, but I guess I’ll follow it.”

So, I moved to LA. I got a job where I was indeed miserable, and I was painting. And I saw, everywhere I went, I saw these glorious murals. And I said to myself, I really would like to paint a mural. I have absolutely zero idea how to do this. And then I read the paper about the LA mural program. That is, it was headed by Judy Baca, who is an extraordinary artist, and she was a real role model for me.

And I ended up applying to do a mural because I had read about that they gave grants out to artists every year. They told me I was past the deadline. I ignored them; I did everything that I was supposed to do if I wasn’t past the deadline. I dropped off my application. I called them every day for three months. Finally, I got a call and they said, “Is Jane Golden there?” I said, “This is she.” They were like, “Look, we want to be clear. We hope we never hear from you ever again, but you have this grant. (Laughter.) Like, please go away.”

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** (Laughter.) Go away.

**JANE GOLDEN:** And so, I had my little paints, and I had –

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** That’s (good?) trouble. I like that.

[06:08]

**JANE GOLDEN:** Yeah, yeah, it’s like – (laughter) – and then I ended up doing this mural. I’d never done murals, really. I just sort of – I had a little guide, a little brochure that taught me how to do a mural. (Laughter.) And it was the most amazing experience because I thought, oh, I’ve always thought art should be available to everybody. This really makes it happen.

And it was, like, incredible standing on the corner, talking to people about politics and community issues.

I moved back east and – to be with my family, and I was coming up to a hospital in Philadelphia. And I was reading about Philly, and how they were about to elect and then elected their first black mayor, Wilson Goode. And he was going to work with graffiti writers, and it occurred to him, graffiti writers loved art. And he was going to hire someone who liked art, who was part of his Anti-Graffiti program.

So, I applied; I sent my resume to his office. And the man who was his deputy director of arts and culture knew my work in LA, knew my boss. And so, he ended up – he called up, said I should come for an interview. I got interviewed; I was hired to work for this Anti-Graffiti Network.

And so, I started working, and I realized I, like, fell in love with this line of work, working with young people. And then we started working in neighborhoods, and delivering art as a city service in areas of the city, where the only other visible city employees were the police. And it was just stunning, and startling and revolutionary in some way, when we started to do murals that reflected the hopes, and dreams, and thoughts, and memories and history of people who lived in that community. So, the art was not disconnected.

So, I did that for 10 years, and it reinforced me that power of art that I sort of thought about but hadn’t really been explicit about. And then Anti-Graffiti closed down, and I thought, okay, so now I think I’ll go to law school.

So, I got into a couple of schools. And my brother said to me – he’s a lawyer – he said, “I don’t think you should go to law school.” And I’m like, “What do you think I should do, dear brother?” because it was like, what? I got into law school. And he said, “I think you should run an art program for the city. You should go talk to the mayor.” The mayor was Ed Rendell, new mayor, and I went to see him. He gave me his blessing, and the Mural Arts Program was created. And I, in some way, I never looked back.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Let’s pause right there. There’s so much in what you’ve just shared that – and then you started with family, and as a child, as a young, you know, woman painting, and, you know, the conversations with your parents.

I want to go back to the mural that you were working on. What was that? And what was going through your mind at the time in terms of, you know, what you were trying to depict? What was it that you were hoping to accomplish through that? And was the moment that, for you, was that – and kind of kind of the moment where you’re like, this is the path, this is the way that I want to live my life, is through this type of work?

**JANE GOLDEN:** Yeah, it was definitely an epiphany for me. So, I think – so I did a design based – like, I hadn’t been in LA very long. I was living in Santa Monica, and I researched the area and found that there had been a pier at the end of this major street that the city had torn down. And people were really sad about it. And I’d heard people say, “There’s just no history in LA. Like, it’s just – people don’t value history.” And so, I thought –

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Is that true? I don’t think it is.

**JANE GOLDEN:** I don’t think it’s true at all. So, I did a design that reminded me in some way of Atlantic City, New Jersey near where I grew up, but it was the pier, this Ocean Park pier. And so, that was the design that I did.

And so, I think when we started to – to put this mural up, all these people who had memories of this pier would stop and talk to us and tell us stories about their life. So, that was very… like, first of all, I was 22 years old. This was very surprising, that art could do this. Everything I thought about public art was in theory, was what I’d read. I’d read about the Mexican muralists. I’d read about a lot of muralists over the years. You know, I read about the political art in Chicago in the ‘60s. And it seemed really powerful, but it’s very different to experience it yourself.

And so, people felt a connection to this mural. Like, do I think it was great art? Not really, but it was beloved, in fact, so beloved that people said, “We should declare it a landmark.” And it was just painted over a few years ago. So, it’s like talk about, like, the test of time.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** That’s powerful. I mean, that is the kind of the catalytic nature of, like, the community building. And I think the city of Philadelphia emulates that really well. I’ve only been there a handful of times, but I know, as I’ve observed, and I’ve enjoyed some of the murals that I’ve been able, privileged to really see. When you think about your interactions with, it was Mayor Goode, correct, and then Mayor Rendell, but how did we get there? How do you get to that point where the murals become a part of the fabric of the city, right? They become a part of the community building. It didn’t just happen overnight, right?

**JANE GOLDEN:** Oh, no, no. I mean, the work we did at Anti-Graffiti was deep, because I worked with community organizers. And so, we really learned early on that you go into a community, you go in with not – you shouldn’t have assumptions. Go in with far more questions than answers, and just be prepared to be respectful and listen.

And I think the reason why the mural movement in Philadelphia has been particularly resilient over all these years, it’s because of the wide range of authors that we shine a light on and work with, that you sort of see a city, a city of authors who can sort of control their narrative through these large-scale works of public art, that exists throughout every single neighborhood of the city of Philadelphia. And that has real power.

I mean, I remember early on, these murals that we worked on, and the kind of excitement that was almost reserved for parades or fireworks or sports teams, that people would just come out and ask questions. A couple of the block captains would make picnic lunches. It was like the former graffiti writers. And me and some artists, we would just all like congregate, like, in the area, like below the scaffolding, and it was so exciting.

And then we saw people get really excited about the work and think, “Oh, we could have a community garden here. No, wait a minute, we’ve been trying to get a hold of these big city departments. Do you all work for the city?” And we’d be like, “Yeah.” “Do you know how to get a hold of the Streets Department?” So eventually, we would, like, infiltrate, right? So we were, like, “Okay, we’re just going to call the commissioner.”

And at one point, my former boss said, “You know, these commissioners are saying that group of artists are calling them and reporting things that are going wrong in neighborhoods. Is that you?” And we were like, “Yes,” because we felt like we wanted to be part of change in the community. But we knew that it had to be driven by the residents. It could not be something didactic or prescriptive, and come from us.

[09:50]

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** You know, listening, the trust building, demonstrating you’re doing, not just talking. There’s a program that you shared with me, it’s called Color Me Back, correct?

**JANE GOLDEN:** Yes, right.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** With SEPTA, I believe.

**JANE GOLDEN:** Mm-hmm.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** And a lot of transportation entities, or I wouldn’t say a lot, but several I’m familiar with across the globe have been incorporating art into subway stations and terminals as a way, I think, to, you know, I think make maybe the commute a little easier in the morning sometimes, too, right? It’s you have that experience as you’re going through your day, which can be a stressor, and art has an ability to, I think, soften that up and make that more present.

And so, I’d love to know more from you about this program, Color Me Back, and the work that you’re doing, and dive into it a little bit more about the concept, where it is today. And our listeners are interested in how could they take something like this and bring it to their city.

**JANE GOLDEN:** Well, I think what I want your listeners to understand is that art can be the quintessential multitasker. And I think sometimes, we think, okay, these are really beautiful works of public art, and then you have social services. And I always loved it – this is, you know, 15 years ago, people would say to me, “What kind of program is this? Is it art? Is it education? Is it, like, social service? Is it criminal justice?”

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** It’s everything!

**JANE GOLDEN:** It’s everything. I believe in sitting at the new – look at the nuance, right? Look and sit in the intersection of the public, the private, the social, the civic and the aesthetic, and have art be sort of the lens through which we look at the world.

And so, Color Me Back is a program that’s creating public art in the concourse. SEPTA’s our mass transit agency run by a very visionary person named Leslie Richards, who really gets it.

And so, people who are struggling with housing insecurity, who are unhoused, are receiving training in how to do public art and mural making, are being sort of afforded opportunities to make money, because everyone makes $50 for a morning. We have CareerLink that comes with all kinds of career counseling. And then we partner with the Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services, and they’re amazing. And they have peer specialists who can provide counseling and, you know, try to deal with people’s therapeutic needs.

So, it’s sort of doing all these things at the same time that beauty is happening, because what we’ve learned over the years is you can have individual change and change in the built environment. And it doesn’t have to be disconnected.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** That is powerful, and so, allow me to follow up on that in terms of the impact, on that very point that this program is having on, let’s say, the transportation system. What are some of the things that you see, that you hear from residents or from your colleagues at SEPTA, in terms of how this is transformational for their operations, and their work that they do?

[12:38]

**JANE GOLDEN:** Well, public safety is an issue in Philadelphia, as it is with many large cities around the world. And so, for there to be an appearance of an environment being safer, and more beautiful and more welcoming, that’s huge. And then for, you know, a lot our constituents were sleeping in the Concourse. And now, they’re going to community college, or they have a job with Mural Arts, or they’re on to doing other things. This is transformational.

And so, I feel that for SEPTA, it’s like, well, this is really a win-win, is that we’re able to reach out to people who are – have been in the Concourse. We’re able to transform this space, it goes from being bleak to something that’s really compelling. And I mean, I think they’re also thinking about, you know, who’s coming into their workforce. And so, they’ve opened the door that some of our people could come in for trainings.

I feel like this is exactly what we want, to be able to work with a big agency like SEPTA to really transform how they think that art can be an important part of how they do business.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** And as you’ve said, Philadelphia is a city of authors.

**JANE GOLDEN:** Right.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So, when we, when you think about this work, tell us or share with us maybe one or two examples, through this program, of one or two of those authors.

**JANE GOLDEN:** Sure. I mean, I would say, Michael Bellow (ph), who is our site manager now in the Concourse site, he very explicitly says all the time, “I was sleeping here, and I came in to Color Me Back and was really not sure, you know, about this program,” because there’s lots of programs, and he felt a lot of them don’t work. And he started doing art, and we recognized right away, he had enormous talent.

And we were like, “Okay, you know, we have some advice for you. You know, we’d like to give you some extra hours, maybe assist on a project.” And then moved up to be an assistant to the person running the site. And then, now he’s in charge. And, you know, he has, now, an apartment, and he’s going to community college.

And I’m not saying that what we do is a sort of a panacea for everything. Like, obviously, I’d be totally disingenuous. But I think the art murals, all those things show us the catalytic force, the catalytic role that art plays in the life of the city.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Some of the questions people ask come down to measurement. And, you know, when we think about budgets, and we think about, if we’re making an impact, what are the measures here, right?

And one of the questions I have that comes up frequently is, okay, so incredible program. You’ve already articulated a couple of these examples that have been lifechanging for people. You have to go back and ask for budget every now and then. When you look at metrics, when you look at data and how you’re measuring this impact, what are the kind of the quantitative things that people should be thinking about?

**JANE GOLDEN:** Cities need to do the calculation. How much are you spending on graffiti removal? So, let’s start there, right? It’s a concourse, underpasses, overpasses, all vulnerable sites to graffiti. I think graffiti art is very interesting, just a wall of tags everywhere. It’s just people just feel overwhelmed by it; they want it gone.

And you could spend a zillion dollars whiting out graffiti, and guess what? It’s like, if you’re not working with people who are writing on walls, it comes back. It’s the same thing. So, the people that we’re working with have a very – an affinity to site. So, they’re connected to wherever we’re working. And so, that’s powerful, and it’s a deterrent.

So, the second thing I would ask people to look at is how much does it cost? You know, look at your homeless service budget. Like, how much are you spending on that? And tell me then, you know, for $8,000 to $10,000 a person, is it more prudent to invest in this kind of program, or is it better just to move people around from place to place, shelter to shelter? And what are your costs?

I feel that the cumulative savings to the city of Philadelphia, when you think of the, you know, graffiti abatement, public safety, social services, all of it, it’s sort of like you could just stack up all the things we’re trying to deal with at the same time, because lots of cities all over the world do beautiful public art, glorious public art. We were just talking about Lisbon. In their concourse, their subway stations have beautiful art.

I’m saying, that’s great, but we can have beautiful art, and we can also save lives. Let’s connect the dots, because I think cities think we can’t do that because we have all these other issues. I’m saying multitask, and when you do, it’s smart, and it can save money.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Looking at the math, looking at the numbers, and from a budget perspective, for cities as they think about approaching programs and developing programs, such as the one that you have. What are one or two other rules of thumb that you would suggest, if a city is looking to do something like the, you know, Color Me Back program? Where to start? Where to begin? What’s your advice? Not every place is the same. We know that right, but what’s your advice.

**JANE GOLDEN:** Well, you know, I mean, there’s so many cities right now struggling with issues around homelessness that I would suggest several things. One, I believe in partnership, because you can always do a one-off project, but I’m looking for how do you sustain your work over longer periods of time. And so, building relationships between the public and private sector is absolutely critical.

I think that we’re part city and part private. Now just a third of our money is from the city and the rest, we raise, but that’s okay. And we have great allies in government. We get space from the city. So, the partnership is good, and it’s lasted a long time.

I would look for somebody in government in Homeless Services, or in your Department of Human Services, Department of Behavioral Health, try to find allies, like who’s really interested. And for government people who are listening, you know, really to think about this as an alternative. There’s so many great nonprofit organizations across the country doing this kind of work. So how do you identify a partner?

And then you tried to build a strategy and start small. We’re going to work with 10 people. This is day wage program. And I know in Phoenix, Albuquerque and Denver, they’ve done this. Not a lot, some cities have done this really around picking up litter.

And that’s why I feel the public art component is really critical, because everyone who’s listening, like think of things that are going to really lift the human spirit, and make people feel really important and counted. And in Philadelphia, because everyone loves the murals, when our constituents tell people, “I’m with the Mural Arts Program,” people go, “Oh my gosh, did you do that mural? That’s fantastic.”

So, start with 10 people, try to raise the money, think about it for a year. You’re going to test this and you’re going to see what happens. And so, leveraging of, like, both public and private, both capacity and dollars, and then identify a site and say, this is what you’re going to do, raise the money and then test it over six months to a year. That’s what I’d do.

And we have a Mural Arts Institute, and we work with cities across the country and the world. We’re starting a project in Athens and a few, and cities in Italy. So, I would say feel free to call Mural Arts, to really go to our website and go to the Mural Arts Institute page. And our colleagues will call you back and provide all the advice that you would need.

[19:40]

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Excellent. Thank you, Jane. One final question for you today. What is one thing you’ve watched, you’ve listened, you’ve heard about recently that’s inspired you as it relates to cities and placemaking, or infrastructure?

**JANE GOLDEN:** Well, I think that I’m really taken by cities that are really supporting the arts. There’s a mayor in Detroit, who’s working with a woman who’s heading their Office of Arts and Culture. And I can tell by his actions how much he believes that art has power.

And I feel that in whenever I read stories about cities around the world, and you look at the leaders, you can really predict what’s going to happen, because, see, I feel that without people at the top of the food chain really believing in what you can do, it’s very hard to make progress. And we’re really good at going around people. Like, I don’t take no for an answer. I’ll go left, right, go around. Like, I’m incredibly tenacious, probably wear people out, and probably –

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** That’s the word that keeps coming to mind for me. I mean, you clearly (crosstalk/inaudible) –

**JANE GOLDEN:** Yeah, I just probably have a reputation, probably because – (laughter). The budget director for the city of Philadelphia saw me walking towards him – this was a few years ago – and he said to his colleague, who ran the Streets Department, “Hold your wallet, there’s Jane Golden.” (Laughter.) I’m like, yes! I think that you can run in place if you don’t have leadership behind you.

First of all, I think artists are remarkable people and agents of change and transformation. And they just generally make our world a better place and more humane. And then there are all the services that can be delivered through artists, through people who are creative, through culture workers, and that can make such a huge difference.

I think that every time there’s a critical issue in city government, if I were mayor, I would have an artist at the table to try to think differently, because guess what? You know, we have to always embrace innovation and creativity, because we know that our traditional ways of doing business are going to fail us, right? And so, our ability to think out of the box is absolutely 100% invaluable.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Jane Golden, tenacious public servant, artist, changemaker, thank you for making time to speak with us, and to share your experience, and to really inspire so many people through your story and journey, and the work that’s yet to be done. There’s so much more ahead. Thank you for meeting with us today.

**JANE GOLDEN:** Thank you very much.

[Music.]

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Thanks for listening to this episode, and being a part of the future of infrastructure, and for joining me on this journey to meet and learn from the people improving life in their communities.

If you liked today’s episode and want to help other people find it, please take a moment to share, rate and review the show. To learn more, visit us at wwps.microsoft.com, or find me on LinkedIn and Twitter @JeremyMGoldberg.

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[22:43]