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**4 SPEAKERS**

Emily Craven  
Tim Souza  
Robin Nigh  
Stephen Bensen

**START OF TRANSCRIPT****Emily Craven**

This is Vibrant Spaces, a show about placemaking activating and connecting city spaces for the communities you serve. Welcome everyone to the Vibrant Spaces podcast. I'm Emily Craven, your co-host today. Um, a part of Story City. And I'm so excited to have you, uh, here listening. We're going to have a great season. Um, we are delving into this podcast into vibrancy within cities. And how do you build cities that people want to live in, play in, work in? Um, and what are the amazing initiatives that are coming out of so many different departments, so many innovators in these spaces? Um, and that's what we're really focusing on. This podcast is like, let's chat to the innovators who are doing amazing things in their city, particularly post-pandemic, and trying to bring their cities back to not what they were before the pandemic, but past that and to and to so much more potential and opportunity, um, in, in these 2020s. Uh, and so I'd like to introduce you all to my co-host here today, uh, Tim Souza. Tim, thank you for joining us.

**Tim Souza**

Yeah. Hey, I'm excited to be here. And, you know, when when we started this, uh, podcast, mainly because we have been having these conversations on a consistent basis. Uh, we talk to cities every day with our day jobs. I like to kind of consider this podcast our Batman gig. Uh, this is what we do when we're not focused on our day job. And it's so fun because, um, when Emily brought me in to Story City with all the placemaking work that we've been doing, I started to listen for the first time to what cities were doing behind the scenes and the reasons they took initiatives and the reasons that I saw the marketing as I drove down the street. Uh, and I quickly realized as we had conversations with more and more cities, that cities don't hear it from each other either. So Emily and I put our brains together and we're like, let's do a conference in your pocket for cities, you know, to celebrate what they're doing to celebrate this placemaking and vibrancy initiatives and.

**Emily Craven**

To learn from each other. Yeah, like, like to learn from each other. You guys are the smart people in your rooms. And we get to learn from you every day. Um, and it's, and it's delightful. And so we wanted to make sure that you were hearing from each other and learning from each other. And so this is honestly, this podcast is going to be a little bit of a love fest. It's going to be we understand that cities have their problems and they have their vacancies. And we like we understand that there are all of these challenges are there. But like this podcast is really going to celebrate, like the amazing work that people are doing and and pushing forward. Right.

**Tim Souza**

Hopefully provide some examples for your city of things that you little nuggets that you can steal and pluck and apply and begin to play and test with. Um, because the ultimate heart behind behind Emily and I is that we want our cities to be vibrant, fun spaces where creators can live, work, play, and the people in those cities can enjoy 24, seven.

**Emily Craven**

100%. And so you are going to hear a lot of love fest. You're going to hear a lot of excitement about the things that are happening. Um, you know, we're going to be critical, you know, as well we will give our critiques and we will find our gaps and we will wonder at how XYZ city might be doing something, um, uh, better or what will they be doing next? And, you know, you'll hear all of that. But but mainly like, we just want to support the great innovators in these cities that we're talking to, and we're really blessed to be able to speak to them every day. And we hope that you enjoy these conversations as well.

**Tim Souza**

Yeah. So thank you for joining us. And we are excited to kind of begin to talk about our first I feel like a theme for this. This first episode is truly the importance of making, you know, downtown relevant to everybody. And like those feeder lines and those connections and some an example I always hear you talk about is Detroit. Can you quickly like fill in our audience on on the Detroit like case study that we reference all the time.

**Emily Craven**

In particular, in particular, it's the Detroit waterfront, right? Like the Detroit the. So the Detroit waterfront is awesome and amazing and how they've set up the thing. So like quick summary. Um, we all know Detroit went through a very difficult period. They went through bankruptcy. Um, even now they're still kind of struggling to to rebuild their city and come back from, from, from that collapse. But like the amazing nonprofit organizations that have pulled up their bootstraps in Detroit and talk and work together with the citizens of Detroit are crazy. And one of those, uh, organizations is the Detroit waterfront, which, um, as they were developing this waterfront out, not only, um, were they involving the community every step of the way, but they wanted to make sure that then the compute the community then had ways of easily and beautifully accessing the spaces that they pulled together. And so like one example that, um, that the CEO gave for that was that they would have like weekly meetings where they would invite the public in, they would bring the architects into the room. So the architects weren't working in their like little castles. They were brought into the room with the citizens, and they would present their plans and the citizens would throw things at them. And so, like, for example, there was one um, uh, person who was like a father of five and he's like, I'm not going to bring my kids down to the waterfront.

**Emily Craven**

Like, how am I going to be able to go to the toilet if the toilet is all the way over there? And so, like, people would have these gripe sessions and then they would all come back the next week. But the whole point of having those architects in that room is that the waterfront organization then made those architects incorporate the feedback, and so they would come back the next week and all of the positions that the bathrooms had changed. And then that was when, like the community slowly realized, oh, you're taking us seriously. Like you're incorporating this feedback, you're doing all of these things. And so they did that back and forth and iteration for many, many, many months. And, and I think even years. But the thing that they then realized and acknowledged was that this waterfront. Um, though it had been developed and was wonderful, was not seeing the sort of foot. Traffic that they were expecting it to, considering all of the community engagement. And they realized it was because for a person to safely get from their house multiple blocks in to the waterfront was actually quite difficult.

**Emily Craven**

And so they started to then rehab these feeder lines that went all the way, like so like old creek beds that had like a whole bunch of like rubbish and things in them. They would go in and they would clean them up and they'd build like miles of bike paths. And so all of a sudden you saw this amazing increase because they had built these feeder lines from the neighborhoods into the area that they had then rehabbed, so that that area wasn't impactful just for the residents along it. And, you know, potentially the gentrification that comes on along with that. But it allowed for neighborhoods further and further and further in and away from the waterfront to then be able to come back in. And I think that that's what really excites me about, um, the way that the city of Tampa is focusing and building their vibrancy at the moment. Um, and, and, and they recognize the importance of that central space, you know, the Detroit waterfront or the, you know, the downtown Tampa. But they they they understand that if you do not connect your neighborhoods to the heart, it won't be the heart, and people won't see themselves represented in that. And that's what I'm so excited to talk about in this book.

**Tim Souza**

And I'm starting to have our guests on today. And so today we will get to be hearing from, um, Steven Benson and Robin Franklin Nigh, who are both very doing very unique things within the city of Tampa. Um, different but different sides of that, those feeder lines and those that connected network. And I think it's it's truly exciting. And so Steven Benson, who is the director of city planning for the city of Tampa. Um, Steven has worked in the transportation and land use field since 2011 as a consultant for Life Context. That's the same year I graduated from high school, so he's been doing it for a minute both on state and local agencies. Um, most recently, he has led this re-establishment effort, uh, for the city planning function in the city of Tampa, um, building this long term policy agenda that advocates for more progressive community planning and design principles that have included zoning reform, missing middle housing, main streets, traditional neighborhood redesign, and highway conversion. Stephen is also a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners in the Congress of the New Urbanism. He is a super proud resident of Tampa, being a third generation at Tampanian. Tampanite. I'm sure we'll get some correction on that one. Tamponian? Temp. Temp. We'll stay with that one. And, uh, he is super brilliant in his ability to see the interconnectedness of things. And what he has done with the waterfront in Tampa is just short of astounding.

**Emily Craven**

Uh, so Robin is a favorite person of mine. I think that if I went to Tampa, we would have a great old time. Robin Nigh, she is the director of arts and cultural affairs at the City of Tampa. Robin Nigh's award winning work comes from 35 years of experience in placemaking, which is amazing, and so she has this experience in placemaking and the public realm. Uh, for the city of Tampa, Nye oversees all aspects of planning, uh, implementation of multiple art related programs, uh, including capital projects that require leveraging assets within the city. Developing partnerships. She's working with community and site stakeholders. She was trained as an art historian, which you'll see as being significant in this interview. Um, it really comes through her her love for for this area and for public art in general. Um, and so she has served on the Americans for the Arts public Art Network Council and has lectured and consulted about art in the realm across the country. Her most recent initiative, which we will be talking about today, is Soul Walk, which is an African American culture and heritage trail through the arts for the city of Tampa.

**Tim Souza**

It's going to be really exciting conversation. And so without further ado, let's just jump right into it.

**Emily Craven**

Steven Benson, Robin Nigh welcome.

**Robin Nigh**

Thank you. It's great to be here.

**Stephen Bensen**

Thank you very much.

**Emily Craven**

So the city of Tampa has some amazing things going on. We're really excited to talk to you guys today. Thank you for joining us. From the very hot reaches of the South. Um, Stephen, you have lived in Tampa for most of your life and your family has been there and called it home for three generations. Can you tell us what was life like growing up for you in Tampa?

**Stephen Bensen**

Absolutely. Um, Tampa, you know, really is and has always been a city of neighborhoods. Um, I grew up in, um, a pre-World War Two neighborhood just a few miles from downtown and, and had, you know, really the quintessential upbringing riding bikes, you know, playing with friends outside, um, and, uh, a place that was, um, you know, so incredibly, you know, family focused and family oriented, but had a rich cultural history, um, that really supported and provided context for, for everybody living in the community. Um, and it's just it's been, you know, really an interesting journey to see the city transform and evolve certain areas of the city transform and evolve, um, and really, really grow up since, since that time, but still retain the identity of, of Tampa, of the original Tampa.

**Tim Souza**

That's awesome. And, Robin, you, um, moved in. I believe you said the 90s into Tampa. Uh.

**Robin Nigh**

99.

**Tim Souza**

Yeah, 90. So what have you seen as far as in the last couple decades? The transformation, because we've had a crazy couple of decades in this country. What is the transformation been like for you to witness in, in the city of Tampa now versus then?

**Robin Nigh**

Uh, just the density is just really amazing. And it's interesting because I grew up in Florida. I grew up in lots of places in Florida, uh, north east and, uh, northwest and southeast and Tampa, just as Steven said, it's it's the most neighborhood centric city that I've been in in Florida. It's fascinating. And and the density has been, uh, amazing. I think we've grown 30% in the past 25 years.

**Tim Souza**

That is absolutely crazy. And so, yeah, what's what is one thing that stands out to you from like very specifically from your experience between the traffic?

**Robin Nigh**

Yeah. The traffic. Uh, I will say where, you know, before you could get somewhere in ten minutes. Now you better bank on 30. So it's it's really. That is a real surprise. Um, but but I will say again that that that the neighborhoods were. So, um, when I first came here, everybody was like, well, my neighborhood and my neighborhood and other cities in Florida aren't that focused on that. Uh, that that individual identity.

**Emily Craven**

How curious. I it's it's while individual, it also feels very, um, community driven as well, which I suppose is we get to chat to you more about during this podcast, which is exciting. Yeah. Um, and so I did want to, uh, maybe, uh, in, in that kind of vein of history and Tampa history. So, Steven, you gave this beautiful quick rundown when we met about Tampa's really incredibly rich, uh, history and legacy and how it informs your approach to to revitalization. Could you give our listeners a quick kind of Tampa history 101. To lay the groundwork for this conversation today?

**Stephen Bensen**

Sure, sure. Um, I think many people would probably be surprised to know that Tampa was was one of the largest cities in Florida, if not the largest city in Florida. At one point in the early early 20th century. We had about 800 residents in 1880 and grew to over 15,000 by 1900. So in just a 20 year period, so significantly more than Miami and Orlando. Um, but that was largely the result. And the growth that came after was largely the result of the cigar manufacturing industry, which was brought here by industrialists from Cuba. Um, Tampa became a financial, trade and commercial hub because of the cigar manufacturing industry. We actually produced more cigars in Tampa and in Ybor City, which has since become part of Tampa than anywhere else in the world in the early 90s. Yeah.

**Tim Souza**

Yeah. Many cigar factories were there just out of pure curiosity, because I remember.

**Stephen Bensen**

Robin may have a better idea than I.

**Robin Nigh**

Know I'm trying to remember. It was a lot like 20 or or 30, perhaps. It was amazing. And I want to go back to say one thing about what Stephen just said. Is that what what was also so attractive to me about Tampa to relocate here was its incredible diversity. I will say that that to me was so energizing because it is an incredible mix of cultures, and that just makes a wonderful, uh, mix of communities. You can really go from one neighborhood to another, and they have a completely different vibe in that way. Yeah.

**Stephen Bensen**

Yeah, that that melting pot was, um, the result of the influx of immigrants that came from Western Europe and from Cuba to serve as blue collar workers in cigar factories. So, um, Cubans, Spaniards, Germans, um, and that's representative in a lot of, um, the local melting pot type culture, even our cuisine, the Cuban sandwich. There are debates that go, you know, all over the state about who invented the Cuban sandwich in Tampa. I think still stands firm that it it came from us and not actually from from Cuba. So, um, just a lot of rich heritage there that came out of just that, that melting pot of culture.

**Tim Souza**

And where do you guys find yourselves, you know, now then you've kind of come from that, that rich cultural space. Where is the city at in its current state coming from that, you know, pre World War Two city that you were describing?

**Stephen Bensen**

Sure. I mean, I think with the, you know, of course, like many cities with the rise of the automobile and suburbanization that happened in the mid 20th century, we we, of course, saw a lot of decline and disinvestment, specifically in our downtown and the historic neighborhoods around downtown. Um, and only really about the last 20, 25 years have we seen that start to turn around in a really sustained and and meaningful way. Um, up until this, um, the current renaissance and building boom that, that we're currently in, not just in our downtown, but now kind of branching out from downtown into all of the adjacent neighborhoods, which is really exciting to see. Um, and it gives, you know, Robin and I an opportunity to, um, you know, think about what made Tampa special and what makes Tampa special now and, and how do we continue to grow and and change without losing what makes us special?

**Emily Craven**

I think that that's what's so innovative about the things that you guys are doing in Tampa. And that's why I'm so excited about this podcast. But rapid fire, before we dive into that nitty gritty of the detail, what is your, uh, favorite or special place in Tampa and why?

Oh, gosh. Gosh.

**Tim Souza**

Maybe we'll put Robin on the spot first.

**Emily Craven**

Let's put Robin on the spot.

**Robin Nigh**

On the spot. I would have to say Ballast Point Park and Ballast Point Pier. Uh, because it's on the water and you can really you can just have you could go out there and it's peaceful and it's quiet and it's it's just again, I like how diverse the people are in that park. It's a tiny little park and you see all kinds of people. The foot traffic and the density is that is really kind of wonderful. You know, there's just a great mix, sort of like Brooklyn in the sense that you've got all these communities and cultures, you hear the different languages and everybody gets along. So, um, that's one of my favorite places in.

**Emily Craven**

A couple of our prior conversations. Uh, both of you have mentioned the insane growth that Tampa has seen since the late 1800s. If we're honest here, um, and definitely across the pandemic and due to the the growing tech scene that is emerging, um, and that has had a significant effect on Tampa's identity as, as a result of that, how you marry the history with the newcomers to find this equilibrium, to avoid the sorts of gentrification that we have seen in places like New York that we've seen in places like San Francisco. Right. There's a reason people move to Tampa. There's a reason people have moved out of those kind of gentrified areas. But then that brings the problem of maybe accidentally bringing the very thing that they were trying to leave for. Um, and so the two of you have tackled this in, in very different ways that are both unique from each other, but also unique from the other cities that that we've spoken to and we've spoken to to dozens of cities across dozens of different urban planning departments to to arts and culture departments. And you guys have a couple of really unique and special things that, um, we really want to dive into in this podcast. And so, uh, I'd like to start with, with Robin. So Robin in arts and cultural affairs, that is your realm. And so Mayor Castor challenged you to shift your work from downtown to the neighborhoods. And she was so committed to this that she even went as far as to move the whole city staff out of downtown and into East Tampa. Right? So, like and so can you talk about the shift of of moving from downtown to city neighborhoods and what that has taught you about community led placemaking and community ownership of the of the current projects that you are stewarding. Um, particularly in this identity paradox we find ourselves.

**Robin Nigh**

Yeah. You know, that's a really good point. And it has been a wonderful challenge. I have learned a lot and I have grown a lot just in terms of being here in this office. Um, I look out the window and there are three, you know, there's an apartment complex right across the street. So we're in the neighborhood, and I see those school buses come, and I see the parents waiting for those, uh, their kids on the school buses, and and I think a lot like, what are they getting in terms of, like, because you do have, um, uh, we do have cultural districts. We do have all those, uh, wonderful cultural institutions, you know, and they are largely downtown. Some do, uh, outreach or programming, but they do not do this level of reaching into the community and really connecting with that identity and culture. Now, um, soul walk, which which I know we're going to get into and how that is developing, that really did grow out of an underserved community, particularly with so much development. Uh, the African American community has lost a lot. Um, the Hispanic community has got Ybor City, and there's some wonderful, uh, still, uh, little niches there and such. But, uh, the heart of the African American community was taken out with the interstate back in the 60s. So they lost so much. And how do you this is really kind of a way of how to protect the local community by elevating and amplifying one what's existing and connecting the dots.

**Robin Nigh**

And then we can do the infill with other cultural, whether it's stories or whether it's whatever else it's missing. We can infill with that. And Steven and I are actually looking at a couple of projects that do just that, that kind of connect the dots on some of these things. So it's a way also of recognizing that people in these neighborhoods, in every neighborhood, their whole sense of what art and culture and identity are, are very different than what you might find in the Museum of Art or, you know, at the theater or something like that. You know, they have. So if we can somehow connect and elevate their, um, connections with their own family, whether it's so we're doing a cookbook for one example of that. So it really is bringing in their family recipes and give us the stories about that. We're connecting that with historic markers and historic preservation. And ultimately it will, uh, turn into a tool as well for the city in terms of development. So when you know, like where the corner stores are and you know, where the, the, the local barber shops are, let's, let's elevate those and connect the dots to those because they're important to the community and let others know it. Let's let's turn it also into a business development tool.

**Robin Nigh**

Now, I know I've scattered and splattered a lot just now and what I just said, but it is a very multivalent program and how we're trying to, um, just tie the community together, and that is a way to preserve it. Um, I've also learned like little things, like historic markers, man, do people get possessive over those. And it's great actually, because they really are these little identifiers. Um, so and there's politics around what text goes on that. So the one thing I really want to be very stressful of is that I kind of see myself as the, um, I don't know, I'm setting the table. I'm not bringing the food, so to speak. In other words, it is about it's not about the community. It's by the community. And that's one reason why it's taking so long. So I'm bringing in scholars from the local university, bringing in some of their graduate students to work with us, and how we can connect the dots. It also is, um, it's just a it's been very slow, but community building is, you know, it's not just something to write a grant about. And as I think I have, I'll be honest, I certainly have tried that in the past. And it's like I get I get it now. So it took a long time, but now I and it's a wonderful challenge.

**Emily Craven**

So it's um, it's interesting because community building is also, um, the key is to not strengthen isolation but to, to do connectors. And so, um, and so it seems like the, the whole point of going out to those neighborhoods is to be like, okay, these enclaves exist, but they are isolated, um, and their, their culture and their art is not celebrated. And so you are essentially building the feeder lines. You are building the feeder lines from the neighborhoods into the cultural districts so that they feel like they belong in the cultural districts as much as they belong in their own 100%.

**Robin Nigh**

At least that's the objective. I mean, that is what we're really trying to do. There's, um, and it's recognizing and to some degree, I also see some calcification within our cultural institutions as well. And I it's a process. I mean, um, you've got to get your, uh, open up whatever your agenda or however you, your perceive the aesthetic to be and respect other aesthetics in that kind of a process and other forms of communication. Um, I will give you one quick story where I had, uh, somebody we were on a conference call with, um, lots of individuals and communication was was different, you know, and it was just kind of all over the place. But that is how the this particular community spoke. You know, it was I. And then after the call, uh, somebody said to me, I feel really uncomfortable about that. And I said, well, you just had a cultural experience because that is what it is. It's just really respecting. And bottom line, it's about respect, really. Um, and it's about respecting others aesthetic others communication processes, their histories, identities and, you know, just making room at the table for everybody as.



**Tim Souza**

You make room at the table for, for everybody. Um, how, you know, how do you tell those stories of the citizens, those communities within the city? And, um, I think the following question to that is what physical forms does do these like engagements eventually take? I know Soulwalk is something I'd love for you to maybe speak to a little bit here, but like part community engagement, it's part academia. I know you have part like, you know, physical art installations, part digital, part wayfinding. What is how do you, you know, capture, display. And you say you set the table. What does that setting look like? Can you help? Well, we're.

**Robin Nigh**

Still figuring that out honestly because there is so much that's also why it's taken so long. And I'll tell you where. In many ways, Soul Walk started, it was during the pandemic. Um, the mayor and the chief of police had asked us to do a memorial to or a monument. Excuse me. All of these people are still with us to for police officers who actually sued the city of Tampa back in the early 70s. We listened to these interviews of these four black police officers and what they went through. And this is right at the time of George Floyd, too, was happening. So you're hearing what these police officers experienced back in the early 70s. And I'm thinking, you know, there's nobody that tells the story. They're not connecting it. It doesn't mean, excuse me a damn thing if it's just done and it sits there. So we really had to elevate it and connect it and make others aware of those conversations and listen to the conversations of others. So what at this point, I mean, for the beginning, I guess I should say I just wrote down anything anybody said. They had a suggestion, they had a memory, they had an experience. I just wrote it down and I put it and I have a lot of spreadsheets, and I just kind of plugged it there until I knew what to do with it, you know, because I didn't. But you can give it to artists, you can give it to family members, you can give it to other levels of of for engagement purposes. And a lot of connections were made with that. But the biggest thing I really wanted everyone to know was that we're listening. And that's that's what I realize. Um, we just need to do more of. It's just listening.

**Emily Craven**

And so that took the form then of the soul Walk. And so can you give us a little bit of a breakdown as to what the Soul Walk is with, you know?

**Robin Nigh**

Sure. Um, soul walk, I can actually just give you one. It's a community centered arts and cultural initiative that elevates and amplifies the cultural heritage, character, and identity of Tampa's historic African American neighborhoods. Um, it traverses approximately 46 miles and 25 neighborhoods. It currently includes nearly 100 stops that visitors can explore that includes public art installations, historic landmarks, museums, cemeteries. cemet- we have nine lost African American cemeteries on Soul Walk that we are addressing. Uh, it is collaborative. We bring it in our wonderful partners, including the Tampa Bay History Center and University of South Florida. But it really is a strategy to connect and protect the culture. It's, um, a I really like the term that you used, Emily, in terms of very scrappy. It's a very scrappy kind of cultural policy that connects, uh, community together. And if we could use that in terms of like, planning so that others are aware of it, it will stop some of the, um, or I won't say it won't stop the gentrification, but it will respect the awareness of what exists and what's there so that it pulls everything together. And at least it's it's, uh, it doesn't get paved over.

**Emily Craven**

So the idea is that we you go into community, you you get a sense for the stories and the history in there. You identify an area which can then take a physical form, such as a, um, area that can be identified with a plaque area that can be identified with, um, public art that honors the history of that place. Uh, and then um, and then from, from there. It's getting it correct. Is that you.

**Robin Nigh**

Are you are. However, what what's really key here is that it's not just out of the physical realm. That's that's what's really important is that it's got to be especially like, let's say, some of our seniors or some other folks. It needs to be accessible at all levels. And and by doing that, it's also respecting different types of, of engagement, how people might want to connect. Maybe they want to take an online course on quilting, for instance. So we can let let's have a way of connecting them with this kind of cultural history and heritage, where we can hire an artist to teach a course, which we did do in one case, where we hired an artist to who worked with 15 seniors, and to make an artwork that now hangs in Hanna City Center. And and that was a wonderful sense of bonding. So it's a different way of doing things. Even your basic artwork, it's it's just a whole different way. It's it's, um, prioritizing process over product. So it takes longer, of course, but you're in result is just, it's it's embedded within the community. These ladies now come and they visit the artwork, you know, they bring their grandchildren. That's you can't ask for anything better, in my opinion, than that because it's just been enveloped and, um, they know it's theirs, which is what you want.

**Tim Souza**

You know, it's interesting. I think one of the challenges that we hear, you know, from the cities that we, we speak to often, um, is something that you've kind of it sounds like you've figured out a little bit how do you keep your finger on the pulse of what those needs are for the community? So as you are developing these, you know, whether it's that online quilting course or installation of a plaque, how, How you know, how do you keep your finger on the pulse?

**Robin Nigh**

Yeah. Listen, and I haven't I was lucky enough to, you know, it started again, as I mentioned, going back to the these four officers and hearing them talk about it and some of the, um, women who were working there have become foundational to lights. I mean, to soul walk, they, they uh, I because again having it that it's got to be by the community. You've got to have somebody who you can work with, who trusts you to bring in others and to connect and see where, um, you can, uh, just continue to kind of do that, like pop beads, kind of like stick everything together. That just holds it all it is. And that's why I mean that it's a long time. It's a long time. I will be much grayer when this is over, I'm sure.

**Emily Craven**

Okay, so it sounds like then that you are you are helping to try and find this equalization of identity through education. Like, it sounds like education is your kind of your best.

**Robin Nigh**

Oh it's found. Yes, it's it's absolutely the thread because not only do I bring in the the scholars who write articles about it, but those scholars bring in their students and they bring in their teachers, and we're writing lesson plans that go into the schools, and then they can do the stories. As a matter of fact, our education component is going to be focusing on oral history so that it really these students can learn from their parents and grandparents. Um, and there's lots of skills that can be developed out of that. But one thing I've really seen is that we had like a little oral history party. We did that a couple of years in which we, um, had people come in and we took their oral histories at the libraries. So one thing I also want to mention is that that's not something that we're all doing ourselves. We're elevating who's already doing it. The public libraries are terrific here in Hillsborough County. So we just let's elevate that and we can pay a consultant to work with and make sure to, like, assess what is in this, uh, oral history collection, then assess what's missing. And let's fill in those gaps, because we haven't been doing, uh, oral histories in the county for, like, 20 years now. So it's it's a way of connecting and make it useful. So, again, working with all these scholars make it useful so that when scholars in 2030, 30, 40, 100 years from now come, there's information there that is beneficial and helpful to them. So it really is also building resources and connecting the dots in that way.

**Tim Souza**

I and I and I love that. And I think that there's I think the interesting thing to me from all of the work that you've been doing is that from my understanding, the city of Tampa doesn't really have like a cultural plan. And it seems to have very much taken on this, like you called it scrappy, this, this grassroots, you know, uh, role that.

**Emily Craven**

Started as African American, but you're talking about like, Latino communities being like, we want soul walk, like, right? Right, right. Yeah.

**Robin Nigh**

We should do that. Absolutely. We because as I mentioned, the one thing that was so attractive because I was, uh, working on my doctorate in Tallahassee at FSU when I was offered this position, and I just really thought, heck yes, I'm going to do it. Mostly because I'll tell you, um, I thought I loved the cultural diversity. First, I thought I could go shopping on my lunch break, and that was a joke in downtown. But, um, I, I really felt strongly that it was the place I wanted to raise my children because I. The diversity was real and genuine. It wasn't, um, it just wasn't the, you know. And I love Tallahassee. Don't get me wrong. Rolling hills and live oaks and it's it's, you know, my grandparents are buried there. I love it, but it wasn't the place that I felt would give my kids the best foundation for their future. Mm.

**Tim Souza**

And this capacity and this building, how were you able to convince the community partners, etc., to kind of pull funding together for this, especially in an office of two people like you have? Um, and like having, you know, seen this growth yourself, how would you communicate that to someone who might be in a similar position in another city who's inspired by what you're doing, doesn't know where to start, and doesn't know how to scale that?



**Robin Nigh**

It's. Well, it's interesting. Um, again, I'm going to say that it was just I had I had I'm very blessed. I have to say that I am very blessed to have engaged and worked with some of the folks that I did at Tampa Police Department, because they were instrumental in helping me become aware of who the community was. And and the other thing is that a lot of our projects that we do, there's always a community representative and our parks department is very plugged in and connected. So I have to say, my colleagues in the city have been tremendous in terms of like to say, well, you might want to talk to so and so or, you know, such and such is interested in and they have been the greatest resource. So it really is in that sense, just listening to everybody. And because there's everybody's got a story. Right? I mean that's um, you know, what is it, Alice Walker? Somebody said, like, we're, uh, we're all going to be stories someday anyway, right? And you just listen to that, and you start like, whatever anybody says, that's your that's your springboard into the next conversation.

**Emily Craven**

And you mentioned when we talked that the that this did not take as much funding as I would have imagined. 46 miles of trail would take. Right? How did you pull this together? Is this a combination of of, um, city municipal spending? Is this a combination of grants, fundings? Is this philanthropy like, how is this volunteerism like how how is how is this hung together financially?

**Robin Nigh**

I will say it took, uh, it's a labor of love and it's held together. By now. We're starting to like, think about money. We really haven't needed a lot because so much of it was existing. The work was, uh, pulling together the what was existing because there was no real inventory for it. Somebody came up to me, this was a couple of years ago and said, oh, we need a memorial for so and so. It's like, well, we have one. But they didn't know it. And in my opinion, that's that was on us. It's sort of like I it kind of the light bulb went off. We're not telling the story because we've got it here and it's out there. So that was on us. And so we have the opportunity. And once you start digging, you realize we have a lot, you know, and and even some scholars who we are working with. Once you see the breadth of it, it's it's kind of massive and kind of overwhelming, but you just kind of do it a bite at a time and it comes together.

**Emily Craven**

It is it is interesting when you can have one person be able to be like, okay, all of these different organizations have different assets. And so let's just catalog the assets. And it turns out that over here someone has taken a bunch of oral histories, and over there someone has taken a bunch of exam research. And so and so if you can catalog what is there, it's amazing what you can pull together with. Not a lot because it's the it's the research and it's, it's all of those kind of components that take that time. Um, and there's more than that too, potentially than you potentially think. Um, yeah. Yeah. And so I'd like to, um, switch gears here a little bit. And so I wanted to bring, um, in the work that you're doing, Stephen, because you have been a steward of the, the city center master plan that's been enacted for the past decade. And so you have transcended multiple administrations, um, with their different funding initiatives. And while I know that a lot of the work that you've done has also included significant, like neighborhood related feats like what Robin has been building. What I would really love to focus on with our time with you is your unique downtown vibrancy efforts. So, you know, Tampa made this this very strategic decision to make the waterfront its welcoming patio, basically to the city that's its anchor, the public space that is incredibly green and vibrant. And it's a major infrastructure feat as well. Why was this deemed so important? Why was this chosen as the anchor rather than City Plaza, for example?

### **Stephen Bensen**

Sure. So, um, Tampa, you know, was largely like I mentioned before, an industrial city. We were a port city. We were not, um, one of the, um, resort style cities that were built like Saint Petersburg, across across the bay, um, to attract visitors. As much as we already had industry on our waterfront that had, um, evolved or shifted and moved further out of town, and we were left with, um, the skeleton of, of a waterfront. And there was a concerted effort, I think, to look at strategies and ways to link up all of the adjacent neighborhoods with downtown and sort of re, you know, reorient everybody outward towards the water rather than inward towards, um, each individual neighborhood. Um, that Riverwalk idea, you know, predated it, predated the Envision Envision Tampa Center city plan from 2010. It predated that by several decades. But, um, it was pretty slow, slow moving, the idea of building, um, sort of a San Antonio style Riverwalk, um, that would connect all of the neighborhoods along the river and the channel. Um, was not a new idea, but, um, it took on a life of its own as a result of this plan. And our previous mayor really made it his mission to see it through to completion before the end of his second term. And that's exactly what happened. And now, um, you know, we, I think, exceed over over a million visitors a year on a three mile, a three mile waterfront trail, uh, through the heart of our downtown. And, and we're seeing, um, now a lot of excitement and interest in the West Riverwalk, which is sort of the next generation on the west side of the river. Um, again, continuing that theme of, you know, finding what works downtown in our urban core, starting downtown and then, um, taking the successes and then sort of branching them out to the adjacent adjacent areas.

### **Stephen Bensen**

The first the first ring of suburbs around around the city. Um, the streetcar extension is another example of that. Taking a look at what has worked, which, um, I think we are the highest, if not one of the highest ridership. Um, streetcars in in the country for systems of our size, um, well over a million riders a year on the streetcar. And now we're in the process of extending it to, uh, our first suburb, Tampa Heights, uh, just north of downtown. Um, and, you know, again, the theme of that Center city plan was taking areas that had either been ignored, had been purposefully paved over, or purposefully, um, undermined through the urban renewal and the highway building efforts of the 60s. Um, looking at the failed public housing projects of the 1960s, and working with our Housing Authority to reinvent those as mixed use districts, especially through the lens of what existed there prior. Um, a lot of these areas, like Robin mentioned, were the heart of um, of, you know, different subcultures in the city. Um, the heart of our African American neighborhoods. Those hearts were completely torn out and just paved over. Um, so we, uh, actually recently received, um, one of the US DOT Reconnecting Communities grants to remove a highway spur and rebuild the historic African American neighborhood that was there before. Now, obviously, it's going to look a lot different, and it's not going to going to be the same neighborhood. Um, but it's reorienting efforts, um, back into a place that was that was really removed, um, without without good cause.

### **Tim Souza**

Yeah, I think that's the all of those efforts are absolutely beautiful, especially those that are like really seeking reconciliation. Um, and, you know, as you both know, that's a huge part of, uh, what I am passionate about. And I think that for me, I think one of the biggest questions that you know, comes to mind is like, what are the challenges of getting some, like, initiatives like these implemented? Um, and not only implementing them, but then also taking that next step and activating them, because not every time that you build it will they come. Right. So in in regards to that riverfront, in regards to getting people to use streetcar systems, how how did you guys activate those spaces to make it inviting for people to enjoy that space?

### **Stephen Bensen**

Well, I think it's if you build it, they will come, but you have to create a means for them to come. And, you know, like Robin had mentioned, I think earlier in the conversation, Tampa, the city and the the administration is the last few administrations have been very pro growth. Um, and the, the most positive sense, you know, we want redevelopment. We want density in the right places. Um, and these are some of the right places that we've made a concerted effort to, to rezone to change our development requirements, to encourage, um, you know, more, more density and more people. It's really to create that critical mass. Because if you have the critical mass, um, if you build it, they will use it. But if you don't have the critical mass, that's I think when there's a gap there and, and sometimes the existing populations, the existing neighborhoods, um, they just can't support, um, you know, a lot of commercial development, a lot of retail. You have to have, um, the feet on the street to actually support it.

### **Emily Craven**

And and it's building almost feeders in that kind of that city planning way. The, the waterfront builds those feeders from the outer communities into downtown. Um, and that streetcar builds that feeder from the waterfront out through the downtown. Um, as well, although I think you told me that the streetcar was, like, there and ripped out and is now being re put in. Did I get that correct?

**Stephen Bensen**

Yes, yes, we Tampa had one of the most extensive streetcar systems in the country in the the 19 up until the 1920s. And um, and then like many places, um, the system was dismantled and removed completely. Um, by the 1940s, we had over 62 miles of track through all of these neighborhoods that that Robin and I are now working in. Um, and, and, uh, the Greco administration, in the early 2000, they made the decision to begin the process of rebuilding it. Um, of course not in the same way, but in a new a new layout and a new, new, um, a new route. Um, but the vehicles that you'll see driving around are replica historic. A couple of them are original, um, original restored streetcars, but most of them are replica vehicles. So they sort of look, you know, and feel like the original streetcars, but have more of the modern amenities like air conditioning and that sort.

**Tim Souza**

We all love air conditioning in Florida, and I think I think that's a huge boon. Um, and I one of the things that I remember from our previous conversation was that, uh, there was a very intentional decision to make those streetcars, those replicas, because of the community's connection to them. Can you speak to that a little bit?

**Stephen Bensen**

Yes, well, they are if you're if you're a fan of public transit and you you've ridden, you know, the streetcars in New Orleans and some of the newer systems in Phoenix. Um, and, uh, and Minneapolis, you'll know that the newer systems have they feel more like, um, they feel modern. I mean, there's like a level boarding. You don't have to go up all these steps to get into the car. Um, but the historic and the replica vehicles have a nostalgia that surrounds them that pulls at people's heartstrings. And I think that was a conscious decision when they built when they built the first, um, uh, new, new section of streetcar to use those replica vehicles because they wanted, you know, they wanted it to be to be a little nostalgic and not just be a mode of transportation, but also check some other boxes and, and contribute maybe in, in more of a less tangible way to the legacy that that administration was at least trying to to preserve.

**Emily Craven**

And so with the streetcars then why do you see them now as essential feeders? Right. Like, like how does that affect vibrancy in the downtown as a result of those?

**Stephen Bensen**

Well, I think it's I mean, it's a little obvious. I mean, they they you don't have to get in your car to experience all of our wonderful, you know, cultural resources to hop from one neighborhood to another. Um, we've had entire, you know, entire sub neighborhoods really built from the ground up. I mean, places that used to be a sea of parking lots are now, you know, 15 story, 20 story buildings, um, entire neighbourhoods that popped out of the ground along the streetcar. I mean, we have probably, I would say, one of the most, um, compelling case case studies for transit oriented development in the country with what's happened here just in the last 20 years along the streetcar line, um, areas that used to be warehouse districts that used to be surface parking for our hockey arena, uh, are now, um, you know, neighborhoods, entire neighborhoods, for lack of a better word. Uh, and it's all served by the streetcar. So I think, um, not not so much that we want to, you know, completely tear down and rebuild, you know, this next sort of push, this next sort of push of, of neighborhoods on the edge of downtown. But we acknowledge that the streetcar has done a lot to spur economic development and to create connectivity and opportunity. And I think that's the goal. And that's the tool that we're that's the tool that we're using it as is to do that, but not focusing just on downtown anymore, but focusing on the neighborhoods that are on the edge of downtown.

**Emily Craven**

And, and it's free to to ride the streetcar in the downtown core. Is that did I get that correct?

**Stephen Bensen**

It is it's a temporary, um, grant that we've continued to, um, have the benefit of for several years now that that, um, we hope will will continue even even longer. Um, because I think that's one of the reasons why it has been so successful is the ease of hopping on and off without having to worry about a ticket or, you know, coins or, or even a fare, a fare card. Um, I think that's helped. It's really a lot of different things. It's been the redevelopment along the line. It's been having it fare free. We also increased the frequency, um, to, uh, around 12 minutes, uh, per car, which which isn't the best, but it's pretty good compared to a lot of other cities. Uh, and I think that's been a factor in, in, in triggering a lot of the ridership that we've seen to not just tourists. Tourist ridership, which has been what has, I think, been the primary source of riders for, for, you know, probably since its inception. But now we're starting to see commuters use it. People that that either live in Ybor City and they work downtown. They're riding it to get to work. Um, people that maybe work in the hotels that need to park further away. They hop on the streetcar to get to to get to their job. Um, we're seeing a lot of the traditional choice riders, um, shift to using the streetcar just because of convenience. Yeah.

**Tim Souza**

And I think that, you know, the the question of, like, how you, how you guys fund these projects is actually a really good one. And so I think I'm going to kind of bridge and step into that. The second component of the strategy from my understanding is not specifically unique to Tampa, but it's unique to Florida. And a thing, as you guys are our first Floridian city on the podcast, you guys to be at spokespeople, can you kind of explain and the how the component that covers the funding of this revitalization work in the city, specifically? Steven, this thing called the CRAs that I learned about that recently. How does this tax, you know, increment system work for those who who live in these communities? How do you how do you leverage it? And, you know, how could people take those ideas outside of Florida if they were to hear how it functions?

**Stephen Bensen**

I yeah, I absolutely and I think to answer your question about how the the secret behind implementation, I think Robin would agree that it's it's aligning the people in the right jobs with the political will at the same time. Yeah, having an administration that is saying we need to do this, and then having the staff that actually knows how to do it, um, and aligning those, you know, when those moments align, it's like magic. And I think that's what got the streetcar built. That's what got the Riverwalk built. Um, it's what's been the, you know, it's what's been the driving force behind a lot of this. But again, that political will thread I think is, um, personified, personified in the concept of CRAs, which is something that's unique to Florida, that's enabled through state law, that essentially says you can draw, um, you first have to identify an area that has significant slum and blight. Uh, and there's a methodology for how you do that. You have to put a plan together, an inventory, um, all of the different factors that contribute to that. That finding of necessity. And then you are allowed to establish a district. And within that district, future increases in tax revenue beyond the year that the district was created go into a pot, and that pot of money can only be spent back in that district.

**Stephen Bensen**

So it sort of holds the line on whatever property taxes are being collected. Those still go into the general fund just like everywhere else, but sort of betting on the future as as the revenues increase because everything generally increases with time. Um, that additional that tax increment goes into a pot. And that's what funds, um, the priorities and the projects that are written into the plan for that district, that CRA district. Um, a lot of the plans say the same things because, you know, as, as you all know, the ingredients to making a great city, it's like the same ten ingredients, just different flavors and different ways and different strategies. Um, and so Robin and I are both tapped very frequently to sort of help implement these CRA plans through our own portfolio of tools and programs. Um, and thankfully, there is a pot of money there, usually, uh, to, to at least support some of these ideas, because the city as a whole just can't, you know, do this everywhere. Um, no CRAs and the funding that comes from them is meant to, uh, to go above and beyond what the city as an underlying government can actually do.

**Emily Craven**

And very specifically, like timed, they stop at they were set for seven years and they stop at the end of that seven years. And that's. Yes.

**Stephen Bensen**

Yes. And it's actually it's a 30 year, um, generally speaking, it's a 30 year horizon. You can end it early if you, if you want. Um, but it can it can go as long as 30 years. And if the blight has not been completely eliminated, you know, you can you can look at extending it or creating a new one. But, um, the important thing to understand about Cras, though, is that it's, um, our in Tampa, at least our CRA board, um, is also our city council. They sort of wear both hats. So while while Robin and I work, you know, as employees of the administration under the mayor, we do have to work in partnership with the Cras and the council to deliver, um, these this vision that they have for redevelopment in these areas.

**Emily Craven**

But I think that that's wonderfully, um, efficient to not have to. It's not building a bid. You're not creating a whole new nonprofit organization which then gets strapped for cash because blank, blank, blank, right. Like this is it is city run. It is it. The council is the board. It is the city employees that do the revitalization. So you can do the economic development, you can do the infrastructure and you can do the arts and cultural programming as one city. It feels more efficient and more helpful than a bit.

**Stephen Bensen**

It is. And it's different a bid. Bids are usually funded with additional fees or taxes, whereas a CRA is taxes that you theoretically were already going to pay. Um, it's just when it comes to the government, um, it gets divvied up differently and there are strings tied tied to it. Um, the other difference is that, you know, Cras are tied to, um, eliminating slum and blight. So once you eliminate slum and blight, that special funding mechanism, um, is no longer justified under state law. So you have to either, you know, come up with a different a different funding mechanism. But ultimately the CRA is going to go away. It's going to it's going to sunset. So what does that mean for, you know, the rest of the city departments that are here having to sort of make sure that what gets implemented, that there's a way to sustain that in the future, even after the CRA ends up sunsetting.

**Emily Craven**

Yeah. Beautiful. Um, and so I suppose to close this off, I wanted to bring, like both you and Robin, into the, you know, the spotlight here. You regularly collaborate with this funding mechanism to, um, build vibrancy together. And I would like to hear how those collaborations, um, take place before we wrap up.

**Robin Nigh**

Well, should I start, Steven?

**Emily Craven**

Sure.

**Robin Nigh**

Um, one example that I can give is, um, something one of his, uh, team members. There's an area called Sulphur Springs, and Steven and his team were looking at doing a, uh, neighborhood plan. A community plan. He can speak far better and more in depth to to that. And, um, what is there is there's just like a corner that really doesn't belong to anybody. In other words, it's just kind of an awful, uh. And the reason I say awful is because it's it's unkept. Nobody. I mean, it's it's mowed, but there's a bus stop there. There's a train trestle there. It's next to the river. It's actually got a lot of really lovely components to it, but it is, um, nobody really owns it. So working together, we can, uh, it's just kind of bring in code, bring in planning, bring in mobility. We can, uh, and I can bring in because there's one of the scholars at USF that we're, that we're working with who's written a book on, on the transportation within the African American community. So then you can start to make that place or, excuse me, that space a place.

**Robin Nigh**

Uh, and it just is a way of pulling in. And it's not the way projects usually roll out, you know what I mean? I mean, it comes out of the budget that you've got all the pieces of something that it kind of comes as a kit. This is essentially almost a kit of parts, for lack of a better term, in which you kind of pulls together, um, the entities, uh, to make something that's not even really on anybody's radar. So it's and the other thing that's a real sweet spot about that is that right down the road from there, there is a museum that and, uh, there's a community called Community Stepping Stones, a group that works on the arts. It's a primarily of youth there. And one of the Soul Walk members that we work with is on the board. So it's it's again, it's a way that that's a perfect example of how the dots are connected. And it is something that has kind of come out organically. That is really what we want to do more of.

**Emily Craven**

See that's beautiful. There's no budget fighting. There's no whose budget line does this come from to bring these people to the table? It's this beautiful tax piece on top that allows everyone to come to the table and make something truly unique, which I think is just that personifies what is so innovative and unique about the city of Tampa. You everything that you have talked about is about building collaboration from a community basis out through into urban planning and placemaking is about building the feeders of connection between community and downtown, rather than just focusing necessarily on that downtown core, because that downtown core relies on the vibrancy of everything else. And so if you build the feeders infrastructure wise, if you build the feeders community wise, all the things that you guys have talked about have been really long and they've run through multiple administrations. And I think, um, maybe a little bit of luck in there, as you say, with the political will matches the thing that happens as well. Right. But I think that because that connector mentality is there, those collisions happen more often because it's in the culture. It's in the zeitgeist of how we do things in Tampa. And so I think you have generated your own luck.

**Stephen Bensen**

Oh, we're hoping for more.

**Emily Craven**

Always. Always more growth. Stephen, do you guys have some final words at all? Um, uh, about the initiatives about the future? Uh, before we wrap up today.



**Stephen Bensen**

Just thank you for letting us share our, um, our story and and kind of, you know, the direction that we're headed in. You know, Robin and I are both, I think, um, you know, students as well as experts. So we're always interested in knowing and learning about what other places are doing and what we can bring back here. So thank you for allowing us to showcase. And we look forward to, to to listening to the podcast.

**Emily Craven**

Thank you.

**Robin Nigh**

I would say the same. And I'm just really, really blessed, as I said, with to work with a great team. There's just lots of really good people here.

**Emily Craven**

Well, Tim, what a gangbusters first episode to start the season.

**Tim Souza**

Wow, that was amazing. Intense. Really thought provoking.

**Emily Craven**

Really thought provoking. 100%. And I think, um, uh, just for those of you who might be new listeners, the the idea behind this section is that we really want to dive into our thoughts on the episode and how does it gel with the other cities that we've listened to and, and try to kind of pull and tease apart the things that we've learned in this episode? And I think for me, one of my main learnings that's come out of this is how, um, they are handling that recognition of the need to bridge the historic value of city spaces. So, you know, the black cemeteries, all of the the different issues that are that are tackled in Soul Walk with the new development of those influx of residents, your people, Tim, everywhere they're invading.

**Tim Souza**

The new colonialism is Californians attacking the rest of the US. I think.

**Emily Craven**

Yeah, yeah, 100%.

**Tim Souza**

But more than that, I think the reason that she's able to do that is that she's bringing an outside perspective into the city of Tampa. Like, granted, she grew up in an about Florida and in a number of different spaces. She self recognizes that. But like it's because she's coming from Chicago, she's bringing a lens of a community that is bridging those gaps into Tampa specifically. And I think that's a value outside leadership in a space.

**Emily Craven**

Yeah, I mean, yes, but at the same time, like like Steven is so like he's third generation, right? Like so so he and his family have been in there like like, like all avenues should point towards the fact that he is firmly entrenched in like old school opinions of like, right. But like he but he like recognizes the history, like he recognizes the history, um, and the continuing legacy. Um, and and how do you continue that legacy and try not to build over what Tampa already has, like, yes. You want to add connection, you want to add those links and those those bits and pieces. But like, you can't also then pave over the history of that.

**Tim Souza**

Yeah, I think that you do also have to recognize that. I mean, he's Steven's an outside thinker, right? He may be from this space, but he thinks differently. He's one of those innovative people that, you know, we often joke that innovative people can be wasted on government a little bit because they get in and then there's just not those changes. But he has come in and he has really championed that change of that waterfront space because he wanted those neighborhoods to be connected, those same neighborhoods that Robin is looking to capture those stories so that they could bridge the old and the new. Steven is thinking about how to use the spaces that he grew up with, that his parents grew up with, that his grandparents had and grew up with right differently. So I think that there's a value there, um, maybe.

**Emily Craven**

Generational, uh, like where, you know, younger generations see the potential more than or in addition to what they've experienced growing up. Maybe, um, maybe, I mean.

**Tim Souza**

I just know that the efforts that Robin has brought into the city have now led to, like, a de facto cultural plan, right? Whereas before there wasn't that kind of cultural plan in place. And really, she didn't even intend to do a cultural plan. She just wanted to capture those stories and the way that she's seen other communities capture the story. So I do really believe that there's like a value in, um, challenging yourself with an outside perspective or challenging maybe, in Steven's case, the perspectives that you've always known.

**Emily Craven**

Yeah. And I think the thing that really makes Robin stand out for me is that she is thinking about this in the sustainable lens. She's like, I am going to be stepping away. I am going to be stepping away from this at some point, and I want it to continue. And so how do I make that sustainably continue within the confines of my role and the funding that I have and, you know, the people who've done it before? Um, and so, like, as she sets up, like what that bar is. Right? Grabbing old assets, repackaging them for relevance, making sure that there's a physical reminder of that, grabbing assets, repackaging them for relevance. Like her and Steven work together extremely well. And that's not the case in a lot of cities that urban planning involves arts and culture. Even in the 1% for arts like the cities that have 1% for arts, that's not a given like they do it as a token throw away a lot of the time. But like Robin really incorporates those pieces.

**Tim Souza**

Yeah. And I would say it's the way in which she is, you know, in her words, like setting the table, not bringing the food. Right. It's not for her about coming in. And I'm coming in from with the Chicago perspective. I'm coming in with this outside thing and I'm doing this thing. She recognizes that community building is slow, and I think that working with that urban planning and working with those arts lenses, she's really helped identify the fact that these communities don't see the art that is in those existing spaces, in those museums, in what is already existing there as relevant to themselves. Right. And so she's working to hand in hand with, you know, Stephen, to make sure that there's connections to these stories, but working to elevate their art and put it and leverage it as a tool for economic development for these communities, by these communities. Um, so that their art can be seen as same as the art that's been inside that museum glass.

**Emily Craven**

Okay. So I raise you a Jane Castor. So the mayor of the city of Tampa is Jane Castor. So she again has been in Tampa for like a very long time. She was like the like the police chief and like, you know, like so she's been in Tampa a really, really long time. She like Steven is like local to the core. Um, and so I'm, I met Mayor Castor at South by the US conference of mayors was running at the same time as South by Southwest. We met at a US conference of mayors session at South by um. And so she recognized that they had like a an Austin situation on their hands. Right. Like they they had the influx of Californians that they need like that the money was great, tech was great. Being seen as a tech hub was great. But she recognizes that, like, you need to mix that with who is there to the point that like, she took their city offices out of downtown and moved them into East Tampa. Right. Like she moved the whole city, city council into East Tampa. And she and she pointed Robin to focus on the neighborhoods, not downtown. She was the one who pointed Robin in that direction. And as much as Robin brought in that wonderful outside perspective, like. Agreed. Agree to disagree, Tim.

**Tim Souza**

Okay, well then I will counter with the fact that via Mayor Castor and then through these, you know, through Stephen and Robin and the initiatives and their peers, they've really moved a focus, you know, into listening to the constituent constituents right all of these connections. They're building all of these, the infrastructure, the cultural, the instead of building these things in pockets, they've been looking at how to connect them, but they listen to all of the different nodes, the culture and the art that's been developing in these spaces and really bringing them into feed to be feeder lines into this greater structure. And so I might give you that, you know, maybe it's not all outside perspectives, but I think what they are doing really, really well is they're saying it's about the people who live in this city. It's not about the city's agenda. It doesn't sound like it's about politics. It's about making, which everything is eventually about politics. I cede that, but I think at the end of the day it's connecting and saying we are one city made of multiple neighborhoods, multiple communities, all of which have value.

**Emily Craven**

Um, you can't have a heart without having the connections. You can't have a heart like like what they did in the Detroit waterfront. Like, people are not going to come to that heart if they don't have the connection to it, both physical, cultural, etc.. Um, and so they are building those feeder lines with, with a whole waterfront with the streetcar. Um, but also with culture. I think that that's really important culture and history and acknowledging that culture and history play a really big part in that education of that plays a really big part. I think it's all about education and practical showing up with action, like moving those offices to East Tampa was showing up.

**Tim Souza**

To the front door where those people lived. And I think that it's almost as if, like this, this leadership is meeting these grassroots desires right there. These stories, these these caretakers of of history. Um, a lot of cities just run events in those spaces and then they leave, right? They come in, they touch, and they pop out. And I think that very valuable additions to be made here in this city, placemaking of building these feeder lines and connecting. And then as Steven was sharing, they're able to connect to new spaces that they never thought they'd be able to connect because they they built the heart and they built these lines out.

**Emily Craven**

Yeah, I think so. And I think that obviously comes from an acknowledgment that previous administrations built the heart. Mhm. And now this administration can build on that to go into the neighborhoods and then do the connections. Right. So like, I like it's all about a journey. And I think that we see that in each of these episodes in this season is that people are at the different points of their journey, and some are at the building the connections piece and some are at the they've built up their neighborhoods to be this really fabulous, um, components, but then haven't done the connection yet. Right. So like, I think that, um, I would like to acknowledge that, like, yes, there's a lot of innovation happening here. There's a lot of grass roots, there's a lot of being able to do stuff with little funding and, and lower amount of people. And I think.

**Tim Souza**

That part of it to what is allowing them to do these very unique spaces is something that's unique to Florida, and that's how they fund all this work, right? They can draw a line on the ground and say, within this zone, I'm we're going to collect the taxes and specifically contribute to raising this neighborhood and raising this community. And I think that that is different from your 1% for arts. It's different than these other area. Yeah, right.

**Emily Craven**

But also not have people fight over budget like particularly with those with those zones that they have like it is budget for that area. And so you can work across multiple departments and it doesn't come out of that department's budget to do the thing. Right. And that's what I think is smart about that funding structure.

**Tim Souza**

That's true. I think it's what it's allowing for, you know, these visions to come into fruition is that they found a way to fund them. Mhm. Mhm. Yeah. Otherwise it's always the the age old question of like leadership can want what it wants. People can want what they want. If they don't have the, the ability to do it. It's not done.

**Emily Craven**

Yeah. There's the money brokers and then there's the relationship brokers and and and and the. I would almost say that the relationships are the heart of part of the equation. Um, but, um, you know, you saw that in the Detroit waterfront. You saw that with Robin Soul Walk and how she's pulling those people together and how other communities, the Latino community, etc. are now being like, we want our soul walk. Right? And and that's amazing. That's what you want. That's the momentum you want.

**Tim Souza**

Right. And some of these other, you know, these bids, these people who want to be involved in these spaces and tell these stories as well. Um, and I think that Robin's high level perspective on, on all these pieces is making sure that, um, that legacy, you know, doesn't just disappear. And she's gotten over 100 different stories and pieces that she's captured. And so even if that neighborhood is transformed, they are they can keep that story of what happened on that land. And I know from a Canadian perspective, you know, land acknowledgement and those those pieces are super important, um, because we are very much tied to all of that. Great. So thank you, Mayor Castor, for introducing us to both Robin and Stephen, because it is allowed for us to have this amazing episode, um, and really have a deeper dive into what it means to build those inner connections and what it means and why, why, why you would want to do that and why you like.

### **Emily Craven**

Yeah, why? Why do you want to listen to you? Like why it is important to listen to your constituents, right? Important to listen to them and the different ways of doing that. Right? I think I think is, is what they are doing so well in Tampa and, and, and doing that cross collaboration and acknowledging that, yes, you need to take into account neighborhoods when you're talking about downtown. And then even in those CRA zones, you need to take into account the culture and the art and the history of that place. If you are planning to revitalize that infrastructure.

### **Tim Souza**

And to hear the stories that aren't official stories, right. We have this huge push right now. And I think this is why I love Soul Walk so much that there's been this big push of like, people carry stories with them all the time, right? We carry stories throughout our day. We build our own stories. Our our stories are built on the backs of other stories. And very importantly, Tampa is not shying away from the complexity of their history. They're not shying away from the, you know, everything from Spanish colonialism to slave trade to like what is happening now with a new form of colonization. California's coming in and bringing their money and being able to buy things and do things that locals can't. And so they're looking at this piece and recognizing that there is strength in acknowledging and engaging that history and building bridges between or in this case, waterfronts between that that old and that new. And I think that, um, that something's really beautiful that the city of Tampa is doing, which makes me want to go visit. So. Yeah.

### **Emily Craven**

And I think and, and there are different ways of celebrating diversity. Right. And a lot of cities, what they'll do is they'll build strong pockets of diversity that are not connected. They act as like satellite communities, right? Where there some strong pockets. And you go to Little Italy and you go to Chinatown and you, you know, you, you, you head to these different areas as their own, like little, um, neighborhood. Yes, but like, like micro city in a way. Right. And so people talk about how diverse and, and how awesome their food is and like, and all of those kind of things. But if those pockets are not connected, like, there's so much money gets wasted in everything from marketing to, um, you know, bringing in tourists to, like, advertising a tiny, like, festival. Right. And so, like, building that infrastructure that is physically connecting, but also culturally connecting is really important. And, um, and that's what I've loved about the grassroots effort.

### **Tim Souza**

Uh, thank you guys for joining us today on our first episode of this season. We're super excited. Um, and mainly, I mean, I think we're excited because we got to see what it's like in Tampa to focus on, like, these grassroots efforts, as Emily just mentioned. Um, and then next week, we really get to take a look at a city that's doing a really great job at doing events. And so, uh, join us next week with Kansas City. And we're going to be talking with their Neighborhood Tourism Development Fund and Sports Commission, um, really delving into what it is like to build a strong identity, um, appealing to visiting demographics that are coming in. So, uh, thank you for joining us, and we can't wait to see you next week.

### **Emily Craven**

Yeah, see you next week, everyone. Until then, be kind to each other. The Vibrant Spaces podcast is produced by Story City. You can find our entire archive on any podcasting app and on about Story City, where we publish transcripts and show notes. This episode was produced by Tim Sousa and our staff includes Justin Kahn, Brett Ludwig, and Victoria Onitsuka. Our theme song is Happy Indie by Alex Guss. Our co-hosts are Tim Sousa and me, Emily Craven. As always, thank you for listening. We hope you have a glorious adventure this week.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



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