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Transcript

Speaker 1

It's time for the Outspoken Cyclist, your weekly conversation about bicycles, cyclists, trails, travel, advocacy, the bike industry, and much, much more. You can subscribe to our weekly podcast at outspokencyclist.com or through your favorite podcatching app to listen anytime. Now here's your host, Diane Jenks.

Speaker 2

Hello and welcome to The Outspoken Cyclist. I'm your host, Diane Jenks. Thanks for tuning in today. Seven years ago, Melissa and Chris Bruntlett gave up their cars, moved to the Netherlands, and have been exploring urban transformations around the world. The last time I spoke with Melissa and Chris back in 2022, they had just published two books, *Curbing Traffic* and *Building the Cycling City*. They didn't have the opportunity to do the traditional kind of book tour at the time because of the pandemic, but that has since changed. In fact, with their kids heading off to college and beyond and their new book, *Women Changing Cities, Global Stories of Urban Transformation*, just published, they've been able to travel and speak about their work in person all over the world. The work has led them to so many women who are doing remarkable things in their respective cities, and their stories are both fascinating and inspiring. *Women Changing Cities* highlights the stories of 19 women working in 11 different cities as Melissa and Chris shine the spotlight on what can only be termed a modern transformation of urban thinking. Our conversation ranges from why women are not well represented in the planning space of engineering, politics, and architecture to the astounding fact that only 8% of the 300 largest cities in the world have elected women as mayors. The explanations of how those things are gradually but surely changing are encouraging. Hello, Melissa and Chris. Welcome back to the Outspoken Cyclist. It's great to speak with and I get to see you again. So we haven't really spoken since 2022. At that point, your children were a little younger, but you're still living in Delft, Netherlands, which I think is such a cool place when I looked into it. And are you still experiencing a pretty car free world life?

Speaker 3

Indeed, yeah. We have now been living in the Netherlands for seven years without a car. I mean, and then of course, we've been living without a car since 2010. I recently got my driver's license again, so we couldn't swap it, but that's neither here nor there. Only because when we travel, it's becoming increasingly challenging and our parents

are aging. So when we visit Canada, it makes life a lot easier. But aside from that, yeah, it's bikes, walking, and trains for us.

Speaker 2

You're saying your parents are older. How often are you able to get back to the States to see them?

Speaker 3

We usually travel to Canada once as a family, once every other year, but it's been almost annual, at least for me, based on work and same for you.

Speaker 4

Yeah, if there's a work trip that takes us into their neck of the woods, then we make a point of stopping by and seeing them. But it is, yeah, as Melissa indicated, quite a car-dependent part of the world, so we often find ourselves reverting to our teenage years where we're dependent on them to shuttle us around because our Canadian driver's licenses weren't transferable to the Netherlands and then ultimately expired.

Speaker 2

Yeah, I know how that goes. We're looking at passports so they're starting to do the same thing. It's like, oh, wait, that was 10 years ago, really? Your new book, which Jamie, Jamie's great. I remember she was originally, I think, with Island Press. Yeah. And she always remembers to contact me when something new and interesting comes out. And this is new and very interesting. It's the first time I've actually seen a book that focuses on women and the work they're doing with urban planning and transportation and just the things that are going on in cities. So it is Women Changing Cities, yay, global stories of urban transformation. As I told you before, we actually started our conversation for the for the podcast. I really love the format of the book and the color. I mean, it's really, really well done. So kudos, you guys. Really good, job.

Speaker 3

Thank you.

Speaker 2

I think of urban planning and transportation issues as mainly being sort of orchestrated, if you wanna call it that, by men. That may not necessarily be the case anymore. So before actually going into the book, I want to know about your experiences of women and how you chose the ones you did for this book. These are stories. And what you think women are, how many women are actually in the space of urban planning and transportation?

Speaker 4

Well, yeah, we obviously get asked this question quite frequently because after writing 2 fairly successful albeit Dutch focused books, why did we decide to dedicate two years of our lives to this topic, to shining a light on women that were doing tremendous things in cities around the world? And there's no one single answer except to say, I mean, for as long as we've worked in the industry, we've seen a lack of representation when it comes to positions of leadership and decision making. We're often told, yeah, there just aren't enough women working in this field to justify an all-male panel or something that's not taking diverse viewpoints into consideration. And then for us, what really lit the spark to allow us to do this in and around our day jobs was we were seeing post-pandemic that the cities that were really making progress on the topics of reallocating road space and transforming their streets and mobility systems were being led by women. And so for us, it just became a giant investigation. Let's travel the world, speak to 19 different women in 11 cities and try to figure out, is there something about female leadership that is rising to the occasion, if you will, and getting stuff done, as we often say. But I mean, the fact of the matter is no, we haven't addressed this gender gap at all. At the time of writing, it was only 25 of the 300 largest cities in the world that had female mayors, so 8%. And the numbers that we also dig out in our presentations, in our books, mean women may be graduating from urban planning and engineering and architecture schools at the same rate as men these days, but they're not filtering up into these positions of leadership and decision making and politics. And this leaky pipeline is really what we wanted to analyze and shine a light on. And so with the events that we've done around the book, we've been able to have some important but difficult conversations about what is preventing women from having more seats at the decision-making table.

Speaker 2

So do you think that women are choosing not to move up into the space or are they being summarily shut out?

Speaker 3

So there's a myriad reasons why this has occurred historically. I mean, women not being in the workforce to begin with or not, having a disadvantage in terms of how soon they've entered into these organizations has meant that men that are in their 50s, 60s, 70s have a legacy that they're building on of other men that they're coming in the shadows out or coming out of the shadows into positions of leadership, whereas women are having, let's say mid-1980s, aside from an exceptional few, really starting to make headway in these engineering firms, architecture firms, and urban planning. So we're already starting at a disadvantage. And then there are structural elements, such as if you decide to have a family or the implicit bias that might exist in a hiring room or in a board decision making room in terms of who to promote might not be actively against hiring a woman, but there's already a bias in place that they're trying to work against. So we talk about this, you know, this is not an urban planning sole problem. You know, women having to work twice as hard, having to watch what language they use, having to not be aggressive or, you know, not being too egotistical to make themselves be

attractive for these kinds of positions. And so these are all the structural things they're working against that maybe have made it so that we're still now in 2026 having to address these gaps. And our hope in putting this book together is that not only does it provide an example for young women coming out of architecture, urban planning, engineering school, showing them that there are women in these roles, that we can have a place at the table and have a very strong impact in the cities where we live, work and play. But also to show men that it's, you know, this is something that we need to balance, that the better that we have representation in our decision making tables, not just men, women, but all the intersectionalities, the better our cities, the outcomes for them end up being because we bring a more diverse thought to the decision making and designing process.

Speaker 2

Has the curricula changed at all to sort of move thinking toward women and transportation and urban planning, knowing that a lot of women, for example, will not ride a bike in the middle of traffic, but they will be happy to ride a bike on a protected bike lane. I don't know if you've seen it, whether anything has changed in the actual education of planners that would bring that kind of thinking.

Speaker 3

I think we do see it a little bit in terms of not necessarily gender-based planning, although we are seeing that increasingly in various geographic contexts. But just this idea of safety and inclusion and understanding that if we're designing, for example, for children, we also can't expect that kids are going to start cycling to school in the middle of traffic. And so we need to address that. I think what we hear a lot and what we communicate a lot is that if we're designing with women in mind, we're essentially designing for everybody in mind. And that just makes the city much more welcoming, inviting, safe for all the kinds of trips, not just the trip to work.

Speaker 2

Let me reintroduce you and then we'll keep on moving. We're going to take a break. In another few questions and comments, and then we're going to actually dive right into the book. We're speaking with Melissa and Chris Brentlett, and their new book is *Women Changing Cities, Global Stories of Urban Transformation*. We've spoken with them in the past. If you want to go back through *Outspoken Cyclists* and find our original conversation, it's from 2022. And it was right after they published two other books. This one is just fascinating to me and of interest to me, not only from the urban transformation, but women being involved. So what do you think women see about their cities that makes them especially capable of making changes?

Speaker 4

Yeah, this is always, and we're going to talk in broad strokes, obviously, and it's very quick to emphasize that it's not every woman and it's not every man. But I think there is

something about the lived experience, the female lived experience, when it comes to, in particular, the work of care. So they are historically and continue to be responsible for taking care of children and making trips to grocery stores and to take care of elderly parents. So they move through the city in different ways, and they're not necessarily doing the single purpose long distance commute from the house to the office that we've been designing our cities around for the better part of 80 years. And so that brings a fresh perspective and new priorities that cities are only now just starting to measure and design for. And that is making our neighborhoods work for the caregiver of the household, making it so that they can do their day-to-day errands in the morning and afternoon. And this results in not just a more livable city, but a more inclusive and a more prosperous place. So this built-in empathy that comes with being the caregiver of the household, whether you're the man or the woman, I think lends itself very well to being in a position of leadership or decision making because suddenly you see the city in a completely different way. We were at an event last week in Bratislava where one of the panelists pointed out the moment you have children, your perspective and your life changes, but also your priorities completely change. And I think we would all do well if our urban planners and our engineers saw the city through the most vulnerable eyes at 95 centimeters, three feet above the ground, rather than where they currently are. So that's, I think, one example. But there were many others that we identified when we talked to the various women. Do you want to? No, that was good. Okay.

Speaker 2

Okay. We just got an A-OK on that one. I do want to take a break and come back and talk about how you chose the women you did and what their roles were in their, I mean, we're not going to clearly talk about every single one, but we'll highlight a few of them and explain why this book might be important to not only urban planners, but anybody who's interested in his or her own living environment, city or urban or even suburban areas. We're speaking with Chris and Melissa Bruntlett. They are in Delft, Netherlands, which is really cool. I just love saying it. And I think it's a, well, I looked into it the first time we spoke and I thought, what a cool place to live. You're listening to the Outspoken Cyclist. We'll be right back. We are back on The Outspoken Cyclist. I'm your host, Diane Jenks. So let's talk about how you chose the women you did and the cities you did, because obviously the women represent their cities. For the book, there are, as you said, I think 19 women, 11 cities. Okay, so obviously we don't have one woman per city. So let's take a couple of the people who have multiple roles and then one who have individual roles. Go.

Speaker 3

Yeah. So really coming down to who we spoke to, it was a bit of what we were seeing in terms of trends online, in the urbanist bubble on various social media, hearing about, of course, what was happening in Paris. But also, you know, having a close connection to Canada, seeing Montreal, knowing very prominent women in Sydney, these cities sort of stood out. But then also we were really conscious because in our jobs we hear a lot

of, well, that happens in the Netherlands, it can't happen here, or that's such a Eurocentric way of thinking about it. We really wanted to make sure we included cities outside of the North American and European context. So ensuring that we had an African continent something from India, Southeast Asia, and also Latin America, because what we really want people to understand is, of course, this is a book about the women that we're helping to make these changes happen, but also these are changes that can happen in any geography around the world. We hope that in addition to being inspired by the women also being able to be inspired by the work that was achieved in these various places and hopefully apply it where they are. So, you know, you might not be Paris and maybe you don't have an Anne Hidalgo in your mayoral race, but maybe you have someone like Keisha Mayuga in Manila who's a grassroots activist and will help spur a cycling revolution there simply by using her own experience and teaming up with other young people to help help realize something different.

Speaker 2

So you found all of these women just by doing research on your own or were people recommended to you? How did you actually narrow it down to 11 cities in 19? I mean, I imagine you could have just kept on going if women are beginning to show themselves in these situations. So were there specific criteria that you absolutely included?

Speaker 4

Not really. I mean, there were the examples that we knew. We also put a call out on social media on the various channels to get people's suggestions. And then at some point, Melissa and I just really sat down and said, okay, we need a cross section of context, geographic context. We need a cross section of leadership types, both top down and bottom up. We need different examples of actual transformations, like pedestrianizations or protected bike lanes or different applications, so that it's almost like we're spotlighting not just the women that are making happen, but somebody described the book as a shopping list of different solutions that you can go through. using the photographs and say, hey, I'd like to maybe try this school street or this pedestrian St. or this super block in my neighborhood. So at the end of the day, it was just about trying to catch as broad a cross-section as we could. And that is how we ended up shortlisting the 11 cities. But as you indicated, we could have done two, three, four times that if we had infinite time and money, but really had to, at the end of the day, draw a line somewhere. And unfortunately, there were lots of great women that were doing great work that also got left out of the book as well.

Speaker 3

I mean, it's important to say that since we published it, we've had a lot of recommendations of people that we've missed. We didn't purposefully miss anyone.

Speaker 2

Of course not.

Speaker 3

Because there are so many amazing women that are doing amazing work around the world. And yeah, we purposely left out the Netherlands because we wrote two books about the Netherlands as well. We highlighted a number of really prominent women in those two books. So it's sort of trying to find that balance. But one of the ways we like to describe it is this book is a bit of a-- it's a snapshot of a period in time. And we know that there's ongoing change. We know there's change that happened before we even started writing this book. When we present on it, we talk about the opportunities that presented themselves because we had to come up with new ways to design our cities and plan our spaces because of the pandemic. And so most of the stories that we share in some way relate to a reaction to a tragedy and finding an opportunity to, improve people's lives the best that they could.

Speaker 2

Was there anything that you saw that just astounded you? I mean, I could see that we might, put a protected lane here. There was a tragedy here. We changed the way the intersection worked. We got something to go from point A to point B that never did before. But was there anything that we just, I mean, we would not think about that just astounded you?

Speaker 4

I mean, we talk endlessly about Montreal because I think for North American city to pedestrianize 11 commercial shopping streets, not for a few hours on a Sunday, but for seven days a week for six months of the year. And when we first visited there in the summer of 2021, walking down the middle of Montreal Street, Our jaws were on the floor. Like we were like, we can't believe that this is happening in North America. And we just received the news that they're doing it again this summer. So it'll be now, I think, six straight years that this has been going through, not just the leadership of the mayor, Valerie Plant, but the leadership of the business community there, which as you know, are often quite amongst the most conservative against change. They led this process. They knew their lives were on the line. It was a matter of survival. And I mean, the reclamation of those streets as a civic space is really incredible. And anybody who's in North America, we would encourage them to visit Montreal in the summer months because that is a transformational project that I still can't believe they pulled it off and they continue to run it to great public support and business support each and every year.

Speaker 2

So they take those streets, those 11 districts, not 12 months a year, but a specific amount of time and shut them to any vehicular traffic except biking and walking.

Speaker 3

Yeah, essentially. So these corridors are usually retail corridors. shops and restaurants and what have you. And the wonderful thing and the reason that we, why Montreal stands out is because it's not like one more affluent area. It's different areas throughout the city, areas where I mean, I spent a lot of time in my childhood in Montreal with family there. So knowing the different demographics in each of these areas all benefiting from May till October, I think is the longest stretch. for some of them. And it's not that they're completely closing off this artery, which would be the first argument against, you know, for anyone that might be against something like this. There's still the ability to do cross traffic on the one-way street network, but the main corridor is just for walking, just for cycling, but cycling slowly. They put up spray parks in the summer because in Montreal, like many Canadian cities, gets into the mid to high 30 degrees, which is pushing 100 in terms of Fahrenheit. to make sure people are nice and cool, but they have wonderful places to find shade and just relax. And it's really, to see it succeed so well and for some of them to actually have become permanent. So there's a couple that they mentioned for this year that are now all year round. Pedestrianizations is quite special and something that we're glad to be able to celebrate. And I think the only other, I was just gonna say the only other thing that was quite surprising and shocking for us is also the story we highlight in the Delhi chapter with the organization called Safety Pin, started by Kalpana Visvanath. Because what it did is it basically democratized data in terms of collection, giving the power to the people to say, this is where we feel uncomfortable, this is where we feel unsafe. But then using that data not just to say, oh, these are all the danger points and we need to be aware, but actually giving it to the government and saying, this is where we need to take action and the government taking action, addressing areas with low lighting or low seating at public transport hubs or places where women were actively choosing not to go and ultimately at the detriment of getting to school or work because they felt unsafe. actively working to address that. And of course, we've been to Delhi, there's a long way to go still, but this ability to simply by addressing a need in terms of a data gap, using that information to actually create action in a place that maybe was very hostile to it before is quite remarkable.

Speaker 2

Where did you go in Southeast Asia?

Speaker 3

To Manila. And to be fair, we didn't actually make it there.

Speaker 2

Who was your Manila lady?

Speaker 3

So that's Keisha Mayuga. She's a young woman who studied journalism. She was on her way to her very first job post-graduation and struck up a conversation with the woman next to her on public transport, who then started recounting a story of how she

misses her child when she's on her way to work. It takes 2 hours to get there, two hours to get home. She leaves before the child gets up for school and then is home after bedtime. And for Kashia, it reminded her of her own childhood and sort of spurred her into wanting to take action.

Speaker 4

Yeah, and that really happened again around the same time as the COVID-19 pandemic. And so in Manila in particular, they shut down the public transportation system entirely, which meant that the essential workers were sleeping in the hospitals and the offices or walking two or three hours each direction. And so that really, that act of empathy Acacia started a nonprofit and worked with a bunch of friends to do one temporary pop-up bike lane using some orange traffic cones. And the next thing you know, the Philippine National Government is engaging with the Dutch Cycling Embassy with the organization that I work with to implement a 500 kilometer permanent bike lane program. This is like just an amazingly inspiring story, you know, one young woman that was able to spark that level of change that has led to policy and infrastructure happening at the national level. And Manila, cycling just was impossible on the streets until this. And it's still got a long way to go, but they've now put the bare bones of a network on the ground. It's becoming established as an option for what is widely known as one of the most congested and traffic choked cities in Southeast Asia.

Speaker 3

And the organization that they started called Move as One Coalition is still active, still offering training, offering reports, collecting data to help keep the government accountable so that they keep building out that safe infrastructure. Yeah, really inspiring story of how even our young people are seeing what is possible and making it happen.

Speaker 2

So the last thing I really want to talk about is the economic impact of having women in these positions. And I don't know if that's something you've looked at at all. It seems to me that women have a different way of looking at the economy and at what's important to them and their families than just going out and having a job. and bringing home whatever the paycheck is. Has any, or should I say, has any of your work in the context of this book addressed any economic stuff?

Speaker 3

I don't know that it's necessarily provided the solutions per se, but it's definitely highlighted some of the issues. And I think Bogota is probably the best example with the care blocks that they've implemented there. And these were, this is a program that, yeah, has was on the table as something to get started for some time. And what they did there under the leadership of Mayor Claudia Lopez is to really ramp it up and establish these essential community centers near mobility hubs where they provide care services for women so that they can actually give time for training. So these are likely

women that are living in lower income areas, maybe have left high school because they needed to take care of family or take care of their own children, things like this. And so they had a distance to the job market. And by providing this place, not only allowed them to train for new jobs, new skills to reenter the workforce, get those high school diplomas, but also relieve them of the burden of, not burden, we have children because we want to have children, but relieve them from that work and provide that childcare for children of all ages, but also for elderly family, laundry services, all kinds of things that would take them away from training and education. and actually tracking what that looks like in hours. And I think if I recall correctly, and forgive me if I don't remember the number exactly, but the laundry services alone were the equivalent of a full year's work, full-time work that they had provided in terms of hours transferred from care burden on somebody else to giving them the hours to actually be educated and find that training. And so when we look at that from an economic perspective, if these women were already at a disadvantage, they're providing them with the skills, not only to find that work, but then also the confidence and just that self-assurance that I can do this too. This is not just for one part of my family, this is something I can provide. And then also providing that inspiration for their children to understand that work is not, full-time work is not just for dad, it can be for mom. And that means a lot for their young children and especially their young daughters.

Speaker 2

Chris, you got anything on that or you want to wrap it up?

Speaker 4

No, I think it's a very important point. But what is also an important point that Melissa likes to make is none of the economic activity that happens in our cities can even occur without that unpaid, invisible care work as well. So it's not only providing support to help women enter the workforce, but recognizing that the work that the so-called breadwinner of the house does is also built on this lattice work of care work. And so I think we're seeing a new movement, a new emphasis on the economics of care and different cities are approaching it in different ways. But we can no longer keep treating care work as inevitable and invisible and have to start putting emphasis and maybe an economic value to it, because as we say, without it, our cities wouldn't function and our GDP. There's some amazing stats in the Bogota version. I think they said if care work was paid work, it'd be something like 26% of the gross domestic product.

Speaker 2

I can believe that. Absolutely. I don't think people realize what women do all the time. I mean, I think some people do, but you just look around your own house and go, I I do all this and then I go to work and then I take care of, yeah, right, exactly. We've been speaking with Melissa and Chris Brentlett. They are in the Netherlands. Their new book is Women Changing Cities, Global Stories of Urban Transformation. I was really excited to get my copy and nobody can have it. It's going to stay on our shelves. And I think it's

got some great stories. Take it to your local urban planning meetings, your cities, your whatever. And if you see some ideas, I assume that's one of the reasons you wrote the book is so people could get some ideas to take to their cities or to their city planners and see some success stories. I really appreciate you writing this book. I think it's excellent. What's next for you guys? You guys just keep doing and doing.

Speaker 3

We don't know. We'll never say we won't write another book. That's what we used to say after curbing traffic. But yeah, for now, I think we're in a bit of a transition. As we were saying before we started recording, our eldest is moving out and our youngest is not much further behind. So we're just sort of living in that space for a bit and enjoying Dutch life as best as we can and still traveling whenever possible.

Speaker 4

And enjoying promoting this book because in all truth, the second book came out during COVID-19, so we weren't actually able to take it out to physical audiences. This time around now, Slovakia last week was the 10th country.

Speaker 2

Wow.

Speaker 4

We've been able to visit on this tour, including US, Canada, China, Spain, France, Belgium, Germany, et cetera. So we're just enjoying getting into rooms full of people, having that face-to-face interaction. Yeah, spotlighting the incredible work that women are doing in those cities. trying to have this discussion about why the leaky pipeline exists and how we can work together to address it, then I think we'll continue to process and enjoy the lessons of this book and then maybe we'll start thinking about once that idea gets, the seed gets planted in your head, then it becomes obvious that that's the next project and we'll see when that moment occurs.

Speaker 2

It's been great to talk with you again, and I always look forward to knowing what's going on. I do follow you. Tell our listeners how they can get a copy of the book and how to follow your work, because I think it's interesting and productive work.

Speaker 3

Absolutely. Well, to buy the book, you can go to the Royal Institute of British Architects to purchase directly from there, or it is being carried in the US at any major or minor bookstore, if you just ask, or online. So *Women Changing Cities: Global Stories of Urban Transformation*. And then if you want to follow along in our work, we're both on LinkedIn with our names, Chris Bruntlett, Melissa Bruntlett, or you can find us on Instagram, Blue Sky and Facebook at @modacitylife.

Speaker 2

Thank you. And it's a pleasure to speak with you again. Have a wonderful summer and good luck with book sales. I will treasure mine. I hope you have a great summer and take some time off.

Speaker 3

Thanks, Diane.

Speaker 4

Much appreciate it. Thanks, Diane. Until next time.

Speaker 2

Yeah. and there will be one, I'm sure. My thanks to Melissa and Chris for joining me today. I thoroughly enjoyed the conversation and look forward to more from them in the not too distant future. Their new book, *Women Changing Cities, Global Stories of Urban Transformation*, is available from RIBA, R-I-B-A.org, as well as all your favorite booksellers. The suggestions in the book, the women who are highlighted, and the beautiful photography that graphically shows some incredible results will inspire anyone looking for ideas and support to bring to their community for consideration and hopefully implementation. For more information on what Chris and Melissa are doing next, you can follow them at modacitylife.com. That's M-O-D-A-C-I-T-Y-L-I-F-E. My thanks to you for listening. As we head into summer, I'll be looking at more of the great places to ride in the US, checking in with our friend Joe Lindsay as we lead up to the Tour de France, and we'll begin a series about safety, or a lack of it, and what's being done to improve relationships with law enforcement, legislators, and government in general here in the U.S. You can find links, photos, and a written transcript of every episode at outspokencyclist.com. Follow us on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube. subscribe to my Substack for extended commentary, and while you're there, consider buying me a coffee or subscribing to the channel. Please stay safe, stay well, and remember, there is always time for a ride. Until next time, bye-bye.

Speaker 1

Thanks for joining us today on *The Outspoken Cyclist* with Diane Jenks. We welcome your thoughts and contributions on our Facebook page, or visit outspokencyclist.com to leave a comment on any episode. We will be back next week with new guests, topics, conversations, and news in the world of cycling. Subscribe to the show in your favorite podcast app and you'll never miss an episode. *The Outspoken Cyclist* is a copyrighted production of DBL Promotions with the assistance of WJCU-FM Cleveland, a service of John Carroll University. Thanks again for listening, ride safely, and we'll see you next week.