

Episode 79

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urban planning, placemaking, Ash and Lime, small town downtowns, bottom-up development, Strong Towns, incremental development, third places, downtown revitalization, action plans, Jane Jacobs, tactical urbanism, community engagement, planning paralysis, Main Street manager

SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Rik Adamski, Ethan DeLeon

R

Rik Adamski 0:00:00

What are modest steps that we can take that are not necessarily grandiose? How do we take space and give it to people? Can we take one storefront and divide it into two? Can we take one empty lot and put activity into it? Can we start to have public art or improved window displays? Right. And you want to have your big plans, but if you're not thinking one step at a time, you're going to have very unsatisfying places.

E

Ethan DeLeon 0:00:38

Welcome to the Small Nation Podcast, brought to you by CoverLink Insurance, where people are more important than policies. On this show, we unpack lessons from entrepreneurs to break down development strategies and do deep dives on small town success. Our goal is to provide value to our listeners by hosting conversations that teach, inform, and Hey everyone, my name is Ethan DeLeon and I'm here in the studio with the founder and CEO of Small Nation, Jason Duff. Today we're excited to be virtually hosting President of Ash Lime, Rick Adamski.

R

Rik Adamski 0:01:06

Welcome, Rick. Welcome. Thanks so much for having me here, for both of you, Jason and Ethan.

J**Jason Duff** 0:01:12

Yeah, Rick, I was excited about this episode today when we get to have a thought leader on a topic that we don't often talk about. Right. I want to share, so give a plug for LinkedIn. Rick, you know, reached out, sent this really nice message to me. And how I knew it was not spam is he was asking really good questions about, I found your website, love what you guys are doing in revitalizing and renovating small towns. Let me tell you about what I'm doing. And oh, by the way, there's this great conference in Cincinnati that I'm going to be at in a few weeks. Like, we should connect. So, you know, with LinkedIn, like the power of that, when I jumped on and looked at his background and profile, I learned that he had founded a company that was doing urban planning but had a particular focus for small towns. I also like was seeing the kinds of things that he was liking and commenting. And it was all these folks that we had some mutual connections with, but many folks that because he's working down in Texas and we're up here in Ohio, many people that I was not aware of. So the next step that we took is we jumped on a Zoom and, you know, took about an hour to, like, learn more about each other and kind of became really great friends, like, almost instantly. Because when you find other people, it's kind of a small brotherhood, sisterhood of people that are doing this kind of work. But Rick happens to be one of those guys. So, Rick, I'm excited to have you on the show today.

R**Rik Adamski** 0:02:39

Well, well, thank you so much. And I'll tell you a couple of things. You know, I have been orders of magnitude more active on LinkedIn since about December than I have been ever, you know. So I've gotten very, very active on LinkedIn, really sought out people like yourself who are like-minded. And I've had an enormous amount of conversations and I've learned a lot. One of the things that I've learned is that there are a lot more people who are working the way that you are and that I am than I ever really realized. And I thought I kind of knew a lot of people who knew what was going on. But once I've really said, let's dig into everywhere and really see how it's doing this, how this is working, it's pretty amazing. And, you know, I've, I've reached out whether it's within Texas or other states or, you know, I've even ended up reaching out and finding people who are doing this stuff in Australia or in the Middle East. And it feels like there's definitely this global, you know, we might call it a placemaking movement. We might call it bottom-up. We might call it kind of a focus on doing what you can with the resources you have instead of this very kind of top-down version of planning. You know, the other thing that I would say is that's been interesting about our business is that we've worked in a huge amount of contexts. Probably 8 or 9 of the cities that we've worked in have been cities of under 10,000 people, in some cases even under 2,000. But we've also done work in Dallas and Fort Worth and Houston and a lot of different things in between. So what I've found is that if you come at things with the right type of openness, the basic principles that you have are the same, whether you're working in a place that's, you know, 120-year-old historic downtown, or whether you're working in a place that was, you know, built after World War II and is kind of your very car-oriented conventional suburbia, or whether you're working in big cities or small towns, um, I find the principles are the same. And so I find that we're able to very much focus on the district, the neighborhood, and the corridor and use a similar approach. It changes every time, every place is different, but the basic sort of underlying ideas are, are very similar no matter what. So that's been kind of a cool experience for me.

J

Jason Duff 0:05:08

I love that. And you brought up the term we. Let's just kind of dive into Ash and Lime. What is your firm and what do you do?

R

Rik Adamski 0:05:17

Okay, so I'll get into the name first because people always go, what the heck does that mean? Sometimes they'll think we're a construction company. We're not. But those are the basic ingredients of Roman concrete. So when we were first trying to come up with names, we almost came up with something much more boring and somebody with a similar name threatened to sue us.

J

Jason Duff 0:05:38

Like that.

R

Rik Adamski 0:05:40

Like that. So, yeah, we, uh, it's still— we still have a DBA, uh, that we, we don't use in our business practice. Um, but the idea of it is that these are simple ingredients that have stood the test of time in creating enduring places. And, you know, nothing that we do— we haven't invented anything. Uh, none of the concepts that we work under, none of the ideas that we have, none of the The critiques that we have of where we think planning and placemaking and economic development has gone wrong, they're all very timeless. And we're rediscovering these principles and the idea of them being simple. Sometimes we're too clever by half, you know, sometimes we, we try to overthink things rather than figuring out what is the essence and what are the next things that we can do to help this community because that's what's important. What tools and resources can we give? And sometimes, you know, it's good to be able to make a sophisticated analysis, but sometimes you also have to be able to say, this is what's on the ground and here's how we can help to make the next steps happen. So that's kind of a lot of where the name came from and our theme. In terms of us, we were founded 10 and a half years ago. We were at a conference actually in Louisville, Kentucky of what was once kind of the group of people that used to be called CNU Next Gen. Fortunately, there's a Next Next Gen now so that—

J

Jason Duff 0:07:13

They keep raising the age, right?

R**Rik Adamski** 0:07:15

Yeah, people who are pushing 50 like me don't have to be the next gen still. We can have the new people come in. But the— I was at a conference and there were 27 people present and we all presented on what our ideas were on the next American urbanism. And at that point, I was either wise or foolish enough to decide that I was going to go with 2 other people who were in the room with me and start a business based on these ideas. So we've changed a lot of the kind of the way that we've had to do things in order to sell our services and make a living. That's had to evolve. The ways that we found, oh, this is the most effective way or that's the most effective way. But the principles under which we founded, I think, are rock solid and I think work pretty much anywhere from my experience. Do what you can with the resources you have. Take a step, and if it's working, take the next step. Empower people with tools and resources that they need to improve their community. Focus on outcomes. All of those types of ideas we found, you know, find gaps and fill it with activity. Again, these are pretty simple, but if you approach a place in that way, it proves to be very effective. We've been doing this for 10 and a half years. As I'm sure you know from, from working in small-town Ohio, it's probably very similar that we went to random places in Texas or even big cities in Texas, and people had no idea what we were talking about. You know, this bottom-up approach was very foreign to them. But we've had to learn how to prove the ideas one step at a time, get work. You know, now I've figured out that we've worked in more than 30 communities and they have been every type, every size of place. You know, we get called in a lot of the time when somebody says, I don't know what to do with this, let's call Ash and Lime because at least they'll be enthusiastic about it. You know, if you put us in, you know, that's great if we can come in and there's this, you know, cool urban neighborhood and we can help make it a little better. We love that. But just as much, if it's like, I don't know, we've got a couple blocks here, if we squint your eyes, this could be a special place. Our attitude is always, yes, this could be a special place, have pride in it. And let's figure out what we can do to make it better. And we approach that with just as much enthusiasm, if that makes sense.

J**Jason Duff** 0:09:53

It does. And I— looking at your website, what you're speaking, uh, it ties together with what you're saying is be bold and not reckless. I loved that statement. Um, but, uh, you know, good ideas never go away, they just evolve over time. And, uh, it's kind of serendipitous that you mentioned concrete because our studio is facing here in the historic Opera Block, um, on the oldest concrete street in America, the first ever concrete paved road. And in 1891, George Bartholomew, who was a chemist and a pharmacist here in our town, mixed sand, clay, and marl using those old ancient Roman techniques and poured a— the first concrete street. That street is still driven on today. And so just— that's kind of a neat serendipitous thing with the values of your company. We hope that you at some point can get back here to Ohio. We would love to shoot a photo of you on the oldest concrete street in America with the Ashland Lime team.

R**Rik Adamski** 0:11:00

Yes.

J**Jason Duff** 0:11:01

Yeah, let's make it happen.

R**Rik Adamski** 0:11:02

That would be fantastic. And of course, my mother and stepfather still live in Cincinnati. I don't know if that really counts as Ohio. Sometimes I used to say it was the northernmost city of Kentucky. But I lived in Cincinnati for a long time and they still live there. So, you know, I think that there's probably some opportunities in the state in general that that our firm could, could work on. And, you know, I— it's interesting to me because I think that if I had stayed at a place that was more within my comfort zone, which we might say Cincinnati, and then when I moved to Chicago, you know, those were places that I kind of maybe intuitively understood a little bit more having grown up in places like that. But I'm a much better planner for having worked in places that were different than what I was used to. And, you know, and I think when I come back and visit Cincinnati, I see opportunities that I would have never seen or never been enthusiastic about because I've gone away and because I've done that. And I've just, you know, I think that on a related note, something that was a blessing in disguise for me when I started this business is that I wasn't able to necessarily get the type of work that I immediately thought I was going to get or expected to get. That would have been, you know, because I was like, oh, we— I think we've got these great opportunities in downtown Dallas and we're going to be able to come in, you know, guns blaring and do this really transformative work in downtown Dallas. And when that didn't happen, it was like, where else could we work? And if you called me and you said, hey, we want to do something, we were like, yes, like, thank you for giving us this opportunity. We did one place, we went into an interview where they had, there were 13 companies that submitted, they were down to 4 companies. And you know, this was a place that didn't necessarily have, it had, it had kind of a lot of the parts, but it didn't necessarily have this super cohesive downtown yet at this point, several years ago. And one of the questions that they asked was whether we were enthusiastic about this project. And they said they interviewed 4 firms and they all gave the same answer and they only believed one of us, that this was actually something that we wouldn't go, oh, you know, we're like, we're not too good for this. This is like super important work. And, you know, we are, I see a profession that thinks that, where a lot of people think that if they've reached a certain level that some work is not important enough for them. And I just have really, I'm so glad that my professional trajectory pushed me away from any possibility that I would think that way, if that makes sense.

J**Jason Duff** 0:14:06

Yeah, those are wise words. So when you're working with a community and developing a plan, you have to dive deep. Deep with data. You've got to dive deep with getting and soliciting the feedback, which is both good feedback and also taking some of the criticism and showing the warts that exist in the community. But you need someone that is going to be the champion, um, both from the planning and develop— or in the firm. But then also you need local people that are going to facilitate to help. You know, it's a two-way street to dive deep to understand those opportunities? Is that something as you work with folks that, you know, it is really a partnership, right?

R

Rik Adamski 0:14:46

Oh, absolutely. So, so I think that the first, the first place that I would start, right, like you need to have—there's a certain amount of data that you need to be able to know what you're talking about. That's just kind of baseline information.

J

Jason Duff 0:15:03

What is that? Can you kind of share some of those things that are important?

R

Rik Adamski 0:15:06

Yeah. So, for example, I want to know, okay, what is the, what is the vacancy rate of these of these buildings, like what's the vacancy rate of these commercial buildings? What are they, what are they renting for? Right. Like those, those sorts of information, like what type of, of population do we have? Having a little bit of an understanding, you know, has there been, have there been economic development studies done? Those, those, those sorts of things are, you know, what, what is the average daily traffic that goes through here? Right. So, so to some degree, there's just a baseline of things that you need to have done your homework. But a lot of times what you see, you have to in some sense create your own data based on what you think is most important for that particular context. So in some cases, let's say, you know, we have a client and we see, okay, there's several places that could end up being the Main Street. What— where should this be? And it's like, okay, let's— we have kind of our intuition, but we also do a study. Let's go building to building. Let's do an assessment of the storefront quality and let's look at that and then let's make maps of that. Some of that stuff may be things that we see intuitively anyway, but we want to make sure to show that we've done our homework. It's like without showing your work, it's not necessarily going to be as helpful. Things like the age of the buildings might be useful. So all of those things, there's a certain amount of baseline data that I would want before doing anything. But that we live in an age of enormous amounts of data, right? And especially the capability of mapping data is enormous. And data does not give you wisdom, right? It just informs. It's not wisdom in and of itself. Because we have, you know, if it were, we'd be the wisest society in the history of the world. No question, right? You know, we carry supercomputers in our pockets. So, so then after you have the data, it's like, what do we need to do to take action? And the way that I often think is, you know, there's certainly situations and I think we were discussing this a little before, there's certainly situations where you need to have a comprehensive plan. There's certainly situations where you need to have, you know, a downtown plan that gets all of the information there. But a lot of times what you need is an action plan. And what often informs that the most is not kind of the type of data that you can get if you, you know, with the GIS mapping or whatnot. It's the type of information and knowledge that you get from talking to people. And that can be— some of that is formal, necessarily. Some of that is you have a formal meeting. But you don't really get most of the good stuff from the formal meeting. You normally get most of the good stuff from walking around and talking to people and having people tell you things, you know, kind of behind the scenes. So, you know, you end up sitting on someone's porch and sometimes several times you end up sitting in someone's diner or in, you know, a quilt shop and they tell you a lot of the real dynamics. So, A, that tells you how people are actually feeling. That tells you what their actual lived experience is, right? But, well, I'm over at the senior center and I try to get to the diner every day and I push this little bag button and I can't cross the street, right? It doesn't— I can't cross the street. That's great information to have, right? Or, hey, I just spoke to 6 of your honor students. You were asking me why you should care about this downtown. Why don't you ask them to tell me what they said about whether they're going to come back from college if there's no vibrant downtown here. Yeah. Every time I get that, oh, you mean you don't want to spend 4 to 7 years somewhere really fun with young people and come back to a place where there's nothing to do? What a shocker. It doesn't matter what the jobs are, right? So you find out that type of information. You find out things like, oh, I have this brilliant idea that these two storefronts here could be pop-up storefronts. Okay, have you, have you talked to Don? Oh,

then you talk to Don. Okay, Don's not doing anything. Or Don's doing something. Okay, well, Don's a talker, you know, but is he, you know, that building's been vacant for 5 years and he said the same thing. Yeah, yeah, it's been, it's been vacant for 5 years. So it's like you get that type of information, you get active public support, you know. So if you've done that, even in 3 days, you can build enough that you can say, hey, This is going to go before council on Wednesday. I know there's going to be a couple people who aren't going to be in support of it. Can you call everybody you know so that we have 50 people in support of it? Because you told me, you know, I listen to you and we're doing these things. And, you know, so, so all of that stuff is important, but here's, here's much, much more important in my opinion. Um, much more important is the fact that my plan that I came up with and my ideas and my recommendations, that there's a spectrum. There's the time before this and then there's the time after this. So whatever recommendations I make are a blink, right? It's a blip. So someone has spent 20 years working their heart out for this downtown. I can come in with fresh eyes. You know, they've been building a business, they're committed to this place. You've got the mayor, the council, they're committed to this place. I come in with fresh eyes and I say, hey, here's the thing I see and here's how we can move things forward. And then I leave, right? Right.

J

Jason Duff 0:21:02

So you can't do it.

R

Rik Adamski 0:21:03

I didn't really do any— I, I can't, I can't do most of it. Maybe I can help you with some cool tactical project that might be, but I can't do Almost none of it can I do.

J

Jason Duff 0:21:12

The renderings are not going to create the project, right?

R**Rik Adamski** 0:21:15

The renderings are not going to create the project. And even, well, I can even say more on that, but yet someone, other people are going to have to implement it, right? And, but it's also going to have to be things that happen from the bottom up for it to work. Right? Because if all, if all that you have is coming from the city top down, but you don't have anybody investing their time, their energy, their money, and their passion in the place, what does it matter to spend \$10 million on infrastructure and have the 10 best businesses downtown throw their hands up and leave? Your \$10 million didn't matter. It didn't matter because you no longer have those people. So it's like my What I need to do is find the people who are most able and willing to do something and help give them tools and resources so that even while the city's doing things top-down, they're doing them bottom-up. And if I really, really, really do my job well, they're barely going to remember me in 5 years. Maybe 1 or 2 people will, but what they'll know is that they did these cool things. Hey, we, I, I, I took, this, you know, burnt-out building and I made it into this cool event space, right? We took this lawn and we started having— and on Saturday night, we started having movie nights. And all of a sudden, if you go to our town on Saturday night, it's not just the tourists coming in to buy fudge, it's the actual locals, right? So, it doesn't matter that I made these recommendations. I'm not a very important part of the story, right? So, it's like, how I give these people tools. It's like, okay, can we help them to organize into a downtown association? Can we make their downtown association better? Can we connect the right people to the small business development center so that these cool businesses are getting the support that they need? So like my— for me to succeed, I have to give people tools. Yeah. So I might have even told you, Chase, when I was, when I was in Cincinnati, I told several people this concept that I had and I loved it so much. I said, if let's think of like when you think about getting credit for a project, right? There's the city being happy enough with you to hire you back and then to say nice things about you. There's you being able to have a narrative so that I can go on, you know, this podcast and talk about the things I did or I can sell it to other people, right? Yes. There's me knowing that I'm doing good things and that because I have other— I could go get a job with the city and it'd have a pension. I wouldn't have to hustle. I have other options that would be easier. So, there's me saying, "Okay," assessing like, "Is this what I should be doing with my energy, with my time, with my career?" And then, the fourth thing is my ego. Right? And the 3 things are, the first 3 things are really important. And the 4th one isn't. So to go full circle, it's more than a partnership. It's like, I'm going to go back to my own community. I'm going back home. So like, I'm just here for a short time. I have a short amount of scope or whatever that was brought in for, even if it's a year, it's going to be short. So, I am here enough to figure out what tools can I give and how can the specific way that I share these tools be useful so that they will be implemented. And in the end, that's the most important thing. I worked for, you know, I did some work for this town, Seguin, Texas, right? And I knew, okay, they have great leadership. On the top level, right? They have great momentum. But I also knew they have a downtown, you know, this guy Kyle Cram, like this, they have this great Main Street manager basically. So I'm like, so, so you've got somebody who's going to help to implement this stuff. So it's like if I look at it, okay, so I wrote part of this for the city leaders, right? The people on the very— the city manager, the council. I wrote part of this for the downtown businesses and downtown stakeholders. You write, you kind of write a little bit of it just for any random person who might read it, but most people don't read this stuff, right? Um, but then I think a lot of it is how do we structure our recommendations. I've known Kyle

for a long time. Can I structure the recommendation so that it's easier for Kyle to implement? Because if you have the Main Street manager who you give them a list, you say we've vetted this list, and they implement it, he looks like a rock star, I look like a rock star, The city, you know, everybody wins.

J

Jason Duff 0:26:10

Which isn't the criticism, Rick, is the criticism of a lot of traditional community planning firms that they generate binders that sit on shelves, make a certain group feel good, but you— they oftentimes those plans collect dust and they never generate the results that they were intended to do. Isn't that in the industry? That's one of the problems.

R

Rik Adamski 0:26:37

I mean, I think that's one of the biggest problems. And I think that the— but if your plan, if there's nobody who cares, who's doing the plan, who cares if it sits on the shelf unimplemented, then that's a natural reaction to it. So you end up getting pretty pictures and, you know, here's the thing to be— to be as fair as possible, right? It's like everything about the way that the system is set up is set up to create plans. You know, even if you go to the procurement process, right? Like the whole system is set up to create plans that sit on the shelf and that don't actually take action. And if you want to actually get action, you have to dig into the specific details on such a level that it's just not the way that our profession thinks. It's not even the way that a big firm can work. I spoke to a, you know, I was in the headquarters of a major planning firm, you know, major like global firm, right? And I'm talking to them, we're discussing partnerships, and I'm just looking at this amazing, you know, headquarters that they have, right?. And I'm like, you can't go to your bosses and explain to them why you were hanging out drinking whiskey with a councilwoman 3 days straight, or why you were hanging out in a quilt shop for 8. You could explain that to them, right? And that was the most important, like, that was the most important thing I did.

J

Jason Duff 0:28:20

But to build that currency and those relationships, that's what you have to do in a smaller market. Yeah.

R

Rik Adamski 0:28:26

Right. Or, you know, again, like, you know, I've worked in, you know, places like Deep Ellum, right? And I actually lived in Deep Ellum in Dallas, like an intense urban neighborhood or working in, you know, University of Houston, working in Fort Worth. It's the same. You still have the relationships that are local and you still have the people who have put their passion and energy into a place and you still need to have relationships with them. And if you're on the scale of a neighborhood or a district, whether it's a town of 1,500 people or whether it's Dallas, it's like the— it's, you know, you have to adjust it to the specifics, but it's the same thing. And it's like you're building relationships, you are figuring out who can do things and you're trying to come up with something that's going to be— that's going to actually be able to happen. And then you're figuring out what the next steps are to give people. And it's like, it's disarmingly simple in so many ways. Like, we make it, you know, so you wanted to talk to me at some point about StrongTowns, which I've worked on.



Jason Duff 0:29:38

Yeah, tell us what is StrongTowns.

R**Rik Adamski** 0:29:40

Yeah. So, I'll tell you that, but I wanted to— oh, I wanted to give— I wanted to tell you something that the founder of Chuck of Strongtowns says, and then I'll tell you about Strongtowns itself. So, I'll do it a little bit backwards. But Chuck Marrone, the founder of this group Strongtowns, talks about complex versus complicated. And, you know, so for example, an engine of a car is complicated. There's a lot of different parts. You know, it's very hard to understand. But if you do something with an engine, you know, if you have a perfect understanding of the engine, you'll know what the consequences are of what you do. You know, if this, if this happens, then this happens. If you have a watch, these are complicated things. They have a lot of different moving parts. But if you're the world's leading expert on watches, you can say, oh, if this thing happens in the watch, then this is going to happen, right? Things that are complex don't work in the same way. When you make an intervention in them, a bunch of other things happen that you can't predict. So if I've worked in towns, there's been places where they've said, hey, we'd like to shut down the street maybe, or I might recommend look at shutting down the street. And one of the things I say is, let's test this out for a day and then for a week and then for a month and see what happens. And there's a few reasons for that. For example, that's a way to build public support. But one of the reasons for it is I don't know what the heck's going to happen. I don't know if maybe the parking, you know, I might say, oh, the parking's not going to be a big deal. Maybe it is a big deal. Maybe I didn't think of something. Maybe it's going to mess with traffic in a way that I didn't anticipate. Maybe, you know, maybe some people will just get mad enough that it's not worth it. I don't know. You know, so, but you test the idea for a little bit because when you're making an intervention in a complex system, right? You actually, if you don't want to do a bunch of different things to mess with it, you want to do one thing. It's like if you're taking a code and you're like, oh, I have a problem with a code of, you know, a computer, you don't go and say, I'm going to change 10 things at once. You know, it's like you change one thing and see how it works. And that's the way that is best to intervene in general in the city, it's try some small things. That doesn't mean that you don't have the big, all right, we're going to spend all this money on a stadium or convention center. That doesn't mean that that never happens. But what it means is that that only works if you also do a bunch of little things and test little things and see how things evolve and how people react before taking it to the next step. So you had asked about Strongtowns and that's an organization that I have quite a lot of ties with from early on. In fact, I believe I first saw Strongtowns in my first Congress of the New Urbanism, CNU conference. So that was back in Madison, Wisconsin in 2011. And I saw this guy, you know, Chuck Barone speak and basically it was what I now understand to be a critique of this very top-down planning and engineering system that we have where everything is about kind of experts imposing things from the top and not really about, hey, how do we figure out what's going on in the grassroots and give people resources that they need? And over the years I've seen it. At the time when I first saw him, I believe it was him, and then there was one person who was, uh, Jim Kooman, who was basically a volunteer for the organization. And now I see they have this huge, um, nationwide following, and Chuck has written several books. And now the Strongtowns Conference was alongside the CNU, and I think they had 600 or 700 people show up for it in Cincinnati. Um, but I've also seen the ideas of strong towns evolve in a way that's, that's certainly very fascinating.

J**Jason Duff** 0:33:59

And I'll just share some of those, those pillars, uh, were ending highway expansion, um, transparent local accounting, incremental housing development, safe and productive streets, and ending the parking mandates and subsidies.

R**Rik Adamski** 0:34:20

Right. Those are those— I, I couldn't have pulled out 5 things out of my head as well as you just did.

J**Jason Duff** 0:34:26

So I took some notes. But, but that's the thing. They started there. But one thing that— one thing that I think is really cool now is they have these neighborhood groups. And in cities all across the country, you can organize knowing their pillars and their principles, and be boots on the ground if your city is considering a change in zoning ordinances, or if you do have a good idea to take back your park or to fix potholes. It seems like that neighborhood group system is really making massive changes in a lot of towns and neighborhoods around the country and around the world.

R**Rik Adamski** 0:35:05

Yeah, well, in fact, there's one of them, I forgot what community it was in, but there was one of them who literally organized a neighborhood cleanup. And it's funny because I've seen the power of what even that can do. Yeah, I think that globally, there's kind of a few things that Strongtowns has helped us to figure out that I give a lot of credit for. And I think that a lot of the kind of ramifications of their ideas, I think a lot of these specific ideas that you had and a lot of the specific policy changes that they bring up are connected to these realizations. And what you see is that, you know, they figured out what we do in our— we'll call it the North American planning system. You know, we could say there's, you know, Australia and New Zealand. And then to a large degree, the rest of the world is following this sort of thing as well. But if we look at kind of the US and Canadian planning system, right? It's like everything is set up so that the idea is that you have the final product, right? So that we have this, whatever it is, this suburban development. This is what it is right now. This is what it's going to be like forever. Everything is always going to have this same type of function. You're going to drive from it. We're going to make all of this investment so that everybody is going to drive to every place. Everything is going to be separated. And as professionals, we have all this wisdom to figure out where all this stuff should go, that as experts, we're knowledgeable enough to make these decisions for everybody. Right. And, you know, you look at this, this history and, you know, the fact that some of us are still huge fans of Jane Jacobs and what she did in 1961. And some people are like, wow, you're still like hanging on to that.

J**Jason Duff** 0:37:02

And just a quick commercial. Who is Jane and what did she do?

R**Rik Adamski** 0:37:07

Jane Jacobs was a person. She wrote a book called *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, and this was in 1961. She was somebody who had gone to, you know, extensive Ivy League graduate education at Columbia. So she wasn't an uneducated, formally uneducated person, but she didn't have a degree in planning or anything like that. And she just wrote this book that was absolutely incredible. She wrote several books, but "Death and Life" is really the one that I would recommend everybody check out, where she made observations about the ways that we were planning in, you know, 1961 that was very much kind of destroying cities because we didn't understand what cities were. So she had a bunch of recommendations where she said, here, based on these observations, This is how cities really work. And, you know, one of the things is like, we're not actually wise enough to plan cities top-down. Like, we actually need to give tools to people so that they can help to make places great, which was very radical in 1961 and would be very radical in 2024. And every time I really read her stuff, I get something different out of it. So, really extraordinary. And I'd recommend that everybody check out Jane Jacobs. But, you know, so there's this, there's this history of thinking that way. And then I look at what Strongtown's really figured out and it's like, this is, this is the same thing. Like we kind of at one point you had kind of these movements like the New Urbanism that, you know, start to have meetings and you start to have conferences in the '90s. And they have these kind of groups that come with it that are like, oh, we're more incremental, we're more bottom-up, we're more tactical. And it's like, oh, we have the New Urbanism here and then we have the incremental thing here, right? And all of a sudden it's like we've started to figure out, no, cities are built step by step. Cities are built with— you take a modest investment and then when that works, you take another investment and the cities decisions in cities are in some sense made in a decentralized fashion, right? It's not everybody come— someone coming from above and necessarily saying, this is what, you know, this is where these types of houses are going to be, and this is where these offices are going to be, and this is where multifamily is going to be, right? You have to have some order to things in our modern time, right? It's not— we're not living 100 years ago, but basically things have to evolve in a decentralized fashion. So if you look at— if you go to the Empire State Building, which is basically 100 years old, right, and it's still functioning, you know, 100 years later, and could we imagine that it might be still thriving in 100 years? We could. But that, that spot started as shacks. So no one just came there and said, this is going to be the Empire State Building. They did it incrementally. So incrementally doesn't mean it's got to be small. It means it's how you bring your way to huge. You know, does anyone believe that the tower in Dubai is going to be occupied in 100 years? I don't, because it wasn't a natural evolution of the market building bigger and bigger. It was just someone making a decision, we're going to do this grandiose tower, we're going to have this massive silver bullet, and it's actually a much less sustainable way of doing things. And if you look at, What, you know, Strongtowns has, has kind of figured out, it's that all of this is the way that, that this, this way of taking one step at a time is really how you do urbanism. And it's kind of how you've done that. And when I say urbanism, I mean whether you're talking about, you know, a small town downtown or a big city, I'm kind of using it in, in that sense of the word, right? But we are So when I look at things, that's the reason why I say, hey, what are, what are modest steps that we can take that are not necessarily grandiose? How do we take space and give it to people? Can we take one storefront and divide it into two? Can we take one empty lot and put activity into it? Can we start to have public art or improved window displays? Right.

And you want to have your big plans. But if you're not thinking one step at a time, you're going to have very unsatisfying places. And that's what we've, we've managed to create for ourselves and our society.

J

Jason Duff 0:41:55

All right. At this time, we're going to take a quick break to hear a word from our sponsors. Come check out 600 Downtown Pizzeria in downtown Bellefontaine, where they cherish the art of making the most authentic, unique, and delicious world-famous and award-winning pizzas. Their team hand spins each pizza the old-fashioned way and only uses the freshest of ingredients.. Come see why they were featured on the Food Network. If you are looking for a dynamic workspace in the heart of Bellefontaine, look no further. Build Coworking Space is your destination for creativity and collaboration with state-of-the-art facilities in a thriving community. This is where innovation happens. Join them today for as low as \$99 a month and build your success at Build Coworking Space, which— that's a perfect segue to a topic that I'd love you to chime in on.. And that is this concept called third spaces. Can you, for our listeners, explain what third spaces are and why right now a lot of planners like you and developers like me are really trying to embrace these and find ways to create more of them?

R

Rik Adamski 0:42:58

Right. So, but I usually use the word third places, but they're used interchangeably. Third places, third spaces, they tend to use them all. There was a book that came out in 1989 called The Great Good Place. And the— Oldenburg coined the term third places in this particular book. And what he had documented even in 1989, he talked about kind of, okay, these are places where people can connect, where they can see and be seen, where they can relax, the primary conversation The primary activity is conversation. There's usually not a huge barrier to entry, so you don't have to, you know, be rich or be, be a member of a special group in order to enjoy these spaces. And he documented how in sort of the, the US context of 1989, how these places were disappearing and what the ramifications of it are. And what I have realized kind of talking to people and based on my own experiences that we have even much less of these places now. So that when you go into a city, you know, there's a lot, whether you're new to a place and you just want to go and have places to hang out and to meet people, or whether you want a place to go and connect with your friends and colleagues.

J

Jason Duff 0:44:24

Which, Rick, if I can stop you right there. Just speaking for you and I growing up, many of those places were the mall, right? Uh, the movie theater, uh, you know, maybe it was an arcade. And the truth about it is a lot of those business models has evolved to where it's— those businesses can't— don't exist or can't make money, right?

R**Rik Adamski** 0:44:47

Well, I— so, so I think that, and I think that in general businesses that, you know, having a place that has a lot of staff, right, is harder and harder to maintain. Having a place where you're not really that concerned with people loitering, so to speak, is not really as viable, right? So, you know, there's, there's a lot of, and there's also a lot of differences, even in places that might have physically existed with the way that people interact with them, um, or the way that, that it's acceptable to interact with them. So we could take the example of, um, the 24-hour diner, right? Not only are there less of such places, but the way that people interact with such places is very different, um, than it was, you know. And, and, and with all these things, by the way, I'm very open to being told you know, hey dude, you're a middle-aged man who has, who has some nostalgia about your early 20s or your late teens, and, and maybe you're missing something. I'm totally open to that possibility, but nobody has managed to convince me of that yet, right? Um, but, uh, you know, so if you go to— I mean, go to, go to a Denny's at 2 in the morning and see if you have large groups of people hanging out. Yeah, you know, you don't, and, and you certainly did I have a little bit different perspective. And if there's, if there's a sense of which, in which I've realized that my perspective may be warped on this in some sense, is that I lived most of my life in very unusual places and I had a different set of preferences in terms of where to go than most people did. So in other words, you know, I was living in Ann Arbor, Michigan, or in the university neighborhood of Cincinnati. You know, I grew up in Oak Park, Illinois, spent time in Chicago, moved back to Chicago, spent a lot of time in, you know, places like Wicker Park. But also I was seeking things out, right? So, so I don't think that the average person in the United States who was, you know, 19 years old or 20 years old in the late '90s was hanging out at a lot of coffeehouses that were open all night or open till 4, open till 2. Or, you know, finding a lot of DIY venues, right? Like, so I have a different experience than most people have and an experience that was much more centered around third places than most people have. And I realize that. That being the case, I don't think that if a 19-year-old, you know, ended up in Ann Arbor, Michigan, today that they would've had any possibility of having anything like the rich experience of connecting to the place that I had at the time.

J**Jason Duff** 0:47:42

And, and just kind of cutting to the chase with that, what, what are some of your, your favorite third space concepts that you are seeing open up and be created today?

R**Rik Adamski** 0:47:54

Okay, so here's, here's one example. I think that some of the good concepts happen if they are fueled by something other than a, you know, kind of by, by maybe a DIY ethos or by something other than a profitable ethos. Right. So one of the places that I bring up is called Central Arts, which are in, in what we might call the Mid-Cities area in Dallas-Fort Worth, which is really— it's kind of if you have Dallas to the east and I'm quite backwards here, but Dallas to the east, Fort Worth to the west, this is kind of, you know, kind of closer to Fort Worth. They have these groups called Central Arts where you have events for kids, gallery openings, movie screenings, concerts, all of those sorts of things that happen in kind of—

J

Jason Duff 0:48:41

you hang out there, Ethan. Oh yeah, Ethan would be there.

R

Rik Adamski 0:48:44

Not for play. Oh, it's, it's, it's a, it's a fun place. So those types of models and it relates to a lot of the things that I've been thinking a lot that I experienced with like DIY places that still exist to some degree in a place like Chicago. Right. Where it's like somebody has a concept and they find space. We do have a lot of empty space now and they find space and they find someone who is willing to work with that concept.

J

Jason Duff 0:49:09

Right. Maybe an opportunity for a lot of entrepreneurs out there now. It really is. And I saw one— I was sharing this one with Rick earlier— is that up in Sandusky, Ohio, there's now the Sandusky Book Bar. And so they acquired, you know, thousands of titles of used books, set it up in a nice venue space environment that also happens to serve coffee and cocktails. And so like, just for a lot of younger people, when all the bookstores closed, you know, that's a really nostalgic experience for those of us that remember bookstores, but it's also a brand new cultural opportunity for someone that has never been around all the intellectual curiosity of just walking into the store browsing the aisles and finding a great book. Yeah.

R

Rik Adamski 0:49:55

Yeah.

J

Jason Duff 0:49:55

Right.

R

Rik Adamski 0:49:56

No, no. So yeah, I mean, I think that, you know, and I'm seeing concepts like even, I even see like, you know, there's a hamburger place in our area that is really like consciously becoming a third place and a place where people can hang out. We have a place, it's a cereal. They literally sell cereal and other treats, but, you know, they have board games out and they're open until late. I hope they stay in business. I don't, I don't have as much of a desire to, to eat a bunch of fruity cereal, but I see that type of thing. Yeah. You have in my— not far from where I live in Denton, Texas, you now have a cava bar, you know, so it's like something that you can consume that isn't necessarily alcohol, but that can keep people kind of, kind of hanging out. In general, I think that a lot of the model can be 'Cause you know, the challenge right now is that it's hard to monetize these places, right? It's just, it's hard to make enough money to keep it going. You know, one of the ways to address that is by combining uses that may not be very profitable in and of themselves, but maybe you can combine them or maybe you combine one thing that isn't as profitable with another that isn't. So in my neighborhood here in Dallas, there's a place called Wild Detectives. It's a bookstore, a coffee house, and a bar. And it's a really, really cool vibe. It's a converted house. And with those 3 uses, you can make it, but you can also stay up, you know, you can also keep it open later hours than you normally would be able to. Or there's a place called The Spin in far north Dallas that is both a coffee house and a record store. One of the things that I really respect about The Spin is that it doesn't compromise either of those things. It goes full on on both. Like it's a good— it stands on its own as a coffee house, it stands on its own as a record store. And you have to now. Right. I can think of places that are music stores that have, you know, that sometimes will have concerts and things like that. I can think of houses of worship that have different types of activities. You know, they don't have the same they already have the space, they already have the people there. So they don't have the same need to monetize to the greater extent. And whether that's, you know, a place that's a church that has a coffee house, there's a place called Kalachandris here, that's the Hare Krishnas. But they have like a great restaurant that's also, you know, a vegetarian restaurant, but it's also a place where people really hang out. And so you interact with the, with the Hare Krishnas there. And and things like that. So, I think that there's a lot of models where I see the models working and where I see it is where, A, there's a consciousness behind it, and B, you're figuring out how to monetize it, right? And monetization means you either have to figure out multiple sources of income or you have to have some sort of arrangement that makes paying the rent less essential. Right. There's a place called Opening Bell Coffee here in Dallas that is within this bigger development, Southside on Lamar. So it is— it's, you know, it's been around for, I think, 20 years. And you go in and it's open later. You have concerts. It's a place to hang out. But, you know, I'm pretty sure they're not paying full rent because they're an amenity for the, the building.

J**Jason Duff** 0:53:26

They bring the cool. Yeah. And I was going to say, you're ability to— your ability to do these things well makes you a destination and people will travel all over, which will obviously help that monetization problem that you were kind of talking about. We are kind of coming up close on time here, so I am going to kind of transition us a little bit. But thank you for just sharing. Those were— first, Rick, incredible rapid fire. Yeah, those listening, there's probably 20 different ideas. Yeah. About how to— if you've got an empty space, where you're wanting to create more of these kind of creative collision opportunities. There are 20+ ideas. Yeah. And I know, you know, Rick has talked about third spaces and places a lot on other podcasts as well. So I'm going to link some of those in the show notes as well. So feel free if you're listening to this, go check some of those out where you share some of that wisdom. But just the whole episode in general, man, you've shared a lot of cool stuff, whether it's, you know, researching by walking the streets, you touched on the bottom-up approach a little bit, which is kind of its own thing. Like any of these could be their own episodes, but also just your, you know, I appreciate your very practical approach to planning and helping people not get stuck in that planning paralysis phase. But I am going to kind of transition us here into a rapid-fire Q&A. So this is just more fun, like lighthearted, you know, questions. So here we go. Round 1 is, are you left or right-handed?

R**Rik Adamski** 0:54:49

Right-handed.

J**Jason Duff** 0:54:50

Right-handed. All right. You mentioned that you've lived in a lot of different cities across the country. What is the favorite city that you've ever lived in?

R**Rik Adamski** 0:54:58

I'd say Chicago.

J**Jason Duff** 0:54:59

Chicago. Chicago. All right.

R**Rik Adamski** 0:55:01

Yeah, I'd say Chicago.

J**Jason Duff** 0:55:02

Awesome. And then my last question here is, when are you coming to visit Bellefontaine, Ohio?

R**Rik Adamski** 0:55:09

Soon. Put you on the spot.

J

Jason Duff 0:55:12

Now that concrete's like in his background and DNA, we're going to have a lot more to talk about with that.

R

Rik Adamski 0:55:16

Oh, no, I'd love to. I'd love to figure out a way to visit you all and potentially figure out a way to partner with you in some way. I'm sure that there's an opportunity for some form of serendipity. And I'd also say related to the kind of third places idea, you know, one thing that I will share with you as things go along, I'm actually setting up multiple webinars, it looks like. I'm working with this guy, Jaime Izurreta. I hope I didn't mispronounce his name, but Jaime and I are working, are collaborating. He's the storefront expert, as you might know. He's written a couple of books on the topic, and we are actually going to be doing a lot of webinars to work with communities on how to create third places in their downtown.

J

Jason Duff 0:56:10

It's great.

R

Rik Adamski 0:56:11

Awesome. And, you know, connected to One thing I was starting to say is that a lot of this opportunity may be vacant spaces that are eyesores and that there may be ways to better use the spaces. I'm thinking of an example that I used to go to in Chicago, in the Rogers Park neighborhood, where there was a space where literally the landlord didn't want it to be an eyesore anymore. So he worked for some not-for-profits. He asked for \$1 a year rent. And he said, you can do whatever you want with the space as long as you don't charge anybody. So they had to pay rent and utilities. And so it allowed the creativity. It was win-win. He would have had that empty space anyway, so he might as well do something constructive with it. And I think that's going to have to be a lot of the type of model that we think about as we go forward is, okay, we have underutilized space. Can we make this into something that's going to be an amenity for the neighborhood or for the development? So that's, I think, an interesting model going forward.

J

Jason Duff 0:57:12

Yeah.

R

Rik Adamski 0:57:12

Yeah.

J

Jason Duff 0:57:13

It's a good thought. A couple of final questions here for you. And I know you've already shared a few really valuable resources on the show, but what is one professional development resource that was impactful for you personally along your professional journey?

R**Rik Adamski** 0:57:27

I mean, I think, I think connecting with both the StrongTowns and the CNU was extremely, was extremely good for me. And because I was able to really find my tribe and I was able to find a lot of like-minded people. Yeah, I think a third, a third organization, it's sort of a cluster of organizations that I also want to get involved with more. I was actually pretty involved with Project for Public Spaces at one time, and there's kind of an offshoot organization called Placemaking X. And I think that those would be, those would be good organizations for people to check out. To kind of share that details.

J**Jason Duff** 0:58:09

Yeah, yeah. I think thanks for sharing this, some new ones here for us, so that's good. Um, and then finally is where can people follow you in your business to keep up with the work that you're doing?

R**Rik Adamski** 0:58:18

I'm most active on LinkedIn. Um, so if you type in— I've had, I've had amazing conversations on LinkedIn. So if you go on LinkedIn, I can kind of give you updates. Um, we do have a website that I, I would like to you know, we probably need to spice it up a little bit, but it has the basic information about us. If you go to ashlime.com, and there's all my contact information. If you go on LinkedIn, you can, you can reach out to me. I'm pretty accessible. There's— I spell my name R-I-K, which is unusual, so I'm easy enough to find that way. And we're going to— I'm going to bring someone on who's going to help me to be more active in other forms of social media. I am going to start having a TikTok and go through and show people examples of places that I might find relevant to myself. So great. You can keep up with me on those through those.

J**Jason Duff** 0:59:16

All right. Thanks, man. Well, Rick, this has been a great episode. I, you know, Concrete is all about ready mix and the right ingredients there, you know, from planning to your, your strategies and ideas that you share today, to organizations and resources to keep those, that idea well strong and flowing. Just thanks for sharing all of your knowledge and background, and it's great to have a new friend that's making huge strides of building up communities and making towns better and stronger. So thanks for being on the show today.

R**Rik Adamski** 0:59:48

Definitely. I really appreciate it. Thank you.

E**Ethan DeLeon** 0:59:51

Thanks for tuning in on this episode of the Small Nation Podcast.

E**Ethan DeLeon** 0:59:53

We hope that conversation proved valuable to you, and if you enjoyed it, be sure to share the episode and follow the show on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or your favorite podcasting platform. You can also subscribe to the Small Nation YouTube channel if you prefer to watch your episodes. Follow Small Nation on social media, and we'll see you in the next episode.