



Season1- Episode 8

Urban planning in 2023 with Bill Fulton- Transcript

Journey into the future

It's a calm Tuesday afternoon, Xenia and Thomas are sitting together in the living room after lunch to drink tea. Melanie enters rushing excited to them after she just find out about the tree sponsorship project in their neighborhood. "Mum, Dad I want to sponsor a lime Tree!" Both parents were already expecting this to come up, when they first heard about the revitalization project, that comes as a part of the city reorientation and revival plan after the corona pandemic, so they were not much surprised hearing Melanie's wish.

As a young passionate eco-friendly girl, Melanie is excited to be part of this project. Lime trees adapt perfectly to climate changes, are beneficial for insects, birds and small animals and they have a very refreshing smell. She suggests using money from her savings account to sponsor her chosen lime tree. When Xenia asks about the cost of one tree sponsoring, she is surprised to hear it is 500 euros! She tries to explain to Melanie that this amount of money was saved for her future school year abroad. Melanie is still not convinced and replies "Important is that birds' population stays stable and not go extinct like I heard yesterday on the radio. That would be terrible!" As Christie overhears the conversation she stands by her sister and wants to sponsor a tree as well.

Thomas then starts to explain to the young girl how important it is to actually take care of a tree. " It is not money that matters, the important thing is helping the tree grow every day, in fact when you volunteer to take responsibility of more trees you get a reduction on the money, because that's the real work needed" Christie and Melanie then get excited to volunteer for taking care of the neighborhood trees. Melanie says, " in this case I will even get up a little a little bit earlier, so that I can water the trees before school". Her mother Xenia nods asking " may I remind you when it is time then?" Christie then interrupts saying" In summer, when the trees need watering, there is already light outside in the morning. I would love to get up early and wake Melanie up with me!"

Agnes Kunkel: Hello, I'm Agnes Kunkel, your host in 2023, your window to the world beyond covid-19. Today we have over 20.1 Mio. confirmed cases worldwide and over 737.000 people have confirmed to have died from covid-19. The curve of daily infections seems to have flattened just below 300000 cases per day. We have over 160 vaccine projects around the world. A vaccine, at least for the people at the front line,



seems to be at hand in two to three months. Looks like some light at the end of the tunnel. Today is the 11th of August 2020. Our guest today is Bill Fulton, director of Kinder Institute of Urban Research at Rice University in Houston, Texas. They are only a few people who truly influence our world. Bill Fulton is one of those people, one of the world's leading urban planners and innovative thinkers, not only by his tremendous scientific work, but also by his practical experience as a politician and mayor in Ventura, California. He's an incredible, productive writer, have authored books like Guide to Planning in California and the Reluctant Metropolis The Politics of Urban Growth in Los Angeles, which has been a bestseller on the struggles and partnerships between politics, business and individuals that have formed or deformed Los Angeles. In 2009, he was named on Planet Tyson's list of 100 top urban thinkers since 2014. He is director of the Kinder Institute of Urban Research at Rice University in Houston, Texas. Under his leadership it has become a globally leading Think-Tank on urban planning. Bill Fulton is one of the people who really owns a crystal ball. He is the one who can tell us what our cities will look like in 2023 and what we can do so that in 2023 our cities will be much more better places to live. Building better cities, building better lives. Let's get inspired by what Bill Fulton has to tell us about the future of our cities. Welcome, Bill Fulton.

Bill Fulton: Thank you very much for having me.

Agnes Kunkel: Oh, Bill, you are a highly productive scientist, thinker and writer with many activities and partners around the world. How have the changes in the last few months changed your own life and your scientific work?

Bill Fulton: Well, it's done both. Like most people, I've been working at home since March. Finally, this week with school opening up, I'm going back to the office two days a week. And of course, I haven't been traveling around as I usually do. What it has really done to our work, though, is help us think about and help us understand how cities are changing as a result of the covid crisis. And really, there are a couple of themes coming up. We realized that there are going to be more extreme events affecting cities in the future. You know, one of the things that many people often say is more than half of the people in the world now live in cities. So one of the things I like to say is every human problem is an urban problem. So extreme events of various kinds do affect cities. We're trying to figure out how to learn from that and how to help cities become more resilient



and more flexible so that they can accommodate those changes. Also, here in the US, we've seen significantly highlighting economic inequality as a result of Covid. Many people who are more affluent are able to work at home and lead pretty comfortable lives. Many essential workers still have to take the bus to work, don't make very much money. They've had their income cut. And I'm very worried that there's going to be a major rental housing crisis in the US as more and more people can't pay their rent as a result of the Covid induced economic crisis.

Agnes Kunkel: That's, of course, a deep influence.

As I dived into the publications, I saw you have already done research exactly on this topic: "The influence of covid-19 on the urban city centers". I would say I understood we will have a lot more of remote work, we have many signals from different sources that remote work will stay and increase its part, and that we will lose shops in the city centers. Looks a bit like our city centers could be quite desolate and empty which is not a very pleasant panorama.

Bill Fulton: In the short term I think that will be true, that not only city centers, but also suburban shopping centers will be emptied out to a certain extent. So there's really two things going on here. One is the question of how many people are going to continue to work remotely when it is over. And I think the answer is many more people are going to work remotely part of the time and go to the office less often. This will probably mean less demand for office space in city centers and other large job centers. In the short term that's probably a bad thing, in the long term I think we'll see a transition towards more entertainment, more residential in city centers. But in addition to that, the other pattern, which I think is not going to change, is the increasing growth of online retailing. And that is going to mean, as you said, many of our shops, especially our local shops, but chains as well, are going to close and we'll have big gaping holes in our city centers and in our suburban shopping centers, at least in the short run. So we'll have an excess of office space in excess of retail space. And it'll be very interesting to see what we do with all that space.

Agnes Kunkel: That's a big question.

When you say we will go for shopping in the city less and we will go less into the city to work, and in a quite significant proportion. So what will make a city attractive to people?



Bill Fulton: Well, I think there's two great things about cities. One is that there's a diversity of activities. Right? So you go to a city center, whether you're in the US or Europe or Asia, and you have not just the offices, not just residences, but entertainment venues, restaurants and bars. Once they all open back up again, which they will, cultural facilities, sports arenas, theaters, all these different things that people like to do in a concentrated area. So I think one of the attractive things is that people are going to want to participate in all of those activities again. And one of the things we know about cities is that people really like to be together in close proximity to one another, which currently they can't be.

But when covid is over and as you said at the top of the show, there are some encouraging signs and we may see light at the end of the tunnel. People are going to want to. Get back out there and mix it up again and be in close proximity to one another, and that's really the attraction that cities provide.

Agnes Kunkel: Are our cities prepared to attract people as mainly our cities here in Europe are designed to comfort cars, but not so much to comfort people walking, or riding a bicycle.

Bill Fulton: Yeah, well, I think what you see in both the US and Europe is people going to the city center in their car, whether that's to work or whether that's to shop or whether that's to go to an entertainment venue. But once they're there, they're less likely to use their car, they're more likely to walk around or even use bike sharing to bike around a city center to do various things.

One thing I will say is that this is impossible to predict at this point. It's entirely possible that our traffic patterns will change and that if a lot of people remain working remotely, at least part of the time, that may mean that there's a little less pressure on our rush hours, that somewhat fewer cars out on the street, at least at that time of day. And so people might not be so reluctant to go to city centers and inner cities, if the traffic is loosened up a little bit.

We'll see. I can't predict for sure that's going to happen because traffic always seems to get worse everywhere, no matter what. But I do think that there might be a change in traffic patterns during the course of each day.



Agnes Kunkel: When you are walking or riding a bicycle, you like to have a little bit more green, maybe to have some fountains and space for the children to play. Could this be important to keep city centers attractive?

Bill Fulton: Yes, I think so. We already see change there. So I live in Houston, Texas, now, which is very different from the typical European city, right? Our downtown, which I live near, was pretty much until recently nothing but large office buildings, many of them built in the 70s and 80s. They were designed to drive into the parking garage, go up to your office and drive out at the end of the day. Many of those office buildings are being retrofitted at the ground level to have shops, restaurants, a little bit of green space so that people can walk around more. That is already happening.

And I think that in order to remain competitive, yes, city centers are going to have to create places to walk and to bike that are as attractive as possible. In the US certainly that's not the norm in the suburbs. Right? Because the suburbs are very auto oriented in the US. So in city centers and also in other city neighborhoods near city centers, the ability to walk and bike pleasantly is a unique asset that can attract people.

Agnes Kunkel: I have read in your publications about the Greens Bayou Greenway Project. To me it looks a little bit, of course, in a very modern way, like the big parks that were built in the 19th century in Europe, in the outskirts of the cities or residential cities. So to build parks, not only for the king and the queen and the high-ranking people, but maybe to create parks for everyone.

Bill Fulton: Yes, Houston has been very ambitious in the last few years in creating green ways along our bayous. Bayous is our local term for a very slow moving, sluggish, muddy river. Houston is built around a series of bayous that flow into the Gulf of Mexico. And so we have undertaken a very ambitious program in the last 10 years to create greenways along something like one hundred and twenty miles of bayous, including along Greens Bayou, as you mentioned. And one of the great things about this program, like you say, is that is that we have excellent parks in affluent neighborhoods. In the old days, that would have been for the king and queen, but now it's for the millionaires and billionaires. But these greenways throughout Houston, including the Greens Bayou, which is near the airport, will serve many low-income neighborhoods



and people who work for modest wages, who will be able to take advantage of them. And if they have a bicycle, they get out there and go for many miles.

Agnes Kunkel: Has the perception of the project changed during the Covid pandemic and its restrictions?

Bill Fulton: I think the perception of parks and open space generally has changed because all spring that was pretty much the only place you could go and the only thing you could do throughout the US, including here in Houston all spring from March through Memorial Day, all the restaurants were closed.

The bars were closed. The bars are still closed, most of the stores were closed. People weren't going to work. The only thing you could do would be to go out and walk in the parks and along the bayous.

I live near Buffalo Bayou, the main park here in Houston, and social distancing became somewhat difficult because walking along the bayou was so popular because it was the only thing to do. So actually, I think the importance of parks and open space and our greenways along the bayous has grown and people have come to appreciate them far more because of the Covid situation.

Agnes Kunkel: I have read a lot about it. It really sounds like a wonderful project, but it doesn't come for free, as I understand.

Bill Fulton: In Houston, it's a combination of philanthropic money and tax money, about half and half. Our Parks border is raised about two hundred and twenty million dollars to build these greenways, as I say, about half of it from philanthropic donations and about half of it from tax money. And that's always a major issue, particularly in the US, particularly in places like Texas, which doesn't like taxes very much. Right? But people have been more than willing to support parks actually all throughout Texas, Houston, Dallas and elsewhere.

Agnes Kunkel: Do you have ideas or concepts. What could a city do that does not have oil billionaires and millionaires for philanthropic support?

Bill Fulton: Well well, that is a major part of life here in Houston. One of the things that the city is grappling with right now is, in the long-term future, 2040 to 2050, not just



2023. Is Houston still going to be the oil and gas capital in the world, or is Houston going to truly be the energy capital of the world? However how much energy is produced at that time. That's one of the major debates in Houston now and of course, diversifying the economy with our large medical center and our space center are our major topics.

Agnes Kunkel: And the big scientific triangle you'll have.

Bill Fulton: Yes, that's right.

Agnes Kunkel: So what will cities that do not have billionaires and millionaires for supporting parks and outdoor space transforming do?

Bill Fulton: I will say that when I lived in Ventura in California and was the mayor, that was a city that did not have billionaires, it had affluent people, but it didn't have billionaires. In those places it was a combination of relatively minor philanthropic donations by individual people, along with a lot of work by our city, which I led at the time, as well as the state to protect open space and to build and to build new trails and greenways. It's a different solution in different locations. But you're right that we are fortunate in Houston to have very wealthy, philanthropically minded people who have helped.

Agnes Kunkel: But I guess the money should not be the threshold. I think the cities should be improved. And as you'll say, maybe by some crowdfunding initiatives, or doing things yourself and sharing the burden of maintaining such infrastructure and all that stuff as it's.

Bill Fulton: Yeah, it's a combination of all those things, and as I say in Houston, the voters did approve overwhelmingly one hundred and twenty million dollar bond paid back by their property taxes to help pay for the greenways.

Agnes Kunkel: You talked about the big office buildings where you drive in the parking lot.

Bill Fulton: You go straight to the elevator; you never go out.



Agnes Kunkel: Exactly. And everything is filtered and ventilated and air conditioned. What will happen to these affluent, large office buildings? What can we transfer? Do you have ideas how to transform a part of those?

Bill Fulton: I think what's going to happen is, there will be less need for office space if people work more remotely, more often. So the offices that are needed will consolidate into the newer office buildings. Many of the older office buildings, and this is already happening certainly around the U.S. in downtowns in city centers, will be converted to residential use. As our downtowns and our city centers have become more diverse in the sense that there are many, many different activities, they become more attractive for people who like urban life. This is fairly new in the US. It's not new at all in Europe. We've seen in Los Angeles, where I used to live and elsewhere and a little bit in Houston, we've seen older office buildings transformed into apartments and condominiums, and I expect we'll see that happen in a big way over the next year. So we'll see a lot of empty office buildings for a while and that will harm our city centers. But in the long run, I think we will see a lot of those office buildings reborn as residential buildings.

Agnes Kunkel: Ok, OK, that's maybe what you meant when you talked about hotels.

Bill Fulton: Well, I've what I've said is that the future of city centers in downtown is to serve as the urban hotel. And kind of what I mean by that is a little bit more than just residential buildings. What I mean is that downtowns in city centers will become places where face to face contact occurs, whether for business purposes or social purposes. When you want to get together and see each other in person face to face, you go to a city center, you go to a downtown because that is well suited to do that. That might be why you office in a downtown part of the time. You could, as I am currently doing, sit in your spare bedroom in your house and do your work when you're just doing your work by yourself. But when you have to have to interact with somebody and you have to meet with somebody, and when only that face to face contact will work in a business setting, that's when you go to the city center or the downtown, or if you live in an outlying area, perhaps that's when you come in and literally stay at a hotel in the downtown to do that for a couple of days.



Agnes Kunkel: As you mentioned, you go to the city for a few days. Might it happen that many people have more places to live, maybe, as you say, a micro apartment for the office job and maybe a bigger place where the family is living and maybe some other place where the husband is working, as maybe not everyone is working in the same city and maybe something you share with your friends in the countryside?

Bill Fulton: Well, I think the big unanswered question is if people work remotely more often and they don't go to the office as office workers, I'm speaking of and they don't go to the office as often ever or hardly ever or as often as they do now, where are they going to want to live? Right. And a lot of people, particularly in the US, urban pundits have said: well, they're going to want to live out in the edge of the suburbs, right. Where they can buy a bigger house, cheaper and so forth. And I think that's somewhat true, but it's not quite right. I think what people will do is they will have more of an ability to live where they want to live rather than being tethered to a commute. For some people, yes, that will be a big house on the metropolitan fringe. For other people, it will be an apartment in the middle of the city. I'm not sure very many people will be able to afford multiple residences, but I do think that people will be, as I say, able to live the lifestyle they want to live rather than the lifestyle they are kind of forced into because they are tethered to a commute to a particular location. In some cases, that might mean living in the suburbs. In some cases, it might mean living in the city center.

Agnes Kunkel: Yeah, what about prices for real estate and rents?

Bill Fulton: Well, that's a good question. There's a complicated interaction there, right? Because office and retail rents will undoubtedly go down. What we've seen during the Covid crisis, interestingly enough, a lot of residential real estate prices, a lot of housing prices have gone up. No one expected that. But I think that's because places where people want to live have become more valuable. So it's a little hard to tell right now what's going to happen to real estate prices in the long run, because, as I say, there'll be a lot of vacant office and retail space and office and retail rents will be low. If a lot of those spaces are converted to housing that might moderate housing price rise. But at the moment, it certainly looks like housing prices are going to continue to go up. As desirable places, whether they're in the suburbs or the city, become more desirable because you're stuck at home all the time. A lot of people are saying I'm stuck at home all the time. I'm not commuting. Yeah. So where do I really want to live? And they seek



those places out. And that's part of the reason that we've seen real estate prices go up since the beginning of the pandemic.

Agnes Kunkel: It's quite the same here in Germany, the attractive areas to have a house or a larger apartment, they are stable or even still rising. But yes, it seemed to surprise some people, but not me, as I understand exactly what you've just said. As we are now talking about the suburbians, as we say, the city center may have less people and less shops in the short run. What does this mean for suburban areas?

Bill Fulton: That's a really good question, because I have a theory about that which may or may not be true, but a couple of things, I think. Number one is: some people will not want to go to the office in the city center, but for a variety of reasons, they may not want to work at home. So it may be that many of these vacant retail spaces will be converted into small coworking spaces. Right. So instead of driving to the city center every day or taking the train to the city center, you drive a very short distance to your local shopping center, which used to have some kind of retail store in it, but now has coworking spaces, kind of a “we work” type space.

Agnes Kunkel: Yeah, exactly.

Bill Fulton: Where you can go in for a very small amount of money, you or your company can rent the desk and that's where you work. So I think that's one thing that's going to happen. Although I don't know how widespread that's going to be. The second thing I think is, if people spend most or all of their time in their suburban neighborhood rather than commuting to the city center, they're going to want more things out of that suburban neighborhood. The high street, as you say, may become more interesting. In American terms What I've said is if you are at home all the time and you never commute to the city center, are you really going to be satisfied that the only restaurant in your neighborhood is an Applebee's -an American generic chain restaurant-?

So it may well be that if people, who work at home or near home rather than in the city center have more time and money to spend on the suburban high street, that suburban High Street eventually becomes more interesting and gets a greater diversity of stores and restaurants. Many shops will close, but I really think restaurants and bars, once the pandemic is over, will thrive and there may be a greater variety and more interesting



bars and restaurants on suburban high streets than there were in the past. That's my theory. I don't know how true that's going to be.

Agnes Kunkel: When you think about your experiences during the pandemic, have you changed something where you say, I like it that way and I will stick to it when the pandemic has gone?

Bill Fulton: You mean me personally?

Agnes Kunkel: You as a person, Exactly.

Bill Fulton: Oh, yeah. I'm pretty sure I'm never going to go to the office on a Friday again.

As I said, Rice University has reopened. The students are coming back. We've gone back to the office at the Kinder Institute on a limited basis. I'm currently going to the office two days a week. I can imagine that it'll step up to three or four. But like everybody else, I'm learning there's no particular reason for me to go to the office just to sit in front of my computer.

It makes perfect sense for me to go to the office and to go to the campus in order to meet with other people, either people on our staff or people across the campus. But you don't have to do that forty hours a week, right. You can do that three days a week, six hours a day or something like that. So I think for me personally, as an office worker, that's probably the future. I'll work at home more and at the office less. And again, going to the office or to the campus in my case, really is in order to facilitate face to face contact. Not really to just to sit and type on the computer.

Agnes Kunkel: Well, it was wonderful to have you with us, I guess our thirty minutes you sponsored for us are over. And we are very happy to have heard what you see in the future for the cities. And thank you. Thank you very much.

Bill Fulton: Thank you very much for having me. And I guess I'll see you on Zoom and not in the city center from now on.



Agnes Kunkel: Right, wonderful. Thank you!

Bill Fulton: Thank you. Bye bye.

Agnes Kunkel: Bye.