

# Curb Enthusiasm Episode 9 Transcript

00;00;00;00 - 00;00;04;27

**Emily Weidenhof**

Welcome to Curb Enthusiasm. I'm Emily Weidenhof.

00;00;05;03 - 00;00;06;15

**Jason Banrey**

I'm Jason Banrey.

00;00;06;18 - 00;00;20;00

**Emily Weidenhof**

Today we're talking to Skye Duncan, executive director of the Global Designing Cities Initiative, which is focused on transforming streets around the world and developing international street design best practices.

00;00;20;03 - 00;00;30;26

**Jason Banrey**

Prior to her current role, she served as a senior urban designer at the New York City Department of City Planning, collaborating with multiple agencies to make New York a more resilient, livable, and healthy city.

00;00;30;28 - 00;00;43;03

**Emily Weidenhof**

Welcome, Skye. So wonderful to see you. A true globetrotter. Always, a different time zone, when we connect. Thanks for joining us all the way from the southern hemisphere.

00;00;43;08 - 00;00;45;16

**Skye Duncan**

Oh, you're most welcome. Great to be here.

00;00;45;18 - 00;00;57;17

**Emily Weidenhof**

So, you work for Global Designing Cities. Recently celebrated a 10-year anniversary. Tell us about, the initiative and what you do there.

00;00;57;20 - 00;01;11;26

**Skye Duncan**

Yeah, sure. Well, firstly, again, thanks for having me. This is so awesome and I'm really happy you guys are doing this podcast. I've listened to a bunch of them already and they're great. They're kind of really inspiring for a lot of us who geek out on the streets. Not only in New York City, but around the world.

00;01;11;28 - 00;01;34;16

**Skye Duncan**

So, it's an honor to be here. And particularly speaking about some of our work at GDCI. As you mentioned, Emily, we're now 10 years old, which is awesome. And today we're about 40 staff, I think, now in almost 20 different countries around the world. And so, we really work to help cities ask what's possible of how that kind of space can serve more people.

00;01;34;16 - 00;01;53;08

**Skye Duncan**

And we work directly with touched down in about 70 different cities around the world. We literally go out and paint the streets in the middle of the night. We get projects on the ground to show them what's possible, and then we help the cities scale that for the longer-term systemic change through, you know, citywide programs, policy updates.

00;01;53;10 - 00;02;14;00

**Skye Duncan**

And all of that work is based on our core guidance, which is the Global Street Design Guide. Now we've got just over 130 cities, regions and organizations around the world who have endorsed that. So, a similar process to the guidelines where they produced it, like by cities for cities, and then the states endorsed it, the cities endorse it.

00;02;14;00 - 00;02;34;09

**Skye Duncan**

And ultimately, you know, central government or national governments started to update their policies as well. And then we've done a suite of other resources. One of my favorites, designing streets for kids. But at the end of the day, it's really all looking at, you know, our streets, as the heart of our cities and how we can rethink that.

00;02;34;11 - 00;02;52;23

**Emily Weidenhof**

Fantastic. Super exciting. Super impactful. I'm glad you mentioned streets for kids. We're going to talk about that in a little bit. But if I were to ask you again what you do, but explaining it to a classroom of five-year-olds, what would you say?

00;02;52;23 - 00;03;00;03

**Skye Duncan**

It's such a cool question. I'd say, you know, as a kid, you guys, every day you are kind of out on the street.

00;03;00;03 - 00;03;33;15

**Skye Duncan**

It's your space, right? You can't drive, but you can scoot, and you can walk. And this is a space that if you look at it and reimagine it, what would you want the space to be? What we realized is you do not need a master's degree to tell us this stuff, right? You talk to a five-

year-old and they can tell you where they feel freaked out crossing the street or their favorite corner to stop and play and have a conversation because something engages them, or to pause and smell the flowers.

00;03;33;15 - 00;03;39;13

**Skye Duncan**

And we do a lot of kid's engagement where we ask them to tell us what they want to see in the space.

00;03;39;17 - 00;03;52;26

**Jason Banrey**

I'm curious, as a new dad, you know how that new work has really translated to changes throughout the world. You work internationally and so curious, what are some of those patterns that you've seen specifically with children, right?

00;03;52;26 - 00;03;59;26

**Jason Banrey**

Are children actually asking for specific things in their streets? Are they saying, specific things and have specific requests?

00;03;59;28 - 00;04;15;29

**Skye Duncan**

It's pretty similar across the globe. I mean, when you think about it, streets are essentially our largest network and public space, right? And this trend of kind of wasting that space, or kind of capturing that huge untapped asset.

00;04;16;02 - 00;04;41;11

**Skye Duncan**

It's global. It really doesn't matter, like what language we're speaking or what color our skin is or what our accent is. I mean, this is kind of consistent across the world. We need to be designing our streets through that lens of children. And when we do that, we're making it great for everybody. But we're also acknowledging that these guys are, you know, they are our future and they're so vulnerable in the sense that they they're not just little adults.

00;04;41;11 - 00;04;52;09

**Skye Duncan**

They actually have different, diverse needs that as people who are shaping streets, are making decisions on a daily basis around how we design at what we fund, it's really critical, right?

00;04;52;15 - 00;04;52;27

**Jason Banrey**

Oh, yeah.

00;04;53;04 - 00;05;03;12

**Skye Duncan**

What we know is the science for early childhood development, for the brain to develop, to build important and kind of meaningful connections with the caregiver, you need to have lower stress levels.

00;05;03;14 - 00;05;34;15

**Skye Duncan**

You need to have opportunities for some learning, and opportunities for meaningful conversation and connection. So it's important to think about the need of the kids, but also for the caregivers who are with those kids. Right. And so many of the, you know, streets you see around the world, there's no chance of parents going to pause and have a meaningful conversation or play with their child because they are terrified that that child is going to survive when they're walking down the street, on the road bed or trying to cross the street that has no crossing with, you know, speeding vehicles coming at them.

00;05;34;21 - 00;05;51;21

**Jason Banrey**

And just curious, because I've seen how our work has changed hearts and minds here and improve children's lives, and especially during Covid, some of the open streets and the program that that we developed, with your work, Emily. It's really transformed and improved kids lives. So just curious, you know, when you do that work and those kids are in that work, what's it like for them?

00;05;51;21 - 00;05;55;13

**Jason Banrey**

And what do you see in their faces when they're enjoying the product of that work?

00;05;55;16 - 00;06;23;14

**Skye Duncan**

It's hard to describe because it's such an intense feeling of joy to see it on the kids' faces, but also on the caregivers faces, on the parents faces as well. That those smiles is twinkling eyes when you see, you know, previously kids that have been holding on to their parents legs, as they kind of come out of school or into the school and instead, you know, they're running free, they're climbing on furniture.

00;06;23;15 - 00;06;50;16

**Skye Duncan**

You know, there was an amazing project in Milan that we worked on. We've been working there for a number of years now, actually, with Janette Sadik-Khan and Bloomberg Associates, helping them kind of kickstart a plaza program very much inspired by New York City. And there was one project outside a school there in Spoleto. And firstly, they had a great competition where the kids got to compete to name the new plaza that was there.

00;06;50;18 - 00;07;08;28

**Skye Duncan**

And so, the child, we've got these great photos of the kids standing up with, like, you know, 'Plaza of Dreams,' and it's like, how amazing is that? Right? Like no adult or engineer is going to come up with a name like that, but it's also those stories and, you know, the moments that you capture seeing.

00;07;08;28 - 00;07;25;10

**Skye Duncan**

I've got this amazing photograph of a of a new mother with a newborn, like, tiny, tiny little baby standing there in the middle of the space. And all the neighbors are kind of standing around to meet this latest newborn baby. And that's when you kind of sit back and go, we kind of did something pretty cool here, right?

00;07;25;10 - 00;07;45;23

**Skye Duncan**

Like the fact that that person comes out feeling comfortable in a space to bring one of the most vulnerable, you know, stages of life to that space is just chalk and cheese, black and white to what it was. You know, previously, literally, again, like car parking, speeding vehicles and parents standing in a road bed.

00;07;45;23 - 00;07;54;09

**Emily Weidenhof**

Yeah, yeah. So you guys do an amazing job of showing, incredibly transformative before and after photos.

00;07;54;09 - 00;08;24;27

**Emily Weidenhof**

Like you're saying, just incredibly powerful projects that people kind of can immediately feel the benefits. You do an amazing job of communicating a lot of the work and graphics and in the street design guide. That said, change is hard, and it's not always as easy and as beautiful as you make it look. Could you talk about some of the challenges that you face in in creating these projects?

00;08;25;01 - 00;08;46;19

**Skye Duncan**

Yeah, the pictures are great and thank you for the compliments on that. We try really hard. And again, a lot of inspiration from New York City DOT from the early days. This stuff is never easy, right? We've got the pretty pictures at the end of the day. But I think as you guys know, I don't think there's been a single project that, you know, we haven't been screamed at or spat at or, you know, some form of, you know, verbal,

00;08;46;23 - 00;09;15;20

**Skye Duncan**

Luckily, not a ton of physical abuse, but it's really hard. It's really, really hard to do this stuff. But I think a couple of things. One, we do try and take, like you guys, this kind of interim approach sometimes to getting change on the ground and actually showing people what's possible through human experience versus asking them to understand the implications of that through looking at a drawing on a piece of paper, you know, or on a screen.

00;09;15;22 - 00;09;40;07

**Skye Duncan**

And that kind of interim approach really does help. I think it lower people's fear of change, because you've got that tagline of, like, we can put it back, we can bring it back if it doesn't work. So, you know, we do a lot of engagement. Before the projects, but also during the interim interventions or the pop ups or whichever version makes sense to gather people's feedback and to collect that data.

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**Skye Duncan**

Both, again, the numbers, the stories, the feedback, so that we can shift from kind of anecdote to analysis because, again, I think globally, we are always going to see people screaming and yelling and pushing back. But the reality is that generally, that's not actually representative of the largest majority of people. They're the loudest.

00;10;04;24 - 00;10;05;02

**Emily Weidenhof**

Yep.

00;10;05;07 - 00;10;07;23

**Skye Duncan**

But not representing the majority.

00;10;07;23 - 00;10;33;27

**Skye Duncan**

And so we find that, you know, when you can kind of acknowledge that, but bring the data to the table, you can have a fair and more equitable conversation around what makes sense moving forward. You know, this is public space. It's public money getting invested. We need to make sure that this finite space we have in our cities is serving, you know, the most amount of functions and the most amount of people that we can.

00;10;33;29 - 00;10;40;24

**Skye Duncan**

And I think one of my favorites is actually finding those people who are converted and having them come and help you on the next project.

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**Emily Weidenhof**

Yeah, exactly. We I think we see that. We see that all the time in our work. You know, we may be able to deliver some, some data, some analysis, you know, the kind of city perspective, but it's never really us convincing, neighborhoods that this is a project for them.

00;10;58;28 - 00;11;18;13

**Jason Banrey**

That's correct. And I love that you mentioned converts and I got goosebumps when she did that, just because I've seen we've seen converts, you know, and we're inviting converts over to our meetings now and just empowering them to speak to their neighbors. And it does make a difference. It makes a huge difference when you get that buy in from somebody, especially someone that didn't really enjoy the process.

00;11;18;15 - 00;11;25;11

**Jason Banrey**

But then, yeah, they're gifted with something that, that they see themselves in and they kind of carry on that conversation. It is amazing.

00;11;25;13 - 00;11;40;10

**Skye Duncan**

Yeah. And you guys are the masters at that. Right. Like you've now got over a decade of doing this work. I mean, gosh, almost coming up two decades right, of doing this work. So, you've now kind of done that transformation on the ground that you've built that local demand.

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**Skye Duncan**

And I think that's a very similar kind of trajectory or long-term vision that we're trying to help cities get to, where often they're often at the very early stages of that. But I think even as city governments, you know, I remember chatting to Will Norman, one of the deputy mayors for walking and cycling in London, and he was saying how they, they found like local plumbers or local business people and actually gave them media training and got them to help tell the stories about these types of changes.

00;12;08;13 - 00;12;25;05

**Skye Duncan**

You know, plaza cycle infrastructure and so forth. For that same reason, I think particularly the business owners is a really important and hard kind of nut to crack. Right? Like when it's people's financial livelihoods that they feel like you're threatening.

00;12;25;08 - 00;12;26;08

**Emily Weidenhof**

Right.

00;12;26;08 - 00;12;40;27

**Skye Duncan**

So, I think it's really important in this work that we're doing, we absolutely want authentic community input and engagement in the process, but we also cannot strive for 100% consensus.

00;12;40;27 - 00;12;50;13

**Skye Duncan**

I think that's a mistake that we make too often in cities because it's literally impossible. We are never going to get 100% of people on board with something.

00;12;50;16 - 00;13;00;25

**Emily Weidenhof**

Hey listeners, we hope you're enjoying this episode of our podcast. For those of you who are as enthusiastic about transportation and planning as we are, we'd like to hear from you.

00;13;00;27 - 00;13;11;16

**Emily Weidenhof**

You can submit topics and questions that you'd like us to cover at [nyc.gov/curb](https://nyc.gov/curb) enthusiasm. And now back to our conversation.

00;13;11;18 - 00;13;25;21

**Jason Banrey**

We've talked about this before and I think it's, touched on it being a story of reclamation. Right. A lot of what we're doing is reclaiming public land and giving the public an opportunity to say, hey, how do you want to see this? And so, are there other notable, stories that you can share, when it comes to stories of reclamation?

00;13;25;24 - 00;13;43;03

**Skye Duncan**

Yeah. One of my favorite stories of reclamation, it's from a quite a few years ago now, but it was, like very impactful for me. We were working in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and we'd done like a kind of intensive training with a bunch of engineers.

00;13;43;03 - 00;14;02;07

**Skye Duncan**

We went out on the streets, we had buckets of kind of gypsum, and we were literally drawing what on the ground, what we'd just been drawing on paper. This kind of like show what's possible. And at the end of finishing it all, the commissioner of transportation came out and he kind of stood there with me at the intersection, I was also quite new at my job,

00;14;02;07 - 00;14;19;01

**Skye Duncan**



So, I was pretty nervous about how this was all going, you know, and, he kind of looked at me and said, like, you've taken a lot of space away from the cars and what's going on here. I was like, well, you know, commissioner, it's, you know, the reality is in your city. And this was a huge intersection.

00;14;19;01 - 00;14;41;08

**Skye Duncan**

I was like, you know, over 80% of your population are people that walk and take transit and, you know, only 4% of the population drive. And I said 88% of your fatalities are people dying on the streets like pedestrians. And I was like, they need this space, you know? So, to shorten the crossings. And, I was like and looking like a bus, you know, kind of came and still could make, you know, very easily make the turn.

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**Skye Duncan**

And, and he kind of stood silently. Meanwhile, I'm like sweating and like stressing that I'm, you know, still going to have a job at the end of the day. And he looked at me and he said, so why is this not permanent? And I was just like, amazing, you know? And so it was amazing because that seeing is believing.

00;15;00;23 - 00;15;16;15

**Skye Duncan**

We then got the kind of permits to do, like a six month interim trial. We worked with local artists, did the paint, and then we could collect all the metrics as well, quantitative and qualitative, to show the impact. They then went back and made it permanent and scaled it up to a citywide program.

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**Emily Weidenhof**

Yeah. And you know, you're on the right track when they start asking about the next set of questions, so

00;15;22;29 - 00;15;23;05

**Skye Duncan**

Yeah, yeah!

00;15;23;10 - 00;15;34;27

**Emily Weidenhof**

Because you know, right. It's not just about the paint, but how fast you can build the paint, which is, you know, exactly another set of questions, another, another podcast for another day.

00;15;35;01 - 00;15;36;23

**Jason Banrey**

Keep the conversation going.

00;15;36;26 - 00;15;42;21

**Skye Duncan**

Yeah. They don't like the color of the planters, right?

00;15;42;23 - 00;15;44;16

**Jason Banrey**

I've had many of those conversations.

00;15;44;18 - 00;15;48;28

**Jason Banrey**

That means they're in, the buy-in is there, so we're having conversations about the planters.

00;15;48;29 - 00;15;50;04

**Skye Duncan**

Totally.

00;15;50;04 - 00;16;01;16

**Jason Banrey**

Just curious if you can get a little bit more into Latin America examples. You know, Latin America and a lot of those countries have been following our lead for, for quite some time since, since you left. And so, you've been leading those conversations.

00;16;01;16 - 00;16;07;08

**Jason Banrey**

So, can you share a little bit more, you know, about what public realm changes are happening in Latin American cities?

00;16;07;10 - 00;16;24;24

**Skye Duncan**

One of my favorites in Latin America is, Fortaleza. I was just there a few months ago, and seeing they've been doing this work now for coming on a decade. And so you can really see the change that they've kind of institutionalized and been able to carry across, you know, political administrations.

00;16;24;26 - 00;17;03;03

**Skye Duncan**

And they've they had a first lady back in the day who was really about kids priorities as well. So they've got like bike share for kids in Fortaleza. They've got these like little mini plazas throughout, you know, the city for small children. And so they've kind of taken this really like coordinated approach that I think is quite rare in cities that so often each discipline sits in their own silo and they've taken this kind of, yeah, approach where now they've got incredible cycle networks, they've got improve public spaces, and you can just feel the

difference in the city and that we're actually one of the few cities in the world that meet the UN SDG

00;17;03;03 - 00;17;24;13

**Skye Duncan**

goal of halving road traffic fatalities. It's now 2030, but it was 2020, the goal, for a minute. And one of about three cities in the world that met that goal by 2020. So it's pretty colors. It's paint. It's feel good stuff for the kids, but it is life and death as well. Like they're saving lives drastically. So really impressive work coming out of there as well.

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**Jason Banrey**

Amazing.

00;17;25;06 - 00;17;50;11

**Emily Weidenhof**

Yeah. I want to build on some of the points you're making about embedding, institutionalizing, scaling up. You guys are thinking about some innovative strategies kind of moving beyond just individual projects. Can you talk a little bit about what you're thinking in terms of really creating these types of changes, culturally in the long term?

00;17;50;14 - 00;17;53;01

**Skye Duncan**

It's such a critical question, right?

00;17;53;01 - 00;18;14;01

**Skye Duncan**

And like, what are the different ingredients that go into that deeper systemic change and how can we help these things not be one liners? You guys have done really well in New York, right? Like to be able to kind of survive through different mayors, different political administrations, to still show that this stuff is critical.

00;18;14;01 - 00;18;44;08

**Skye Duncan**

And I think part of that is obviously getting the projects on the ground, collecting the right data and having the local precedents to point to because everybody sees, right? New York back in the day said, "We're not Copenhagen." Now everybody says, "We're not New York. We can't do that." And having something locally with at least some community members who understand the impact and the data, the metrics to show what's possible really is a critical component of getting over that first really big hump, right?

00;18;44;10 - 00;19;10;11

**Skye Duncan**

But also, you know, updating the street design manuals, changing the policies, getting the speed limit reductions down, and kind of institutionalizing these types of projects and transformations in the day to day operational budgets of the city so that when something needs to be repaired, it's built back better, or that lines painted slightly in a different place, even if it might not cost any more.

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**Skye Duncan**

So, it really is kind of a combination of different factors. I think that we have to embrace that complexity to really institutionalize change.

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**Emily Weidenhof**

Yeah,

00;19;20;09 - 00;19;27;21

**Jason Banrey**

That was awesome. I mean, I'm just loving the global insight here, which just only gives me and Emily confirmation that what we're doing is right.

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**Skye Duncan**

It is! Keep it going!

00;19;27;28 - 00;19;32;11

**Jason Banrey**

But I just wanted to ask you a little bit more about the difference.

00;19;32;11 - 00;19;50;06

**Jason Banrey**

You've done a lot of work here, and you've traveled. You travel the world. And so, you know, New York City has a has a great public transit system. A lot of folks, a lot of our people rely on that. But you've traveled to major cities that don't have that public transit system. So how does your work actually enhanced transportation, transit connectivity, and connecting folks to, to where they need to go every single day?

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**Skye Duncan**

So, there's a bunch of cities that I think are quite similar to New York, but there's ones that I think are quite different. Right? I mean, I think I was just, you know, a couple of weeks ago in, in PCMC, Pimpri-Chinchwad in India, you know, that's a kind of a project around a 15 minute city approach that the city's working on and we're supporting them on.

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**Skye Duncan**

But they don't have the public transport, you know, infrastructure there in that case that you can fall back on. And we're trying to focus on cycling in that case. Right. But we're also trying to say, like, you need to do the cycling infrastructure really well, because if you don't protect that space and look, you know, we biking around the neighborhood as we go, it's like, look, there's a car parked in that cycle facility.

00;20;37;23 - 00;21;00;22

**Skye Duncan**

That's just the painted line. Like, you're never going to get a kid or a caregiver out on that facility. And so we, you know, we were lucky. We were visiting a street where they had just freshly painted, you know, just the painted line. This gets a bit geeky, but like, they were looking at that 1.5m to be within a six meter, two travel lane, basically 20ft, of space.

00;21;00;24 - 00;21;18;09

**Skye Duncan**

And I was like, well, hang on a second. Like, you know, we got some chalk out of our pockets and we're actually if we just take this extra 50cm over here or, you know, or so and we drew it down and we kind of sketched up a buffer and we got a jersey barrier and put it on the street and said, "Look, actually, the cars are still moving."

00;21;18;11 - 00;21;40;26

**Skye Duncan**

And, you know, so sometimes, like we talking about big spatial reclamation, but sometimes it's also finding opportunities for like little nuggets of space that can again show what's possible and unlock and say it works. And look this is going to be safer. Yes, it's taking space away from vehicles, but we're trying to help people understand that, like most people in those places can't afford a car.

00;21;41;03 - 00;21;48;28

**Skye Duncan**

So why are we looking at shaping a future for them where the only option is to is to drive?

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**Emily Weidenhof**

Right.

00;21;49;22 - 00;21;56;00

**Jason Banrey**

We asked every guest what their biggest breach of transportation transit etiquette is, and I want to pose that question to you.

00;21;56;03 - 00;22;06;13

**Skye Duncan**

Yeah, it sounds funny, but I do miss my New York City commute. I was there for 15 years. I think gosh, I mean, I never loved a big backpack on a crowded train.

00;22;06;13 - 00;22;27;09

**Skye Duncan**

That was always a little frustrating with the kind of, you know, swing that, like, took you out unexpectedly. It is never that fun. But probably one of my other pet peeves is when you can see somebody sitting down and they see someone who needs a seat, and then they pretend that they haven't seen them, and they keep looking down on their phone, you know,

00;22;27;09 - 00;22;27;14

**Jason Banrey**

Faux pas!

00;22;27;14 - 00;22;31;10

**Skye Duncan**

That that makes me, that makes me a little frustrated.

00;22;35;22 - 00;22;42;25

**Emily Weidenhof**

Skye, what are you most enthusiastic about for the future of transportation?

00;22;42;28 - 00;23;04;04

**Skye Duncan**

I must say. I mean, I think the kids lens, is just really, really powerful. And I'm super excited about, you know, scaling that thinking and that work because I think it's something that, you know, again, in a really difficult political environment in most parts of the world, it doesn't matter if you left or right or center or, it doesn't matter what color your tie is.

00;23;04;04 - 00;23;44;27

**Skye Duncan**

You know, so many people can relate to kids. And I think, you know, if we can institutionalize that approach to consider that perspective, if we could ask ourselves that question of like, how could we make this better for a child? And we've got like, you know, hundreds and thousands and hopefully millions of people doing that. I'm very optimistic, that we can take, you know, some pretty amazing places already and just make them that much better and, you know, that much more fun and joyous and, you know, spaces that foster love and adventure and crazy things that we don't typically talk about an hour in our profession.

00;23;44;27 - 00;23;47;27

**Skye Duncan**

But I think we should probably talk about it a little bit more.

00;23;47;29 - 00;23;55;03

**Jason Banrey**

I love that. Spaces that develop love, because that's certainly something that we're doing here in New York, and that's something that you're doing around the world. Thank you for saying that.

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**Emily Weidenhof**

Yeah. Well, thank you so much for all of your expertise sharing your stories. Skye, it's so reassuring knowing that you are tirelessly, doing all of this fantastic work all over the globe and, we'll see you out there in another time zone soon.

00;24;10;29 - 00;24;22;18

**Skye Duncan**

Yeah. Amazing. Well, thank you guys so much for having me. This was so much fun. And, yeah, look forward to catching up again soon.

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**NYC DOT Commissioner Ydanis Rodriguez**

Hi. My name is Ydanis Rodriguez, commissioner of the New York City Department of Transportation. Thank you for listening to Curb Enthusiasm by New York City DOT. This episode was produced by Michael Santos with video support from Sigurjon Gudjonsson, and Juan Vega.

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**NYC DOT Commissioner Ydanis Rodriguez**

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