

WE ARE ETH – Episode 9

With Anette Freytag, Professor, Department of Landscape Architecture, Rutgers University

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[00:00:00] **Anette Freytag:** When I taught landscape architecture, both at ETH and now at Rutgers, I tell people it's not only a discipline or a profession, it's really a way of life. It's an attitude towards life. A garden has care, self care, being careful with resources, being careful with your own movements – carrying you know, also for the other.

[00:00:26] **Susan Kish:** In today's episode, I'm talking to Anette Freytag, who's in the studio in Zurich, not our usual studio, but a lovely looking place in the top, in an old half timbered building. Anette is a professor of landscape architecture at Rutgers University, and she's gonna talk with us today about how the ETH Zurich influenced her about the story of her career and about the role that ETH continues to play with her today.

[00:00:51] I'm Susan Kish, host of the We Are ETH podcast, which tells the story of the alumni and friends of the ETH Zurich, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology based in Zurich. ETH regularly ranks amongst the top universities in the world with cutting edge research, science and of course people. The people who were there, the people who are there today, and the people who will be there. And these are their stories.

[00:01:19] Maybe we can start with saying, you're both a historian and an architect, and it turns out a radio journalist, a person who understands how to translate the world of architecture and the outside world to the world of words.

[00:01:33] How did you combine those? What was the catalyst that caused that to happen?

[00:01:38] **Anette Freytag:** Yeah, so, um, I started at the Youth Radio at age 15 to, you know, have a little bit of pocket money. Um, and I think this opened really my, my view to the world. I mean, I had to deal with a lot of people and so I'm a very much society person in a way caring for the society, caring for the community. But then I decided to study art history. I first studied macroeconomics and art history, and then I got rid of the macroeconomics after the bachelor and, and just continued in art history. But through art history, I came into architecture and gardens and I really found my calling in, dealing with gardens and landscape architecture.

[00:02:23] And as a historian also a little bit, you know, the other way around. I started caring for contemporary projects and only then I went down in history and now I'm at the hydraulic age, you know, that's when I start my, my lecture series. In a way it's also, you know, I love art and I'm still working with artists and dancers and, you know, choreography also in landscape.

[00:02:46] But for me, working with landscape architecture and gardens is this possibility to also be political and do good things for the community. And so that's really my calling. On the other hand, when I came to ETH, I came a little later in my career. I was in my mid 30's and this is when I stopped radio journalism because you cannot do an academic work and, you know, work for the radio.

[00:03:12] It's too much. And I did a, a doctorate about the very important Swiss landscape architect, Dieter Kienast, who really was a new mentor for an entire generation of landscape architects. And also it happened to be that the ETH installed the professorship for landscape architecture because of him. So he was so influential and he worked with all, you know, the well known Swiss architects, Herzog & de Meuron, Dina Dina, Burkhalter Sumi and many more.

[00:03:41] And then they really thought, no, we really need landscape. You know, it's so important also for architecture.

[00:03:47] **Susan Kish:** Very cool. Now you used a term that I didn't know what it was, which was that hydraulic age. I realize I'm digging into, I'm deep

diving into something that we'll probably touch on later, but what is the hydraulic age?

[00:04:01] **Anette Freytag:** No, it's the civilizations. We call it the hydraulic civilizations. It's basically, um, so I start the western, the history of the western landscape, architecture and Crete. So Crete is this little island in the Mediterranean. And it's a really important point of exchange where the influences came in from Egypt and, you know, Turkey and Asia, and then went through Italy in the north and back.

[00:04:29] And so, uh, you call, you know, the landscapes of the south, the communities of the souths who really were dealing with Oasis and water. We call them the hydraulic civilizations. So it's thousands and thousands of year before common era, but it's where we have the roots in European Western landscape architecture.

[00:04:49] **Susan Kish:** Got it. This is the same Crete of the Minotaur and the maze, right?

[00:04:54] **Anette Freytag:** Yes. And the Minotaur is super important because of the maze, you know, the maze is one of the most important, um, features in garden architecture. Of course, gardens are made for wellbeing and so you have formed nature and still they always implemented, um, a symbol for wild nature for the frightening wild nature, which is the labyrinth, the Minotaur, the beast that is conquered by Theseus, who goes in and Arianna plays a big part because of the red thread.

[00:05:25] **Susan Kish:** Right.

[00:05:25] **Anette Freytag:** But so, you know, in Renaissance and Barock and up to today, there's always this reminder of the wild with the Labyrinth. So that's the, uh, yeah, it's the representation of the active wild, side of nature.

[00:05:39] **Susan Kish:** As we would say in Boston, that is wicked cool. I had never thought of it that way.

[00:05:44] In terms of sort of combining or that migration from macroeconomics and art history to landscape architecture to gardens and landscape, to how all that stuff works, both historically and today. Could you just dive for a little bit more about how you're applying that today? You mentioned garden, I think. dancers and art projects, how is that actually relevant today?

[00:06:08] **Anette Freytag:** Mm-hmm. So, you know, I transferred from Switzerland to New Jersey, and so people think there couldn't be a bigger opposite, you know, thinking of Switzerland than thinking of New Jersey. New Jersey is the, the most, uh, densely populated part of a state in the entire United States. In fact, you know, also in Switzerland. Switzerland is very, very densely populated where you can live because, um, a large part of the country is either mountains or lakes, and the rest is extremely densely populated.

[00:06:42] So already when I, when I worked in Switzerland, I had this one year intermediate time that I worked for the Swiss Confederation as a, um, advisor for landscape politics. So for the federal agency of the environment, um, in Bern. We were really thinking about agglomerations and how can we, um, increase the landscape quality, but also the living quality in the agglomerations and the biodiversity of course.

[00:07:09] **Susan Kish:** What do you, what is an agglomeration?

[00:07:11] **Anette Freytag:** Agglomeration is like suburbia. It's suburban landscapes. Yeah.

[00:07:15] **Susan Kish:** Okay.

[00:07:15] **Anette Freytag:** It's this in, it's the fringes of the city where it's a broad landscape, but basically, um, a lot of landscapes in Switzerland's are agglomerations, what we would say suburban. They have a little bit, you know, you cannot totally compare this as suburbia to Swiss suburbia.

[00:07:33] It has to do with public transport and density. But I don't want to go totally into the details, but the point was that we really thought about with this new politics in Switzerland of increasing density in what, you know, they had this really good idea to say continuing sprawl. We, the, the, the new population that has to come in, we have to build denser, which would be a good thing also for the United States, of course. I mean, that's another scale. And then we thought, okay, we really have to defend, uh, the public landscapes and the, you know, the, the open spaces and really change our perspective and think everything starting from the landscape.

[00:08:13] **Susan Kish:** Mm-hmm.

[00:08:13] **Anette Freytag:** And then I also started to say, we really need to walk more. And that's something really new for United States cause it's a totally car based country, but for many, many reasons. It's health reasons like physical

and psychological health and also accessibility, carbon neutrality. You know, the pandemic showed us how important it is that we have like good accessible green spaces in front of our doors.

[00:08:40] **Susan Kish:** Mm-hmm.

[00:08:41] **Anette Freytag:** And so I started, you know, a campaign of walking in suburbia at Rutgers and I did this together with the professor in dance, Giulia Arita, and we founded the Air Collaborative, the Arts Integrated Research Collaborative. And the nice thing is that the acronym air, it also means we only do things in open air.

[00:09:01] And one of our first projects was a march from our Rutgers campus to the Rutgers gardens, and so we called it the march to Rutgers gardens. It was a choreographed two-mile hike with actors, singers on the ground, dances, and it was all to start a campaign that Rutgers gardens become accessible by walking or by bike or ADA accessible because right now you can only drive there with a car.

[00:09:27] If you don't have a car, you can't access this wonderful resource. So it's something that is very exclusive and it's excluding, especially, you know, students, uh, people of lower income, people of color. So I do racial and spatial justice projects through walking through landscape architecture with artists in this way.

[00:09:48] But it was beautiful. I just give you one example. So we had a cow tunnel, so we reactivated a cow tunnel under a highway that is not, that is out of use for walkers. And so we had a composer, a friend of mine, Scott Ordway, composed, a piece called Watershed where he worked with a biologist from my school.

[00:10:06] **Susan Kish:** Mm-hmm.

[00:10:07] **Anette Freytag:** And so he had 80 singers in the cow tunnel chanting the words of habitats that, you know, species in habitats, plants, but also animals that either have disappeared or reemerged or are still there because the highway also cut through the watershed. And it was a beautiful experience. So people dived into this tunnel and they had all these singers chanting, and he also started with the Altos and went into the Sopranos also with a different pitch and, you know, different, um, volume.

[00:10:40] And so it was a beautiful, immersive experience that completely changed your feeling of this very infrastructural industrial landscape and brought beauty to this place. And so these are these kind of things that we work on. How can you change the perception? How can you get an emotional connection to nature again, You know.

[00:11:00] And I believe if you have this emotional connection, it will help you much more to be aware of climate changes if you just know all these catastrophic data, you know you really need this, you need to reconnect emotionally, and the arts can really help with that.

[00:11:15] **Susan Kish:** The way you describe that tunnel and the way they redid that experience is fabulous. Do you think we could just listen to a few minutes of it and who again was the composer for that piece?

[00:11:26] **Anette Freytag:** Yeah, of course. Uh, Scott would love it. The composer is Scott Ordway. He's a professor for composition at Rutgers. And it was performed by the Voorhees Choir under the direction of Brandon Williams.

[00:11:38] **Susan Kish:** Fantastic. Let's listen to a few minutes of the composition.

[00:12:23] To listen and specially to watch this video about the watershed and the whole experience about the cow tunnel, there's a link in the description of today's podcast. And there are additional links there also, for more information and more videos about the air collaborative.

[00:12:39] Anette, maybe you can just tell me a little bit about how you actually got to deciding upon macroeconomics and art history. I mean, that's just a, I majored in history and science and that was a weird combination, but macroeconomics and art history, that's, that's really, that's interesting.

[00:12:57] **Anette Freytag:** It, it really was because I wanted to become a really good journalist,

[00:13:01] **Susan Kish:** Uhhuh!

[00:13:01] **Anette Freytag:** And I thought, um, it's great if I have this, uh, training, macroeconomics and I really liked it a lot. And I also liked the math and everything. Statistics especially. Um, but the art history, you know, you,

[00:13:14] **Susan Kish:** I'm sorry.

[00:13:15] **Anette Freytag:** Yeah.

[00:13:15] **Susan Kish:** Did you say you liked statistics?

[00:13:17] **Anette Freytag:** I loved statistics! I was really good in statistics.

[00:13:20] **Susan Kish:** Oh God.

[00:13:20] **Anette Freytag:** Yeah. I loved it and it was surreal and I, I loved it. But so, but you know, I come from a family of, um, like my family didn't have a lot of money when I grew up.

[00:13:30] But they spend all their money on vacation, and this meant, um, driving to Italy, you know, because we live in the south of Austria. And so I think I have been on every tower of San Gimignano, I've seen every little village in the entire Italian country and, and I've also,

[00:13:50] **Susan Kish:** Did you even go down to Puglia and see those cool houses,

[00:13:53] **Anette Freytag:** Yes of course, and then the Castel del Monte and everything.

[00:13:56] And so I think so in a way I couldn't totally, you know, cut off this like artistic strength in my family and interest.

[00:14:04] **Susan Kish:** Uhhuh.

[00:14:04] **Anette Freytag:** And so I did both. And then, uh, I was quite successful in both, but then at one moment I saw it's just a little bit too much and then I decided for the art history. But then very quickly I came into architecture and, and then landscape architecture.

[00:14:19] **Susan Kish:** So bringing you back up to today, what was the catalyst for you to go from living in Zurich, which is a beautiful town and a beautiful setting and really does, you know, it is the 15 minute city usually. Right. You can walk places, you can get things. It's public transport's fabulous – to Rutgers in New Jersey.

[00:14:41] **Anette Freytag:** Yeah. I mean, in this way, the catalyst was living in Bern for one year because I changed, I went from the ETH to the um, um, the

federal, um, agency of environment, so to the Swiss Confederation. I worked as a consultant for landscape uh, politics and I liked my work very much, but we moved from Zurich to Bern so that I'm, you know, don't have this commute and I was just not connecting with Bern.

[00:15:07] I was really unhappy in Bern and this university head-hunted me. They had an open position of open rank, also and at one point, I got a little weak and I said, okay, I'm, I'm coming, I'm going to present myself. And I really liked it a lot. I hadn't heard from this university before Rutgers, but then I found out that it's an excellent university.

[00:15:30] So Ruth Bader Ginsburg, for example, she was a professor there. I mean, she's only one of the best-known people, but uh, it's very well known in the United States, not so much in Europe. I try to change this a little bit now that I speak everywhere with the affiliation, of course. And, and it was just a good moment because, uh, my partner was already working at a metropolitan opera as an assistant conductor, so it's very nice.

[00:15:55] So, so he's working at the Metropolitan Opera and I'm working at Rutgers University. And our nine-year-old daughter whose name is Flora, how could it be differently? She enjoys her...

[00:16:06] **Susan Kish:** You could've named her fauna. I mean, that would've worked too.

[00:16:09] **Anette Freytag:** It would've been for the son, but there was only a daughter.

[00:16:12] **Susan Kish:** So I do have to ask one final question about this. Do you have a garden?

[00:16:16] **Anette Freytag:** Yes. Yes. But, uh, as my beloved colleague would say it's my dream garden. I look at it and I dream of the things I could do about it. If you would see my garden, it's like the picture of Dorian Gray. You know, the, the better I teach how you should make gardens diverse, my own garden looks so... I got better during the pandemic. During the pandemic I put in 600 bulbs. So that that helped a lot. Yeah.

[00:16:45] **Susan Kish:** That, that sounds good. But you know what, you're gonna have to keep doing that like every fall. Right?

[00:16:49] **Anette Freytag:** I know. October, when I come back to the US I will start digging. I promise.

[00:16:55] **Susan Kish:** I, I totally understand, that's a fantastic story in terms of how you work and what you work and, and the impact you're having, both in terms of Rutgers, the community and understanding that intersection of landscape, architecture, ecology, community, making differences. What's the role of the ETH in the years you spent there? How did that impact what you're doing and where you wanna make a difference?

[00:17:26] **Anette Freytag:** Yeah, it impacted me a lot. So I started working with Christophe Girot, who was the successor of Dieter Kienast the landscape architect on whom I did my PhD. So the things that I learned from Christoph Girot is taking care of the big scale.

[00:17:39] I never thought about the big scale before that. You have to think on a regional scale, even when you are planning a garden. And then the work with Dieter Kienast, I was extremely privileged because, you know, um, so I was asked to do a PhD on his work.

[00:17:54] **Susan Kish:** Mm-hmm.

[00:17:54] **Anette Freytag:** and he's just one of the best designers ever. He said something very important. Always remember the nature in the city is not only green, but also gray. You also have to think about, you know, the open axis. You have to think about, uh, you know, little, uh, water channels, drainage. And so he really, you know, he has a very interesting story, so he was trained as a natural scientist on spontaneous vegetation in the city.

[00:18:24] So it's basically that mean weeds. It's the weeds that come out, you know, between pavers and so on. And that was, he spent his entire PhD on this, and then he became this amazing designer, which is a complete contradiction in itself.

[00:18:37] **Susan Kish:** Seriously.

[00:18:37] **Anette Freytag:** But, but he worked also integrating spontaneous vegetation into his very formally driven gardens very beautifully.

[00:18:46] So he had always this like, uh, play of contrast. You have form and nature is always resisting human form.

[00:18:54] **Susan Kish:** So I'll have to take away from this conversation that if my kids ever ask Mommy, why aren't you weeding? I'll just say, well, I'm encouraging the spontaneous vegetation.

[00:19:04] **Anette Freytag:** Yeah, very good. Dieter Kienast would have been totally with you,

[00:19:08] **Susan Kish:** Excellent, excellent. I really, I have to remember that expression. Um, we're gonna draw to a close. It just feels as if what you're very good at and what ETH really exemplified, is connecting the dots. You've been able to connect the dots between what you're interested in journalism and your family's passion about art and history.

[00:19:29] You're able to connect the dots from that to the landscape architecture and gardens, and you're connecting the dots, both in terms of the contemporary impact and its importance, whether it's around health or the environment or climate. Presumably, or urban planning, and also historically within context to appreciate the work of folks like Dieter Kienast and I, I just wondered if you wanted to say a few words about how that all pulls together because the, the secret that is Anette just seems to have such potential impact how ETH functions and the legacy that ETH will need for the world.

[00:20:07] **Anette Freytag:** Mm. Yeah. That's a tricky question. And, um, but thank you first that you think that I've, you know, I succeeded in connecting the dots.

[00:20:16] When I taught landscape architecture, both at ETH or now at Rutgers, I tell people it's not only a discipline or a profession, it's really a way of life.

[00:20:27] **Susan Kish:** That's great.

[00:20:27] **Anette Freytag:** It's an attitude towards life, and in this attitude, it has all these qualities that a garden has: care, self-care, plants, you know, sensitivity, um, perception, really, you know, being very attentive and, but also caring, you know, like being careful with resources, being careful with your own movements, caring, you know also for the other. And I think that's, we need this more than ever, you know, kind of consolation and beauty, but in a way that is existential. It's not only about aesthetics, it's really about survival. And I see, you know, a lot of things at ETH, um, that help survival. So I think that's, that's something that is very important.

[00:21:14] **Susan Kish:** Thank you Anette.

[00:21:15] So just a few final closing questions that we always ask and uh, probably very relevant, cause you've been away and you've just recently come back. What is your favorite place in the city of Zurich?

[00:21:28] **Anette Freytag:** I have two. The one is the Seebad Enge, when you go to the sauna in winter and then you swim in the lake. Isn't that great? That's fantastic.

[00:21:35] **Susan Kish:** That is fabulous.

[00:21:36] **Anette Freytag:** And the other one is brilliant, the Letzibad. It was, uh, you know, designed by, uh, Max Frisch the, who was an architect, the ETH trained architect, and then went into writings, one of my favorite authors. And the landscape was done by Gustav Ammann, who did a beautiful, um, you know, landscape with perennials. So you swim in the garden, you swim with all these plants. It was beautifully renovated, um, a decade ago. These are my two favorite places. ,

[00:22:07] **Susan Kish:** Do you have a specific memory or a day at ETH that has really stuck in your mind that you'd like to share?

[00:22:14] **Anette Freytag:** Yeah. I'm, I'm, It will sound like if this is a self-promotion, but it is not. But a really incredible moment was when I received the ETH Medal of Award for outstanding scientific research, because I received it from Heidi Wunderli, who was the first female rector.

[00:22:33] And she had this incredible chain around her neck, this beautiful chain. And she really squeezed my hand really thoroughly. And I just thought, that's wonderful.

[00:22:46] **Susan Kish:** And that's just a beautiful image. So Annette, thank you so much for joining us today. Really appreciated the chance to have the conversation.

[00:22:54] **Anette Freytag:** Me too. Thank you so much for having me.

[00:22:58] **Susan Kish:** I'm Susan Kish, host of the We Are ETH series. Please subscribe to this podcast and join us wherever you listen. Give us good rating on Spotify or Apple if you enjoy today's conversation. I'd like to thank our

producers at ETH Circle and Ellie Media for doing a terrific job, and thank you, our listeners for joining.