

# WE ARE ETH – Episode 24

## With Renata von Tscharner, ETH Alumni and founder of the Charles River Conservancy

### [Listen to Podcast](#)

[00:00:00] **Renata von Tscharner:** Because we were getting ready for the referendum for women to vote. There was a lot of PR work to be done, and I was very active on the campaign to get women to vote in 1971. It's hard to believe.

[00:00:23] **Susan Kish:** In this episode, I talk to Renata von Tscharner, who's based in Boston. She studied architecture at the ETH Zurich and is the founder of the Charles River Conservancy, a non profit dedicated to improving the use of land along waterfronts, based on her experiences of urban swimming in Switzerland. This is the We Are ETH podcast, and I am Susan Kish, the host.

Renata, you've had a wonderful career. It was so much fun to read about. But can you tell me, how did you pick architecture? And when were you at the ETH?

[00:01:07] **Renata von Tscharner:** I was at the ETH from 1968 to 1972 during the events, the big events, and I picked architecture

[00:01:18] **Susan Kish:** Those were crazy years.

[00:01:19] **Renata von Tscharner:** Were crazy years. For funny reasons I was in the Kantonsschule in Aarau.

And I did not know a single woman architect. In fact, I didn't know any other women who even had gone to university. It was a period where women normally would not study in Switzerland.

As women did not have to vote in these years. It was a

[00:01:41] **Susan Kish:** Oh, that's right.

[00:01:42] **Renata von Tscharner:** I was All the architecture students were doing work outdoors, combined art with mathematics. I think that's probably about the reason why I picked architecture.

[00:01:55] **Susan Kish:** If nobody else is going to college, going to university, women don't have the vote. What gave you the inspiration to decide that was what you wanted to do?

[00:02:06] **Renata von Tscharner:** I was the youngest of five siblings and three older siblings had gone to university. So I thought I will do it as well. But in fact, my oldest sister she was not even allowed to go to high school, so a lot had changed from my sister who was 12 years older and who became a diaconess, a nun, a protestant nun and a nurse, and me 12 years later who decided to go to the ETH, so it was a time of great changes in Switzerland for women, and because it was normal that a woman If she did even go to high school, would just get married and have children.

[00:02:49] **Susan Kish:** Was it the economy, or did you grow up on a farm, or did you grow up in a village? Where did you actually grow up?

[00:02:56] **Renata von Tscharner:** I was born in the Emmental, where the cheese is made. My father was a protestant minister. Then we moved to Riehen, near Basel, and then to Zofingen in the Aargau. So we moved around because of my father's profession.

[00:03:11] **Susan Kish:** Tell us about going to the ETH in those years?

[00:03:16] **Renata von Tscharner:** It was obviously a time of upheaval among students. Before I entered the ETH, I spent six months in Paris, what the French call les événements of 68. So I entered the ETH at the moment where there was a lot of... Discussion about how much students should participate in decision making, the selection of professors, the selection of curriculum.

So it was a very interesting and a very different time in the ETH when I entered. And also we were 1% women in architecture at the time. So that of course also sets the framework of how unusual it was.

[00:04:01] **Susan Kish:** Being in Paris and, Before the 68 69, were you there when they were throwing cobblestones and at the barricades?

[00:04:08] **Renata von Tscharner:** I was in Paris because the Kantonsschule, and I was in the classics department, it was Latin and Greek, and they would end in the spring, and the ETH would only start in the fall. So I had six months where I could do an internship, and I did go to Paris. But my architectural office was closed because the mail wasn't delivered, so I went to Corsica and worked on a construction site in Bastia. So that was quite an eye opening experience in 1968.

[00:04:43] **Susan Kish:** I can only imagine. Especially in Corsica.

But sometime in there, you were in Place d'Odillon, and you were... In the midst of the protests. Right?

[00:04:57] **Renata von Tscharner:** That's right. I was a young person. I was curious. And it was an exposure to suddenly having to make up your mind, where do you stand, what are the issues of the day, and coming from a very sheltered Swiss environment that was a big change that a steep learning curve of what women could do, that women could actually participate in discussion, they could participate in professional life.

All these were new for me.

[00:05:34] **Susan Kish:** Did you find it exhilarating? Or did you find it terrifying? Or someplace in between?

[00:05:40] **Renata von Tscharner:** I think both. I think they were absolutely it's exhilarating to participate in the discussion, but also see a lot of people assembled in the center of Paris, a place that I had associated just as peaceful strolling and tourism suddenly filled with people. That was definitely a shock. Yes.

[00:06:02] **Susan Kish:** Your years in Paris, your months in Paris, during those exciting times, must have somehow inspired you. Were you involved in student or general politics during those years at the ETH?

[00:06:16] **Renata von Tscharner:** My most important political work was to work for the Frauenbefreiungsbewegung, The FBB. Because we were getting ready for the referendum for women to vote. There was a lot of PR work to be done, and I was very active on the campaign to get women the vote in 1971. It's hard to believe that it was only then that women got the vote in Switzerland.

[00:06:42] **Susan Kish:** Did you encounter resistance? In most of Western Europe women had the vote. In the States women had, you had a lot of models where women had the vote.

[00:06:57] **Renata von Tscharner:** You're asking the wrong person. But most men felt they can vote on behalf of their wives. Why do women need to vote? They probably don't even read the newspaper. They probably don't understand the issues. There was a lot of resistance to giving women the vote.

[00:07:16] **Susan Kish:** Wow. And did it win at the first referendum or did you have to bring it back to vote again? And how did you persuade people to sponsor that referendum?

[00:07:24] **Renata von Tscharner:** No. 71 was not the first time. It had come up earlier and they were defeated. And then in Appenzell, they had the reason, oh,

there's not enough space in the city square because they gather physically. And so there's not enough space for women to also be there. And so there was a lot of resistance, and it took a while.

[00:07:47] **Susan Kish:** How did you overcome that resistance?

[00:07:50] **Renata von Tscharner:** The techniques we used was charm and smiles, and I think probably the example of other countries. And in that sense, probably what happened in France played a role, that other European countries had given the vote to women before. So eventually it came to Switzerland.

[00:08:14] **Susan Kish:** What were your favorite things to study while you did architecture? Because at this time everything was done by hand, right? You drafted everything by hand, you drew all your illustrations...

[00:08:25] **Renata von Tscharner:** That's right. And we did not even have computers. It's hard to imagine life without computers. And the people who did know how to draw, and we had quite a large percentage of people who had gone through vocational training, They could pull up a drawing in no time, whereas coming from Latin and Greek and some other languages, that was a very slow process to draw and to do perspectives and to do models. I spent a lot of time gluing models. That was the kind of overwhelming experience.

[00:09:02] **Susan Kish:** So you go through the program. You didn't flunk out the first year because you completed the full thing. And you graduate and you go to work for an architecture firm in Zurich. What did you do afterwards?

[00:09:17] **Renata von Tscharner:** but what was also different is that we might have been among the first to form groups for our diploma. It wasn't just an individual work, but we put a team together. And that was a wonderful experience because teamwork is really what we did along to learn to prepare for the exams, to build models. There was a lot of interaction between the students. And I did not go into an architectural office. I did some teaching. I did a festival, but then I went to work in London for the Greater London Council. I moved into city planning very quickly because I felt that seems to suit my talent better.

[00:10:04] **Susan Kish:** I think city planning, urban planning, urban design is fabulous. It's the course of study one of my daughters is pursuing, she's an urban planner. So I'm a huge fan. Why did you think your skill set and your interests lined up with city planning? What was it about city planning that was compelling?

[00:10:23] **Renata von Tscharner:** I'm a lover of cities. I absolutely adore what cities have to offer. I think that's the prime reason. The other one is from the few experiences I had on construction sites, because the ETH requires that you do 12 months of practical work, and working on a construction site was very hard because you had the prejudices against a woman and being an architect were so high, even more so in the construction field than in city planning. I felt I don't want to spend my

days trying to overcome these hurdles. I rather use my skills in a field where I can accomplish something.

[00:11:09] **Susan Kish:** So you work for the City of London, which is one of the great cities of the world. So that must have been fabulous. And what did you, what were your projects then? Do you remember? This in the seventies, right?

[00:11:25] **Renata von Tscharnner:** That was in the seventies and it was actually the greater London council, the GLC, which doesn't exist anymore. And I was a big admirer of Covent Garden, the former wholesale market, and I wanted to work on the conversion of the wholesale market to a retail market, and it took me quite a while to get that job because they had to prove that they couldn't find the English person to do the job.

I had to take the civil servants exam. I had to learn English properly. But then I joined the team. They were in Covent Garden and I helped the conversion of that wholesale market into a retail market and that was a wonderful experience. That was really a joy to work in London and London in the 70s was a great place for a single woman.

[00:12:14] **Susan Kish:** I can, oh, that must have been so much fun. And that project was a catalyst behind countless projects all around the world, right? They, that became a real model, whether it was the Fulton Fish Market in New York City or our Market Faneuil Hall here in Boston, right? That was one of the first of those kinds of conversions, right?

[00:12:36] **Renata von Tscharnner:** Yes, actually part of my work in London was to come to America and to travel to those various markets, Faneuil Hall Market and Baltimore and New Orleans and Seattle. And then I even was able to get Jim Rouse, who has done many of the festival markets, to come to London. But he said the political system in England is such that I couldn't really work in London like he did in Boston, where he was able to make a good deal with the mayor and tax incentives.

[00:13:09] **Susan Kish:** Understood. It feels like this time you're starting to see the power of that architectural perspective in city planning. What was it? Is it a systems view? Is it a discipline? What is it that make architects such high impact in that kind of area?

[00:13:25] **Renata von Tscharnner:** I think it's able to put a vision First into a drawing into words. It's to formalize a vision to see a bigger context and then to be able to put it on paper so that other people can see it because that is, I think, a specific skill of architects to be a translator, to be somebody who can take a concept and expand it and let others see that vision as well.

[00:13:59] **Susan Kish:** That ability to translate the intangible, the sort of conceptual to something people can see.

[00:14:06] **Renata von Tscharner:** And there's a school in London called the Architectural Association, and many people who trained there they might have entered because of architecture, but then they went into fashion, into theater, into, oh, very different fields. So I think architects tend to take their skills and also bring them to other fields.

[00:14:31] **Susan Kish:** Got it. So after London, you went back to Switzerland?

[00:14:35] **Renata von Tscharner:** I went to Bern to the city planning office. Bern is my father's hometown and I associate closely with the City of Bern. And I loved working in Bern but it felt like a small place after London. That was quite a shock. It was very comfortable to be in Bern and have civil servants who were very professional and everything was well organized, but it felt like a small world.

[00:15:05] **Susan Kish:** It probably missed that, that energetic chaos that characterizes some of those global cities.

[00:15:12] **Renata von Tscharner:** I got plenty of that when I emigrated to America and that's probably one of the reasons I emigrated.

[00:15:17] **Susan Kish:** So when did you emigrate to America and why?

[00:15:20] **Renata von Tscharner:** That was in 79. I was ready to go into a bigger world again. I was very much attracted. I was, I fell in love with an American. And I was attracted by the energy of America. This feeling of you can do things. Because as in Switzerland there's a saying: That's not done. Ca ne se fait pas. Das macht man nicht. These expressions which very marked much of my youth. There's a given standard of what's done and what's not done. And suddenly in America these expressions didn't exist anymore.

[00:16:00] **Susan Kish:** Well, Renata, it doesn't sound like you listened to those expressions anyway. But okay. So you fell in love, you moved to the States, did you move to Boston at that time?

[00:16:13] **Renata von Tscharner:** Yeah to Cambridge.

[00:16:16] **Susan Kish:** Got it. And what did you do when you arrived?

[00:16:18] **Renata von Tscharner:** My then husband and I started a non profit together. It was called the Townscape Institute. And we worked on the kind of what is now called placemaking. We actually wrote a book together called "Placemakers - Public Art That Tells You Where You Are". And we coined that phrase and we worked in probably a hundred cities and towns, both in America and in Europe to implement placemaking strategies.

[00:16:47] **Susan Kish:** So when you say placemaking, can you explain what the concept is?

[00:16:50] **Renata von Tscherner:** The concept of placemaking is to go to a place. Often it would be a town that wanted to redo its city center and identify what makes that place special. How do you find out how people feel about the place? What are the memories that are important? And how can that be reinforced with physical things or with events or with interpretation?

It doesn't all have to be buildings. It can be intangible things as well that are place making. And it has now become a standard in city planning to do these workshops, to listen to people, to get stories of people who know a place, love a place, and to then to integrate it into design.

[00:17:41] **Susan Kish:** So one of the themes that you read when I read about Renata is about rivers. It seems to stream through your background and your history. Where did the interest in river, why do they play such a critical role in your life? Why are rivers important?

[00:18:01] **Renata von Tscherner:** I was born in Lützelflüh, which is in the Emmental, so I would go and swim in the Emme and the Emme leads into the Aare, and I love swimming in the Aare. If you haven't done that, this is an absolutely must experience when you go to Bern. This fast flowing glacial river where you jump in. And then the power of this glacial water drives you down, you can't really swim against it.

And when you come to the bath, you grab to a bar and you go out and you do it again. And the same in Basel. These are such powerful urban experiences that formed my youth. And when I came to Cambridge, that was my first thought: I want to swim in the Charles River.

[00:18:52] **Susan Kish:** In 1979, because I was also in Cambridge in 1979, you did not go swimming in the Charles, right? I remember the whole thing. The urban legend was you needed a tetanus shot if you happened to fall in, right?

[00:19:05] **Renata von Tscherner:** That's right. Yeah. Yeah. So I became a water tester. I helped to test the water and then in 2000, I started the Charles River Conservancy and to swim was very high on the agenda, although the experience is very different from the Aare because the Charles River when it reaches Cambridge is more like a lake, it flows very gently.

So you don't have that experience of a rushing cold river that overpowers you but it is still a wonderful experience to be in the middle of a city and to swim in that river. And there's now a yearly swim in the Charles and swim races and the Charles River Conservancy continues to work on permanent swimming.

[00:19:57] **Susan Kish:** So the Charles River Conservancy is one of the highest impact nonprofits that I know of living here in the greater Boston area. But why did you start it as a nonprofit? What caused you to say, okay, I'm going to start this because nothing's happening? What was the catalyst to have you decide to do it this way?

[00:20:18] **Renata von Tscharner:** That's a very interesting question, a very philosophical one, because Many of the things that the Charles River Conservancy did like engaging volunteers, illuminating bridges, building a skate park. In a way they should all be done by the public sector, either by the community or by the state. But the area of the river that we were working on was both on the Boston and the Cambridge side, also had a bit of Watertown and Newton.

So it was a multi municipality. So it makes sense to not just work with one community, although I worked closely with the abutting communities. And also, in America, many things, civic things, are done by non profits. You can think of the Central Park Conservancy. There are many conservancies. And there are tax incentives for individuals that give money to the conservancy.

And of course, also foundations give money. And we also did get some. state funding for certain projects. But we did in a way the work that should be done by the public sector, but we energized thousands and thousands of volunteers to work and to donate money.

[00:21:38] **Susan Kish:** And your model was things like the Central Park Conservancy, or how did you develop the model that you built?

[00:21:45] **Renata von Tscharner:** Of course, there are a huge number of non-profits. That's a very common thing to accomplish civic goals in every field, being in music, in the medical field. In land conservation, so I did not invent the model, but I used that model and developed it for the benefit of the urban Charles and its parklands.

[00:22:10] **Susan Kish:** So it sounds like you had an entrepreneurial streak in you from a very early time.

So tell me, how did your years and your studies at the ETH, how did they prepare you for what you did and what you have done and what you're going to do?

[00:22:27] **Renata von Tscharner:** Yes. Entering the ETH was a big shock because I had a very comfortable life in the Emmental, in the Gymnasium, the Kantonschule, because I was the fifth child, nothing really shocked me much. I had heard everything. I did my matura, no big deal. And suddenly, I was thrown into that environment.

And it was very fast paced, everything was new. Everything was under time pressure. And the assignments came one after the other. So I learned how to swim very quickly. And to deliver. And to find methods of coping. So that was an extraordinary, fast learning experience. And I'm very grateful for that.

So I think back to the ETH days when I faced this new challenge of how can I invent a method to solve that?



[00:23:26] **Susan Kish:** Wow. So I'm going to ask you just a couple more questions about what you're doing now. Because if I understand correctly you, the Charles River Conservancy, you retired a few years ago from that. Sounds like it was an amazing party.

But given what you're describing, I can't imagine that you decided to sit in the corner and do needlepoint.

Although, I like needlepoint but

[00:23:51] **Renata von Tscharnier:** I sit in the corner on this very same place and I play the accordion and I learn how to write music. So it's sometimes challenges are comparable. I've never written music before. I've never played the accordion. So I'm starting from scratch in a completely new field. And every day is a challenge and and I trying to learn a little bit every day and I love it.

[00:24:16] **Susan Kish:** How did you pick the accordion?

[00:24:18] **Renata von Tscharnier:** The accordion is an instrument that I associate a lot with the streets of Paris. I love the sound of it, and in fact, you have a whole orchestra in your arm that you can carry with you in a backpack. You can put it under an airplane seat because I travel to see my grandchildren. I can play French chansons, I can take, play folk music, I can play Bach I can play anything on it.

[00:24:44] **Susan Kish:** When you say write music, you're doing compositions,

[00:24:48] **Renata von Tscharnier:** I do, and I arrange things. I learned a software. I was using a software called Sibelius, and it's just word. You learn how to write music.

[00:24:59] **Susan Kish:** The other day when we were at lunch, you mentioned something about a collection of old Swiss folk songs.

[00:25:10] **Renata von Tscharnier:** It's 18th and 19th century tunes. Maybe some occasionally might have words, but there was a woman in Liestal, which is a place I love, a little medieval town called Hanneli Christen. And in the 30s, 40s, and 50s, she traveled around Switzerland to gather those tunes.

And she gathered over 12'000 tunes.

[00:25:35] **Susan Kish:** Good heaven.

[00:25:36] **Renata von Tscharnier:** She gave them to the university of Basel and they sat there undiscovered for 40 years. And then a musician came and found them. And then he started a band called "Hanneli Musig". And they took maybe a hundred of those tunes, arranged them for six instruments, one of them being an accordion.

And they now touring Switzerland with that music. And they unearthed and brought back to the public this very rich heritage of 18th and 19th century folk music. And I'm so happy I'm now working on putting those tunes into my computer and making arrangements so that I can play them.

[00:26:19] **Susan Kish:** Are there any favorite tunes that you like to listen to and where could people find more information about it?

[00:26:28] **Renata von Tscharner:** If you go to the YouTube-channel "Hanneli Musig" has its own YouTube channel and all their CDs, I think there might be five or six of them, are available there. And it makes for wonderful listening. And of course I like the ones where the accordion plays a dominant role, but there's also, the violin, and the cello, and the saxophone, the clarinet, the bass. There are normally about six instruments, and they arrange them in a very witty way.

[00:27:03] **Susan Kish:** Is there any particular song that you... remember, or a piece of music that you'd recommend we listen to?

[00:27:08] **Renata von Tscharner:** There are wonderful waltzes. I like the waltzes because it, it makes you dance. What many of those tunes have is they start in a major key and they go to a minor key. So it's very rich. And I can imagine of how people in the 18th century danced to those tunes.

[00:27:25] **Susan Kish:** Fantastic. Let's listen to one of those right now.

Song of Hanneli-Musig

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWEOn7jKXlYrZY8ihTcfwww>

[00:28:01] **Susan Kish:** So Renata, thank you. Thank you. That was a great conversation and thank you for sharing these experiences and sharing what's next. I'm going to ask a couple of questions to close. So the first one is what when you go back to Zurich or back to the ETH, what's your favorite place?

[00:28:23] **Renata von Tscharner:** What I always thought was so amazing is that you could walk down from the ETH. It was in the old building. We could just walk down to the river and to the lake and there you could just jump into their lake. We already did that. And although it wasn't so common, but the waterfront of Zurich and to any city in the world is such an asset.

And Zurich is so lucky to have this proximity to the water and access to the water.

You can sit on the grass on the steps on the waterfront in Zurich. That is really a world advantage.

[00:29:03] **Susan Kish:** When you were growing up, this is, let's say you're eight or nine years old. What did you want to be? What were your thoughts about what you wanted to be when you grew up?

[00:29:13] **Renata von Tscharner:** The thing as I mentioned before, girls in my generation at age eight or nine, They didn't think they could be physicist or anything like that. I did not know any women professionals. I think I might have known one woman doctor, and that was the extent. Neither any of my aunts studied, because that wasn't allowed. I did not have professional aspirations. They did come in when I had to go to knitting class. Although now I love knitting and sewing, but I thought, I'd rather take Latin. And when cooking classes became part, I said I'd rather learn Greek, but it's not that I thought I would become a theologian, because that's normally why you study Latin and Greek.

That was so removed from my world. It's hard to imagine today.

[00:30:07] **Susan Kish:** And what are you reading now? What are you curious about? what's on your bedside table or what podcast do you listen to?

[00:30:17] **Renata von Tscharner:** I love to read in German because it keeps my German language alive. I read some in French. Right now I'm just reading about somebody I admire a lot, Mani Matter, who was also a songwriter, he was a philosopher, he was a politician, he was a lawyer. So I'm reading his political speeches, because eventually I also want to sing his songs.

[00:30:40] **Susan Kish:** That's fabulous. That's fabulous. Renata, thank you so much. I am Susan Kish, host of the We Are ETH series, telling the story, the alumni and friends of the ETH Zurich, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. ETH regularly ranks amongst the top universities in the world in terms of cutting edge research, architecture, science, and people. The people who were there, the people who are there, and the people who will be there. Please subscribe to this podcast and join us wherever you listen, and give us a good rating on Spotify or Apple if you enjoyed today's conversation. I'd like to close by thanking our producers at ETH Circle and Ellie Media, and especially to thank you, our listeners, for joining us.