

WE ARE ETH – Episode 47

With Stephan Sigrist, ETH Alumnus, Founder of W.I.R.E

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[00:00:00] Stephan Sigrist: So the role that we have or that we want to give ourselves is to provide a decision foundation for the people that have to take decisions. So we're trying to curate the future by providing inputs, facts, structure, solutions, also ideas. But it's not that we're coming from a top down view and impose on people on what they have to do.

[00:00:26] Susan Kish: In this episode, I'm talking with Stephan Sigrist, author and founder of the Think Tank W.I.R.E., the web for interdisciplinary research and expertise, a platform that provides an interface between science and practice. I'm Susan Kish. I'm the host of the We Are ETH podcast.

Stephan, I understand you're not in Zurich and you're not in London. You're in Munich?

[00:00:57] Stephan Sigrist: I'm actually in Munich.

[00:00:59] Susan Kish: Fantastic. So tell me, we met back in, I think 2007, 2008, I was in Zurich. I was very proud to be an early board member for W.I.R.E. when it was just sort of a twinkle in people's eyes. Um, what have you been doing for the last, whatever, 15 years?

[00:01:19] Stephan Sigrist: That's a very good question and in many ways it doesn't feel as, um, so many years have actually passed.

[00:01:26] Susan Kish: I completely agree. You blink and it goes.

[00:01:30] **Stephan Sigrist:** This is the case. So basically, or. In many ways, astonishingly, the DNA of W.I.R.E., the reason why we founded it, believing that there is a need for a link between science and business that provides or that enables organizations and people to think long term, that is still the same. It hasn't changed at all. I would even say that the need for this type of work has even increased looking at all the different changes, technologies that are moving into our lives. And at the same time, um, and many things have also changed when we started in 2007, kind of the systematic approach into looking into the future, trying to do that

as far as possible with a scientific method. Um, at the time, many people thought, you know, this is just a funny thing to do. Some people might find it interesting. It was a bit pre digital. So we've been at the time working with pharmaceutical companies, with, with hospitals, with banks, and many of these organizations thought, you know, it's interesting, but it doesn't really matter in regards to our business model.

And then I would say with 2010, when the narrative of disruption hits. everybody thought, you know, the world is over and everything is going to change. Absolutely. So, um, during those 10 years between 2010 and I would say 2020. Our role has also significantly changed into no longer just, you know, bringing in new topics and trying people to convince that it is important to adapt, but in many ways do the contrary and also bring them back to the ground and, and strengthen critical thinking because a lot of the, trends that have been pushed that are also hypes were overwhelmed and people were were insecure and afraid. So providing stability and kind of a clear angle into long term thinking that has become much more important over those years. But generally to answer your question the DNA has remained and it's still very important and it is fun to do it.

[00:03:40] **Susan Kish:** I can imagine. So, but let's just talk about geography when I met you, you lived in Zurich and then did you live in London for a few years?

[00:03:49] **Stephan Sigrist:** Yes, we were, we actually had, um, we had, um, a dual home strategy based in London on the one hand and, uh, in Zurich on the other.

[00:03:58] **Susan Kish:** Now, was this at a lifestyle choice or did you really, you know, you just couldn't stay away or the English language or?

[00:04:05] **Stephan Sigrist:** It was a bit of both, to be honest. Um, there, um, was the clear idea to get the inspiration, uh, and also access to, to, to companies, to universities from a broader angle, then just Switzerland and London in many ways has and always is and still is the perfect place for that with a very international basis with a lot of energy also with I would say we can talk about that later maybe in many ways more courage by looking into things and at the same time Switzerland's has always been the home.

Um, it is also a great place to do that kind of work we do because we have such a high density of large companies. We have leading universities. There's a huge amount of small companies that provide a very important part to innovative solutions. So for some time, this dual strategy has been very good.

And then some private issues came along, such as kids, uh, which then forced us or helped us to take a decision. So we are mainly active in Switzerland as a home base, but we still have international projects and just these days we're still active in London. So we're having selected projects that we're doing abroad.

But the main activity is in Switzerland.

[00:05:23] **Susan Kish:** All right. So let me translate this to mean you lived in London for several years, you had kids and you wanted them to go through the Swiss system, so you moved back to Zurich.

[00:05:32] **Stephan Sigrist:** More or less in a summary. Yes. .

[00:05:34] **Susan Kish:** Okay. And when did you move back to Zurich?

[00:05:37] **Stephan Sigrist:** Um, it was not, um, a single moment of time. It was just a transition phase. So that was in 2011, I would say. So we've been there for three years. More or less, and then a bit more time in Switzerland and a bit less time in London. But I, until Corona at least, I was in London. five, six, seven times a year, um, for different reasons. London is great.

[00:06:01] **Susan Kish:** There, there's a handful of cities that are international global intersections of people and countries and languages and thought. And I think London's in that group.

[00:06:12] **Stephan Sigrist:** Absolutely. And it's not just the business or the scientific side. It's also the, um, the creativity that you'll find in music, that you'll find in arts and the courage of people to just also do things that are maybe unusual that are a bit on the top. And I think this is just a very important part in the formula of driving things forward.

[00:06:35] **Susan Kish:** Good driving. That reminded me, there's this cool picture in your LinkedIn of a car that looks like the The offspring of a Tesla truck and a sedan, right?

In front of a street that looks like it could either be in Zurich or in some place in Germany. What... can you tell us what that picture is?

[00:06:54] **Stephan Sigrist:** Yes, it is actually a DeLorean. So, that was, that's the car that many people know from the movie Back to the Future, and I happened to own one of these cars, or we have it with W.I.R.E.

[00:07:10] **Susan Kish:** You happened to own? You don't just happen to own, you had to search out for the thing.

[00:07:15] **Stephan Sigrist:** Yeah, yeah, absolutely. So, I have to say, or I have to admit, I don't. I don't say that, uh, often, uh, other places, but I, I've always been into cars. I think my first words were actually not the names of my parents, but I could name a lot of British and American car brands as

[00:07:32] **Susan Kish:** There goes a McLaren!

There's an Audi, it's a BMW!

[00:07:36] **Stephan Sigrist:** More or less. And so, um, yes, I, I, I came to the conclusion or I developed a passion for cars that kind of play it. outside of the average side of things. And I've always liked the DeLorean, uh, for many reasons, there is an aesthetic part, uh, with this very sleek and simple design, but most of all, it's been a car, um, that has been developed with a very big vision.

So the founder of, of the DeLorean motor company, DMC, he wanted to build a car that actually provided, um, Apart to a more sustainable world, as the motor was very small compared to the other American cars at the time.

[00:08:25] **Susan Kish:** When was this?

[00:08:26] **Stephan Sigrist:** Um, they launched a car in, no, in 81. The first car in 81 and the last one in 83.

So it was a very short time when they actually existed. The other thing is, um, there was a social aspect to it. So, um, he made a contract with, um, the government in the United Kingdom, specifically in Ireland. So the car actually was built in Ireland with Irish workers because they wanted to bring in value and give jobs to people.

So it was a color.

[00:08:59] **Susan Kish:** Was he Irish himself?

[00:09:00] **Stephan Sigrist:** No, he was an American. He was, he was the manager of an American car company. And then he had this vision of kind of this ecological point and then the design that, you know, should kind of bring the American car companies to the future. And then there was also this very strong social responsibility, or of course it was also a deal.

He got funded by the British governments to do that. But there was just much more to this car than, um, than, than to any other products of the time. And I, uh, I've always admired her. I loved this big idea of doing things and the car represents that. And so we decided that it would be a good, it would be good, a good fit to, uh, for what W.I.R.E. stands.

Um, By looking, being forward looking, by, by being different, by also providing some inspiration and interestingly enough when you drive around either the city or the countryside with the car people stop, they look at it, although this is the part I like least about it. I thought nobody would recognize it, but it turns out then from policemen to tourists, So children to old people, everybody loves that car because it's so different.

And I think we can talk about it later, but the courage for differentiation, I've said it before, um, is one of the key elements that we need. And the car is kind of a symbol for that.

[00:10:20] **Susan Kish:** Very, very cool. So you decided that you just had to have one, you know, just hanging out.

[00:10:26] **Stephan Sigrist:** Yes. Um, it was in, uh, it was in Germany.

A guy bought it from the US um, he, he put some money into it so that would actually work. And I, one day I drove to Cologne, wanted to drive home, but then after two minutes on the Autobahn, there was a loud noise and there was fire and steam coming outside of the back engine of the car. So I had to stop.

Luckily, the police came, um, but they just took a picture and they moved on. So I had to bring the car back to the seller and then they fixed it. So now it's really stable, but it's also a bit of a, you know, it's a symbol for life. So, um,

[00:11:05] **Susan Kish:** It doesn't always work.

[00:11:06] **Stephan Sigrist:** You have to keep thinking things, you know, it's doesn't work. Most of the, actually, most of the time it doesn't work.

Uh, and you have to, you have to invest time and money and passion to, to keep things running.

Right. Well, I like, I like that time, money, and passion. I think that's a really good trio. So you describe, and you are often described as a curator of the future, which is just a fabulous praise. How do you structure that?

You know, you mentioned that you need a certain amount of discipline, but the future is by definition somewhere between an eight ball and a crystal ball.

Absolutely. Yeah, it's, um, it's interesting you mentioned that not so many people have recognized it. It comes a bit from, um, also the role that we're trying to play.

Um, there are many organizations and peoples around that are looking into the future for good reasons. And the thing is

[00:12:02] **Susan Kish:** every consultant ever, for example,

[00:12:05] **Stephan Sigrist:** Exactly, pretty much on the spot. And of course, there are methodologies that help you to structure that help you to kind of develop a pretty precise idea about you know, long term frameworks, but at the same time, um, it's also a fact that it's clear that we cannot predict the future. And many people misunderstand the role that we have, because we're not able to come up with a precise prediction of, you know, how much the growth rate of AI, for example, will be. You can take some assumptions and there is an Excel model that you fill in, but at the end of the day you don't know.

And it's also not the role, and it's not possible for an organization to tell everybody else what will happen. So the role that we have or that we want to give ourselves is to provide a decision foundation for the people that have to take decisions. So we're trying to curate the future by providing inputs.

Facts, structure, the solutions, also ideas, but it's not that we're coming from a top down view and impose on people on what they have to do. It's more that we provide the framework and we want them to take better decisions. And it's when we stay with the image of AI or the example, it's a completely different fact.

If you're a media company versus if you're a logistics company, it's different. If you're a large scale. international, uh, large company, or if you you're a small company. So there are different solutions, even for the same trends, and it needs differentiation. So this is why we are not want to be seen as futurists and, you know, having this crystal ball that doesn't exist.

It's more this, the provision of arguments to take decisions.

[00:13:52] **Susan Kish:** We've talked about what W.I.R.E. the acronym means. But can you tell us about what W.I.R.E. actually is today, and what are its services, its activities? What is an interdisciplinary think tank?

[00:14:04] **Stephan Sigrist:** Very good question. Um, so there's basically two main roles that we have.

The one is the role of a think tank, um, where we try to come up with new ideas, new solutions, new topics that we as a society need to talk about. There are also topics that, of course, for companies for universities are relevant. So this is kind of the thought leadership. On the other hand, we are approached by many organizations, large scale, small scale companies, public sector organizations, also universities where they want specific advice.

On, you know, how to deal with, for example, um, greenwashing in the area of sustainability, or at the moment we're working on the large study, um, on the actual impact of AI. So basically it's strategic foresight that we're providing. So companies, organizations ask us to help them with getting more orientation on the longterm.

On the second hand, and this is where the books come in. We develop long term perspectives, thought leadership that we translate into books where we always are often work with publishing houses and set in Switzerland, um, Suhrkamp in Germany, or we just did a new book in, in, in the UK with Bloomsbury on the future of clothing.

So, um, we are not doing corporate publishing, but we help Organizations are companies to come up with new ideas and we are a partner in providing critical and inspiring information. And then in the third row, we're actually helping developing specific ideas from innovation management to also prototyping.

We developed a chocolate 3d printer. Some years ago, we had pop up restaurants, we had the digital devices that we were developing. So it's a huge range of, let's say, early stage offerings that we provide with a high quality and also with an independence. And what we're not doing is we're not a consulting company that, you know, there's a strategy and then it provides a huge number of junior consultants to then implement it.

We always want to be neutral and we want to be objective and give the best advice to these organizations that work with us. And maybe what's special, we are completely privately funded, so we don't have any public money. So we're always working with companies that also aim for this long term perspective.

[00:16:22] **Susan Kish:** Got it. And do you still publish a newsletter or quarterly publication or is it mainly focused on the books?

[00:16:28] **Stephan Sigrist:** Um, we, we moved away from the, um, the regular publishing of the books. Um, Also, because we are having some difficulties with organizations that, that wanted that. So we're publishing on an irregular basis, larger books, smaller books, still a lot of them in print.

And I just recently had a conversation with somebody in London, PR agent called me and said, well, it's such a great thing that you have started to print physical things because people actually remember those and they saw such a differentiation from these PDFs and I said, man, we've been doing that all over the time.

We've, we've never stopped. And so we still believe in the physical things because of the, the topics that we want to publish, they have to have a longterm relevance. So and yes, we have digital forums and a lot of infographics that you will find on our website. But we still believe in German, you say "begreifen".

So to to, to understand something, you also need to touch it. And when we hand out the books, people often smell them. They have the, the, the haptics. And so this is part of the DNA that we will also continue.

[00:17:33] **Susan Kish:** Fantastic. It's content and form.

[00:17:35] **Stephan Sigrist:** It's content and form.

[00:17:36] **Susan Kish:** You studied it, I think you worked at Roche and you actually studied biochemistry.

[00:17:41] **Stephan Sigrist:** I did. Yes.

[00:17:42] **Susan Kish:** And, um, then worked in medical research. And I think you did your dissertation, if I understand this right, at the Collegium Helveticum. What is the Collegium Helveticum?

The Collegium Helveticum has been, or always still is, an institution that pioneered interdisciplinary research. It was founded in the 90s as a place where PhDs from different areas could actually come together for a year and spend time.

And the idea was basically that these people, you know, from, from literature, science to an organic chemistry to medicine, if they would be put in the room, the magic would happen.

Right. Which is one of those theories around innovation, right?

[00:18:31] **Stephan Sigrist:** 2004, um, professor Falkers took over and he strengthened the concept of this, I would say, structured interdisciplinarity.

So he was able to convince professors from different areas, um, also with some funded projects. So it was not just, you know, a room where he could come together. They had actually a budget. And over the time when he was responsible, they did some very interesting research also, you know, working on methodologies on how bring people together.

And I happened to be one of the first PhDs at ETH that did an interdisciplinary approach to science. And, um,

[00:19:15] **Susan Kish:** What was your thesis?

[00:19:16] **Stephan Sigrist:** The thesis was actually on a topic that we've just picked up last week again on a large conference that we did. It was on preventative therapies. So basically using drugs, um, in a way not to just to cure diseases, but to prevent them.

And so it was

[00:19:33] **Susan Kish:** That is timely.

[00:19:35] **Stephan Sigrist:** Exactly. Formally, it was quite ahead, five people that were looking at the work, so it was a lot, it was a bit complicated, but it turned out

well. And, um, so I'm very grateful, um, until the day that I had this opportunity because after the study, as you said, I went to Roche, I went to work in consulting companies and then I lacked the knowledge.

I wanted to do something more intellectual, but basically in the first place they said, well, you can come back to, to molecular biology, but here's your pipettes. And I didn't want to go back to the lab. I was not good at it. And so I was looking at St. Gallen, if they would actually could use somebody from ETH and say, you know, go away.

Um, you're, you're, you're a natural scientist.

[00:20:19] **Susan Kish:** Where's your accounting degree?

[00:20:20] **Stephan Sigrist:** Exactly. And the Collegium provided the perfect spot for what I had in mind and there was a, I think a very similar view on, on where things could go together with Gerd Folkers. Um. And so, yeah, this was also the, the beginning then of W.I.R.E, because it was actually possible to show that interdisciplinary research works and we continued actually, or we use the concept of the collegium, but not for basic research, but for applied research.

So that is basically the, the mental stimulus that came from that work.

[00:20:51] **Susan Kish:** How did your years at ETH and the Collegium Helveticum, it sounds like that provided both a foundations and it also gave you that platform to start working in the world of interdisciplinary, connecting the dots.

[00:21:06] **Stephan Sigrist:** Absolutely.

[00:21:06] **Susan Kish:** How did that influence your path?

[00:21:08] **Stephan Sigrist:** Well, um, the, the basic study of ETH just provided me with that in depth knowledge about, you know, from mathematics to chemistry to biochemistry. And also, I think it was mainly a way to make me more resilient.

[00:21:27] **Susan Kish:** How do you mean?

[00:21:28] **Stephan Sigrist:** It was just as it was, it was, it was,

[00:21:31] **Susan Kish:** Too tough?

[00:21:32] **Stephan Sigrist:** No, I managed. So it wasn't too tough, but it was tough. I came from a gymnasium that wasn't mainly focusing on natural sciences. So there were people from other, um, um, high schools or gymnasiums that were actually much better prepared. Um, I was coming from our, uh, philosophically

oriented school. So it was actually tough. And I, you know, I didn't have to go to the Swiss military because of a car accident I had.

So I, some, I felt that this was my military time, just a lot of work. I learned a lot, strengthening resilience. And then I needed to move away. Um, I didn't want to just continue on a PhD in the lab. Um, as I said, uh, quickly, sometimes

[00:22:18] **Susan Kish:** Pipettes wer not your thing.

[00:22:20] **Stephan Sigrist:** Exactly. And then kind of coming back to the, to academia. Um, two, three years later with a completely different approach was very helpful. Also, I wasn't, I, I was working at the same time at, at another think tank. So I had, um, the Gottlieb Duttweiler Institut,

[00:22:39] **Susan Kish:** GDI.

[00:22:40] **Stephan Sigrist:** So I was doing more applied research for them, but I could use the same data for the PhD. So I had difference. I had different angles to look at things and this kind of changing of roles between academia and between my practice is something that also has influenced me until this day and is also an element where I thought, you know, we can actually bring that together with W.I.R.E. by combining both things.

[00:23:05] **Susan Kish:** Very, very cool. Stephan, I've got a gazillion more questions. I wanted to say thank you. Thank you for your time. Thank you for the chance to catch up on this and um, how cool, how cool and how important. We have a couple questions we usually ask our guests just to close off. And the first one I would ask is when you were a little boy, what did you want to be when you grew up?

[00:23:34] **Stephan Sigrist:** Um, I actually, I recently found an essay I wrote as a three year old and as a matter of fact, I actually turns out I wanted to become a, um, a jet pilot.

[00:23:45] **Susan Kish:** Cool.

[00:23:45] **Stephan Sigrist:** Probably, I've seen Top Gun at the time. But then, honestly, I never had the specific...

[00:23:51] **Susan Kish:** I'm sorry, did you say you wrote an essay and printed it out when you were three years old?

[00:23:56] **Stephan Sigrist:** No, no, no. No, no, no. Sorry. I, I, it was in, in, in the third, in the third primary school. Third grade. Third grade. Got it. So you're about

[00:24:02] **Susan Kish:** eight or nine.

[00:24:03] **Stephan Sigrist:** It was eight or nine. Exactly.

[00:24:04] **Susan Kish:** Thank you.

[00:24:05] **Stephan Sigrist:** But actually, I never had, I was never one of these kids that had a concrete idea. So it always was open until a long time.

So I took decisions on the go.

[00:24:15] **Susan Kish:** Inherently, in what we've been talking about, you are curious and you continue to learn. What are you learning about today? What inspires your curiosity today?

[00:24:25] **Stephan Sigrist:** Oh, there are so many things that there are so many links that are popping up on a, on a, on a daily basis. Just before our call, we had the conversation with a strategist from a large hospital and we were talking about the difficulties in implementing integrated solutions, and it was just very obvious what role the psychological effects would play. So that's people understand concepts, but they're having a different identity. So that was one of the things that struck me again, that you can have all the strategies if you don't have people that believe in it, it doesn't work out.

It's not something completely new, but I'm just, it's a recurring, a recurring thing I realize and I learn.

[00:25:16] **Susan Kish:** And then the corollary to that, which is what books are you reading now? What are the books in your bedside or in your Kindle on your phone?

[00:25:25] **Stephan Sigrist:** Good question. To be very honest, I read a lot of magazines.

I'm, I'm, uh, so, and this is a lot of digital things I read because I didn't just dependent on, on, on these inspirations. So there's a range from [Harvard Business Review](#) to, to the [Wired Magazine](#), but also a lot of crappy things that I'll find. And actual books, I often go back to classics. So I love [Friedrich Dürrenmatt](#), for example, for his very precise analysis of society and people get stuck in dilemmas.

So when I get to read, I not so much read this. Thought leader pieces, they're often too long and too repetitive for me, and I stick to classics.

[00:26:15] **Susan Kish:** Sounds very disciplined. And when you're in Zurich, because I assume you do come here often, what's your favorite place, either in the town or by the university?

[00:26:25] **Stephan Sigrist:** The boring thing is I have quite a lot of places I like, but I think actually the balcony that we have, which Provides a nice view over Zurich is

[00:26:36] **Susan Kish:** your balcony at home.

[00:26:37] **Stephan Sigrist:** Yes. It's my favorite place. It provides a moment to step back and reflect on things and have some quiet. But it's one of many places I like.

[00:26:49] **Susan Kish:** Understand. Stephan, thank you very much.

[00:26:53] **Stephan Sigrist:** Thank you, Susan.

[00:26:53] **Susan Kish:** Wonderful to have you as a guest.

[00:26:55] **Stephan Sigrist:** Thank you so much.

[00:26:57] **Susan Kish:** I'm Susan Kish, host of the We Are ETH series, telling the story of the alumni and friends of the ETH, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology. The ETH repeatedly ranks amongst the top universities of the world.

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And thank you most of all our guests for listening to us today.