EPISODE 78

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:06] ANNOUNCER: You are listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders, leadership conversations that explore adapting and thriving in a complex world with Rick Torseth and guests.

[0:00:19] RT: Hi, everybody, this is Rick Torseth, and this is 10,000 Swamp Leaders. This is the podcast where we have conversations with people who've made some decisions about how they want to use themselves in the world to make a difference, how they want to lead, how they want to support community.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:35] RT: Today, it's a pleasure for me to have a colleague and a friend from a master's program that we did, not at the same time, but in an alumni group. Runa Sabroe is my guest today. She is checking in with us from Denmark on holiday, I'm going to say as well. So, thank you very much for taking time away. So, Runa, welcome to the podcast. It's great to have you.

[0:00:53] RS: Thank you so much for inviting me, Rick.

[0:00:56] RT: All right, so let's get people some orientation here. So, what do you want them to know about Runa that will help them navigate our conversation today?

[0:01:05] RS: I think I actually want to start with a quote. It's a classic. It's Margaret Mead who said, "Never doubt that a small group of people, thoughtfully committed individuals, can change the world. In fact, it's the only thing that ever has." And the reason why I start with this quote is that it's what's been shaping me as a person. I grew up, my parents, they were hippies from the sixties, and they started a commune together with a group of dedicated, committed individuals that basically wanted to change the world in a way, the way that they were living together, the way that the society was constructed.

So, I think this has followed me, my background in this commune where we shared basically everything, has followed me as a passion in life that has been driven me to work with, A, things that really makes me feel that I do a difference, and also to work with the bigger groups of individuals, but also bigger groups in society that want to change something. So, this is a little background from me.

[0:02:14] RT: Okay. We're going to, I'm fairly certain in this conversation, we'll go back and forth between where you are currently in your career and where you journeyed from to get to where you are. But right now, that you are the Director of Development for NORD, which is, as I understand it, an architecture firm in Copenhagen. So, tell people a little bit about the work of the firm, and then I want you to tell them a little bit about what the director of development's responsibilities are inside the context of the work.

[0:02:42] RS: So, NORD Architects, I think a little untraditional when it comes to working in an architectural company. They are, of course, the architects are drawing buildings, but they also have the ambition of changing something with architecture, changing the society, how we build our surroundings. One of the things that they have specialized in at NORD Architects, and which is also my task right now, is to rethink the framing of our society, our buildings, how we're living in the age of aging, meaning that we are facing a time now, and the next 20 years, where we are going to get older and older. We also have fewer resources to ensure our welfare society. It can be like a demographic crisis, but we can also rethink the way that we structure our cities and our homes in a way so that it can actually be a good holding environment for people that are getting older.

So, this is what I'm really, really interested in right now is firstly, how can we stay home for longer? How can we avoid getting into institutions and hospitals? And how can we draw this treatment closer to where we live, then closer to our relatives, and closer to our civil society? So, NORD architects they both drew highly skilled institutions for people suffering with dementia. They have a few examples in Norway and Southern France, and also one coming up in the US. But we also work with like health communities where you move into a place where you can actually stay, even though that you cognitively and physically are changing your abilities.

It has a wording called universal design, and that's very much about how can you make room for people that are physically unable to walk, maybe, but we are also, we're drawing this in a broader perspective. It also means how can you actually use your home as basis of having like a good life, even though that you're getting older.

[0:04:53] RT: So, if to follow what you're saying here, so as part of the work that you're exploring through the firm is perhaps redesigning or remodeling an individual's existing home to be more supportive of the age that they're at now? Is that part of the work?

[0:05:08] RS: Yes, it's both the house that you're living in, it's your local community, and it's also like the community around you that we're working with. So, it's small-scale and bigger-scale. It is a pretty complex task because it requires also that public sector, that are used to not working together, has to work together. It's both about having new strategies for architecture and the build environment, but it's also having new strategies for healthcare and bringing healthcare close to where you live. So, it's kind of a local political perspective, but also a national perspective.

On a daily basis, I work with trying to connect these different silos, in a way, from politicians' point of view, local politicians, and also to give some very, very good examples of what does a health-promoting architecture or environment look like in a way, so you can understand it and relate to it.

[0:06:12] RT: Help us then. I'm curious how you bring these factions of groups in the community together or into a joint conversation when they have, I assume, different agendas, different goals, different aspirations, and probably some of the same. That's why they're willing, I would guess, to talk with you. How do you, as a director of development, how do you bring these people together and how do you navigate, facilitate a dialogue that could lead to the goals that you're trying to accomplish at NORD? How do you do that?

[0:06:44] RS: I think I'm drawing it at my experience when I worked in a think tank from the Danish government called MindLab way back, I think it's 10 years ago. But the purpose and the way that we worked in that specific time of my career was that we were putting together different stakeholders working both with employment, taxation, and the municipality. We actually used

the word of the people that they wanted to change something for. We did qualitative interviews, we did qualitative studies, and presented like the key conclusions for the politicians and the civil servants. You have a tendency, if you work on a really broad perspective with creating policy, to be very abstract about what is it that you're actually doing, and you have a tendency to work with a lot of paper that just shift hands. Here we were putting the voices of the end users to the table and ask the civil servants to relate to it.

In a way, it's a very, very powerful tool to youth empathy, professional empathy to the politicians, bringing the voices of the end users into the table. So, that's actually also what I do now. I work with a few projects in areas called social housing. This means that it's people that they are statistically more sick than other people. That some of the people living there are having tough lives. So, I bring interviews with the people living in the area to the table and ask the politicians, how might we bring Social Security and healthcare close to those people?

So, it's a way of moving in different levels to have very, very concrete and specific stories and bring this to the table of the politicians and the civil servants. This is one way of doing it. The other thing I always tend to do, I've been program director at the Danish Design Center also for years, and That's where you work with co-creation and visual tools. Right now, I'm in an architectural company. This means that we can actually draw it so that you understand, this is how it looks like. How can we change things very concrete and specific? Bringing the people's voice to the table and also work with prototypes and visual solutions along the way to create a holding environment where different perspectives can see themselves and what they should do.

[0:09:16] RT: Okay. So, let's help people who listen here with some craft. This doesn't just happen. There's a lot of work that you have to do to get it started, keep it going, get it someplace. So, share with people some things that you know about building communities and connections that are essential to being able to have a chance to achieve the goals you got. What's the craft, some of the craft ideas, or resources you use to do that?

[0:09:42] RS: I have a very good example right now. In Copenhagen, we have an area called the Old People's City. It's smack in the middle of Copenhagen. A lot of people have a highly and close connection to this specific area. So, this means that you have neighbors that want to protect this area from change; they basically don't want anything to be changed in this area

because they think it's their backyard in some way. You have Facebook groups called Protect the Old City from Change. So, this is one group of stakeholders.

I have my client, which in this case is the municipality of Copenhagen. They have hired NORD Architects to create this area as an area that are friendly to people with dementia and it is right in the middle of the city, so we can't fence it. We cannot lock people out of the area, so it's a really, really difficult task. I have the municipality and they want us to do some visual drawings of how can we change this area so that it's friendly for people with dementia.

We have people that are living in the area already. There are a few nursing homes for older people, and we also have a high school, just next to this area that use it for smoking and hearing loud music and normal youth life. Then, we also have a few kindergartens which have like a small farm with, I think they have a few cats and some dogs and animals. So, this is the area that I work with. Instead of pretending that we know best, I actually bring all this different kind of stakeholders to the table. Some of them I do one-to-one interviews. Some of them is like in bigger workshop groups, ask them questions as what is most important for you if we should transform this area? What should we protect? How can we make this a vibrant area that our resource both to you and also to people with dementia?

It requires quite a lot of work to draw in all this kind of knowledge. Then we kind of sketch different kind of pathways, new solutions of how we can rethink this area, and this is very concrete and physical. It's like a map of the area and putting in visual icons of how might we use the area differently.

[0:12:16] RT: How do you handle resistance and anxiety and fear, or loss that you're coming in, you're going to take something of mine away? So, talk a little bit about what you know about how you have to navigate those concerns for people.

[0:12:30] RS: I think in this specific context, I have to create a room when you can have a little heat. I mean, it's okay to have emotions. It's okay to have feelings if it's important for you. So, I'm not trying to make this just a soft and smooth and only nice vibe community. We have to bring to the table in some way what are the challenges here. So, I don't bring all the people at one time into the same room. I do one-to-one with some of the stakeholders that I know can be

extremely stubborn. And then, I engage the most difficult groups more than once so that we show them that we care, we show them that we listen. At some point, we also have to be very clear about this; this require we cannot meet, for instance, so that you have a bold and really frank conversation with the different stakeholders.

The funny thing is, Rick, one of the things that I thought would be really difficult, for instance, creating a connection between the young people and the kindergarten and the older people or the people with dementia, that are kind of suffering from anxiety, and it's a really complex disease, really. And what I found out really quick was that they have a lot to offer each other across these different stakeholders. The people that are living in nursery homes they have a lot of visits from their grandkids and their kids, and they love that they can go somewhere where it's nice for the younger ones. I think we will come up with a solution where we actually make this and meet with each other.

[0:14:14] RT: So, I have two questions. Let's take them one at a time, because you said right at the beginning there it's okay to have a little heat. So, as somebody who's facilitating the process where there is likely to be heat, my experience is that person needs to already have an experience of being in heat situations. This isn't their first time. How have you developed this capacity to tolerate discomfort in heat in a difficult conversation? Where's that come from?

[0:14:43] RS: I think I have been in this situation so many times and my biggest learning environment when it comes to being comfortable in heat was it the daily think tank MindLab because there was a lot of heat all the time, because we were pioneers and we were only a team of five or six people that tried to push the Danish government in a certain way. So, it was something we talked a lot about, and we also had some one-to-one coaching session of how can you actually disconnect the heat that is created on basis of your work and what you, as a person, as Runa, is not really the same thing.

I think you have to act professionally in an environment where there are a lot of different views, not take it personally, and also try to understand where do this pushback come from. All the different stakeholders in the example I just told of, they have a really, really good explanation of why they don't want this area to change or why they want it to be calm and easier or why they want – I mean, every stakeholder has like a background perspective of why they are so

stubborn or emotionally touched to the subject. So, I think you have to both work with yourself and have some comfort, security, and also to understand, and understand what are all those different stakeholders. Why do they say this?

[0:16:26] RT: My question that's banging around in my head is, to what extent did growing up in a communal environment rather than a small intact family, maybe be influential in capacity building for you to do this kind of work today? Is there any connection there? Am I reaching for something, or is there –

[0:16:45] RS: I think that there is. I mean, it's a democracy. When you grow up in a commune, you have to defend your own perspective. You have to understand others and relate to others. Now, this is a very, very serious conversation, but there's also a lot of joy. I think you can't work with chains unless it's joyful in some way. It can be tough, but it can also be creativity, joyfulness, good energy, in a way. Working in an architectural company, they also sell dreams to you. It's like when you win a project, it would almost never be the one that you propose, because you sell some kind of joyful dream that you can solve something for others. So, I think you should basically not take too seriously.

[0:17:30] RT: Too seriously.

[0:17:32] RS: Yes. And the third thing I think I also learned is that if you want to create change, it should not be something that you're disconnected to. My parents they created a commune where they could basically change the world just next to them. I mean, where they were living, the way that they were structuring their housing, et cetera. You need to embed it or engage it's in your everyday lives so that you can take small steps in a bigger road or in a bigger journey.

In the specific examples, it is also that it can be just a small, small step for the different stakeholders where they feel they are part of a bigger picture. They may be proud of being part of this, maybe world-famous project in Copenhagen. So, it should be like in a very small scale where you can make the change just next to you, and you should also be related to the bigger picture and feel that you, as an individual, as maybe just small high school student, can be part of creating this change.

[0:18:37] RT: You mentioned at the very beginning your work in the Danish government, I think, is what you said.

[0:18:42] RS: Yes.

[0:18:43] RT: And I know when we were talking and preparing for this conversation, there were some things about that experience you wanted to bring forward in the conversation. So, I'm wondering what was that experience like and how has that influenced your thinking in the work you're doing today?

[0:18:58] RS: I think if you've not been part of political environment, it might feel scary or too abstract or difficult to relate to what's actually going on when you create politics and service. So, I learned that being part of this think tank is that you can actually just, you can inflect the bigger picture the welfare society if you do it good. It can be small steps where you just make new service or new solutions. So, I think it was very formative for me because it was the first time. I was part of like public sector innovation, working next to civil servants and politicians, and doing really, really important work. Then we actually managed to make this also creative and joyful, and about people living in our society.

[0:19:55] RT: I want you to talk a little bit about NORD itself, because this is an interesting organization. What is the purpose, the mission of NORD? And what about that mission drew you towards them, where you thought this could be a place where I could express myself and do important work?

[0:20:13] RS: NORD is a really, really special company because they have the ambition of doing bigger difference with their work. And they are also, at least in Denmark and in the north, one of the companies that has done the most architecture, creating healthy architecture. So, the reason why I was drawn to them was that I could see that here I can actually do something that are really, really very concrete, very specific. It's about building something, and I can push into a larger agenda at the same time. Because I think if you work as a consultant in a bigger organization, as I did both in Danish Design Center and also at wonderful Copenhagen, it's a longer way from reality. You're creating the bigger framework. Here we are both creating like a

bigger framework for pushing the society, and it's also very, very concrete that you can see something is coming out of it.

I still have been there for a year now, and I'm still really, really excited every time there's a new building opening and I'll go, "Wow, this is really something that you can see out there in the world and not something that you just co-create and workshops and you talk about it. This is out there for you and for me."

[0:21:31] RT: So, what surprised you about going to work? What did you learn about creating, imagining, conjuring, and then actually turning that into something concrete, as you say? What have you learned about that process that's been a gift for you and your work?

[0:21:48] RS: I've always been drawn to creative work. And what I feel really inspiring working at an architectural company is that you do prototypes over and over again. You kind of visualize something and then you get some feedback either from the client or from the world and then you change it and then you get some feedback, so it's like back and forth and you talk a lot about that you should not be afraid of making mistakes, but architects they really, they are not because they have to rethink and redo it. So, it's really, really inspiring to be part of this truly creative process especially as if you as me, are very much into your head, then you kind of have colleagues that just draw something on a piece of paper and then it's kind of come into to a new model or something.

So, it's a way of kind of challenging that your solution should not be ready, ready. It should be like on the way all the time, like in a beta version of it, so that you rehearse and redo it, and then try again.

[0:22:56] RT: I'm wondering, have you discovered sort of creative talents that you may have always had but never had a venue or a platform or a culture or an environment where you're working, where those had a chance to actually be exposed to you first, much less to the world? I mean, is there something in you that you've learned that you have, that you didn't know you had by working with these people?

[0:23:16] RS: Our latest project was to create a model where you connect your physically ability, going from not needing no help at all, to being in an institution 24/7, to connect this with different kind of housing possibilities. That was a model where I really developed it closely together with the architects because they could transform some of the thoughts that we had in the meetings about what should this kind of different housing type what should be able to do for you, and then you could draw it.

So, I was able to kind of give it names and think of the model, and they were drawing it. We have developed four different new housing types that we just sent to the client just before the summer holidays. I told you I was very, very busy with that. It was a deadline on this project. It's really, really inspiring to have this more model thinking in the broader perspective. And then you actually develop new housing types where you draw, here's the room, and here's the table, and that's just how the bedroom looked like, and the living room. I mean, so it's kind of getting into new, concrete, and specific housing types.

[0:24:30] RT: I noticed on NORD's website says their practice is rooted in new Scandinavian architecture. What is new Scandinavian architecture? How would you define that? What is that? I'm asking that because I think most people, certainly where I'm from in the US, have always viewed Scandinavia as at the leading edge of design of all sorts of things, architecture, art, et cetera. So, meaning we just hold that that's the world you live in every day. But the website indicates that there's something new for you that's coming. So, what is that? How do you define that?

[0:25:06] RS: I think from NORD and from the company I am, two things. First, that you develop architecture with the perspective of the user. So, this means that it will be very specific to the context and the people who should be able to use it. That is, in a way like part of democratic architecture that you engage the people along the way. It's not only me who's been doing that in the company. They have, for years, been engaging the end users when they were developing architecture.

One of the first pieces that they did was a cancer center. I think it was 20 years ago that NORD Architect did the cancer center, and it's called an example of healing architecture. They refuse that even though the people that come there are going through a very, very difficult disease,

they refuse that the house should be looking like a hospital or an institution. It's an example of a close relationship between the civil society, 70 people are working there on like voluntarily and also, of course, together with the doctors and nurses, and you will feel it, the healing architect, you will feel it right in the second you enter the building. It looks like a kitchen and a normal living room when you enter the building. There will be people welcoming you and offering you some coffee and some water, and you can meet and talk together with the people that are also going through cancer.

So, this is a way new Scandinavian architecture is that you also have perspective of the user, the end user, the difficult situation that you might be in when you walk into the building. So, this is one thing. The other thing is that it is still very good-looking design. This brings daylight into the building. It's in high quality when it comes to material, so that the famous, we have back from the sixties is still going on.

[0:27:16] RT: It's still working.

[0:27:16] RS: Yes.

[0:27:19] RT: I'm curious, you and I share some commonality, and we both attended a master's program. What pulled you towards going back to school at an age where most people would start to think about, "I'm just coasting here," but you decided you're going to go back. What was the attraction, and what surprised you about going back there?

[0:27:39] RS: I think it was really a life changing for me in some way, both to have a theoretical framework of working with change on an individual level, group level, societal level. So, it gave a lot of impact to me in my work, to find both like a theoretical framework, but also others like you, Rick, or others of my fellow students that were struggling with some of the issues. Even though that we were different in age, we were different in background, we were different from different places in the world, there was some common connection to the others. It also goes to our alumni group, I think, that you can find some life, life friends, and really, really good conversation partners.

When I came there first, I thought this is going to be intellectually challenging, and it was, especially the final thesis. Wow, I'm really lucky that I have a good family that allowed me to be away, I think. But what I keep the most is actually the connections, the personal connections that you share.

[0:28:53] RT: What did you write your dissertation on?

[0:28:55] RS: That was about tourism, and what was it, I just changed job actually from when I started, I was at the Danish Design Center, and when I did my thesis, I just became a Director of Development at Wonderful Copenhagen. My final thesis was about how you actually get like a clash between tourists and locals and my area of field work was cruise guests, which are one of the most, I think, hated from locals. So, I just took a critical case and interviewed a lot of cruise guests and locals and tried to find out what could be the common ground here, because it's really about a fight for territory, I think, that the locals feel that there's someone coming and transforming the area into something different, an area for fun or for like entertainment, and they actually, "Hey, we're actually living here."

[0:29:52] RT: People who are unfamiliar with this program, and it's programmed similar to lots of programs around the world. But there is a final dissertation, and it's a lot of writing, it's a lot of research. Usually, those are skills that we, at the age that we're in the program, haven't used for quite a while. How did you navigate that process of producing something coherent that had value, that you understood? What were your challenges? And what surprised you about your ability to do this?

[0:30:21] RS: In the very beginning, I tried to pick something that interested me deeply. Every time we should have like for every model we had a small piece, an essay. So, I transformed it into something that I was really struggling with. I wrote something about wicked problems, which is basically what I've been doing, working around. I wrote an essay about different silos and how groups can fight each other. I related it to my daily work. It surprised me that it was pretty hard work, I think, but it was making me much better at my daily work because I had a place where I couldn't reflect, and I couldn't have like a framework to reflect my daily work into.

[0:31:12] RT: Why did you do the program? What was going on in your life and the time that drew you into this?

[0:31:18] RS: I was dreaming of it for many years. I was actually teaching together with my former boss, Christian Bason from the Danish Design Center, way back in design methods, co-creating processes. So, I knew the program because I've been there just in one or two models to teach and I was just blown away of the global atmosphere and the level of reflection in the room. So, I wondered how on earth can I be, how can I actually do this? It was a struggle for me for many years to get at. It's a very exclusive program, so you have to – I had to have funding for my program, actually, external funding.

[0:32:02] RT: Yes. What are your gifts and talents? You got a brag now, okay? Not time for modesty here. What are your gifts and your talents?

[0:32:10] RS: One of the things is, I think I have a passion for the possible. So, I would be very joyful, optimistic, deep down optimistic, seeking the moonshot solution. I can be very – when I see this, and I can really drag a group of individuals into the ambition of wanting to be something, part of something bigger.

[0:32:37] RT: You can do that. You know how to do that.

[0:32:40] RS: Yes. I think it's part of my nature and how I work as a person. So, this also means that I'm very robust and I don't really mind to be where it blows a lot, where you have some heat.

[0:32:56] RT: Where people are blowing a lot, a lot of energy is what you're saying. Not the weather.

[0:33:06] RS: So, seeing the possible futures and having the passion for for reaching them and connecting with people in different levels. I mean, I don't mind if it's kids or if it's young people or older people or politicians or whatever, I'm navigating different stages very naturally.

[0:33:28] RT: So, this podcast is called 10,000 Swamp Leaders. For you, what's your definition of leading?

[0:33:34] RS: I don't really see myself as a classical leader. My definition is that you have to be brave and bold enough to walk forward and maybe make people follow you, because you share the mission or the possibility. So, I don't at all believe in being a leader where you punish people, make people scared, or it's a matter of creating an environment where you can make people follow you and the mission that you're on.

[0:34:08] RT: I think it's a truism that we learn more from our leadership failures and we do our successes. So, can you speak to a failure or two that you had that stuck with you and what you learned from it when you're choosing to use yourself to lead in the future?

[0:34:22] RS: I make a lot of mistakes.

[0:34:25] RT: I won't ask for all them, just one or two that jumped to mind.

[0:34:29] RS: It's a given example of a mistake. I think it has to be concrete, specific to understand it. Sometimes I have a tendency to bring too many voices into the room at one time. So, an example at NORD, I brought both local politicians and regional politicians into the same room in a very vulnerable time, where you just had a new reform from the government saying that the regional politicians should give away some power to the local politicians. That was not a very good idea because it ended up being just arguing and not sharing any ideas. I think it was the reason my idea was that I was new and I didn't, in that job, or in that position, so I didn't know all the kind of different voices that were going on. So, one of my mistakes is that making the environment too complex so that you cannot navigate to the change that you want to create.

[0:35:38] RT: It goes backwards rather than forwards in some ways.

[0:35:41] RS: Yes, it does. Then you have a lot of time cleaning up afterwards and creating an environment where you can make people meet, and they also kind of maybe distrust that you are in charge of the process, and if you can manage it. So, what I did in this specific case was

that I took the one-to-one and did an interview with them and put in the conclusions into the case.

[0:36:04] RT: So, you knew, I'm just going to go a little further in this, so you knew something didn't work out in the process you did, and you wanted to do something to see if you could turn it around. Going one-to-one, that's a lot of work, a lot of time. What did you learn about yourself in that recovery phase?

[0:36:21] RS: I hired someone so that I had some help and an assistant that could do some of the job. I'm so lucky that I managed to have a few projects in the company where I need the same skills as mine. So, you can actually get really like overworked and burned out if you don't seek help and assistant. I think I've been better at that to navigate in this uncertainty and then also find out where is it that you have to say stop and hold back, and then maybe get some help from assistants or not being so very ambitious about the process.

[0:37:01] RT: Okay, thank you. Okay, so we're nearing to the end here. So, I'm going to give you the last word. What reflective thoughts, ideas, concepts, anything that you want to say that you would help you be complete in this conversation?

[0:37:14] RS: When it comes to change and leading change, I think you could summarize it in that it both has to be important, part of a bigger picture. You have to be a leader in a way where it's joyful still, and you have to find out how can you navigate a complex change where the people you relate to can see themselves to it, relate into it, and make it part of their everyday life and reality.

[0:37:44] RT: Runa, thank you very much for making time to have this conversation. It's been wonderful.

[0:37:48] RS: Thank you so much for inviting me. I'm very honored to be part of this.

[0:37:53] RT: You're in the swamp now, girl.

[0:37:57] RS: It feels nice.

[OUTRO]

[0:38:01] ANNOUNCER: Thank you for listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders with Rick Torseth. Please take this moment and hit subscribe to follow more leadership swamp conversations.

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