

Cities After Dark with Mirik Milan

Tue, Nov 01, 2022 10:46AM 53:53

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

city, night, nightlife, people, montreal, amsterdam, nighttime, mayor, big, world, governance, important, happening, incidents, global, governments, policies, create, licenses, venues

SPEAKERS

Jess Reia, Mirik Milan

J Jess Reia 18:35

Hello and welcome to threesixtyCITY by NewCities, a podcast delving into the future of urban life. I'm today's guest hosts and NewCities fellow Jess Reia. I work as an assistant professor of Data Science at the University of Virginia in the United States. And since 2020, I have been a member of the Montreal 24/24 Night Council in Montreal, Canada, working closely with the city government and other stakeholders to build a nightlife policy and provide more open data about the night. And when you think of cities like Amsterdam, Berlin and Montreal often scenes of thriving after-dark culture flood the senses. But have you ever thought about the planning and governance that go into creating safe, vibrant and inclusive nighttime economies? The emergence of a field called "Night Studies" over the last 20 years brought together urban planners, scholars and activists trying to understand how urban governance is applied to the 24-hour cycle. Various cities all over the world appointed night mayors, night ambassadors and night czars, creating departments dedicated to governing the city after dark. As we can imagine, these nocturnal activities come with challenges and many opportunities as well. And today we're joined by former Night Mayor of Amsterdam Mirik Milan to talk about how nightlife can shape the identity of a city. Mirik Milan is also a partner at Vibe Lab, and as Night Mayor between 2012-2018 he played an instrumental role in the reshaping of Amsterdam's nightlife scene into one of the most vibrant and economically robust in the world and his innovative position has been replicated in more than 65 cities around the world. So welcome Mirik. It's a pleasure to have you here today. It's really nice to see you again.

M Mirik Milan 20:28

Hey, thank you, Jess. And, great to see you as well.

J Jess Reia 20:33

So maybe we can start talking a little bit about what is the nighttime economy to give a broad sense to our listeners. So what is the night time economy? And also what it is not?

M

Mirik Milan 20:51

Yeah, for sure. Always when I speak about nighttime economies or nighttime culture I like to take one step back, because I think that the night is just so important for cities in their development, and cities really benefit from having a vibrant nightlife from a social, cultural and economic perspective. Because at night, people connect, people develop their talents, and there's a lot of economic activity that is happening. So if you would ask me, what is the nighttime economy? I think that it is everything that happens after dark. And, it's all the activity that is shaping the identity of our cities, but it's also making us socialize, and there's a lot of creativity involved as well.

J

Jess Reia 21:45

And usually, when people think about the night, they probably don't associate the night with infrastructure and conventional urban planning. So can you unpack a little bit the role of nighttime governance in our cities?

M

Mirik Milan 22:02

Oh, yeah. 100%. So when I started as the Night Mayor of Amsterdam in 2012, it was really an emerging policy field, and as you said, over the years, more and more cities have adopted this idea of installing a night mayor or night czar or a club commission, because a lot of cities all have the same problem. You know, many citizens want to sleep at night and other people want to go out or or run their business. So when you say what is nighttime governance, it is managing the urban night, it's planning the urban night, it's making sure that there's a good coexistence between everything that happens. And for us personally, it's really about connecting the day and the night. There's a 24 hour cycle. And that is also one of the things that I have worked a lot on, is developing 24 hour venues and locations where activity can happen during the day and at night.

J

Jess Reia 23:12

And you were one of the first night mayors, right? Everyone is always very interested when they hear the word Night Mayor for the first time. So I believe we all would love to hear a little bit more about this role. And if there is any difference between being a night mayor, a night ambassador, or a night czar, like the one in London. If you can give us some examples about the kind of work that you do as a night mayor.

M

Mirik Milan 23:44

Yeah, of course. So as you said in the intro, there's more than 65 cities around the world that have a night mayor or similar position. What is interesting to know is that we have done a study in 2012. It was a paper that was published by Urban Studies, which is a scientific journal on urban planning. And in this qualitative research of the role of the nightmare, it showed that all nightmares around the world are advocates. And that is whether you're located inside or

outside city governments. So for example, New York, London and Paris have night mayors, which are located inside city governments so they're part of the city administration. And there's also like my role in Amsterdam, where the Night Mayor Foundation was an independent non for profits, or the club commission in Berlin which is located outside of city government. They're all advocacy roles because none of the night mayors have the power to change policies themselves, they always have to go to city council or through the mayor. So in my position, in the role of the Night Mayor in Amsterdam, I was a direct adviser to the mayor of Amsterdam and to the city council. And we really tried to bridge the gap between the city, the nighttime operators, but also city residents. And I think that's really where the value comes from. So also out of our study, it also showed that these night mayors are often mediators, they're translators. They are trying to bring all sides of the city together. And to bring a mutual understanding, and I think that's also how the night mayor changes the game by really building on this, really trying to create mutual understanding between all sides. And why is it important? Yeah, because the first reaction of many cities in the past, and also nowadays is if there's a problem at night, the first reaction is to say, Oh, we have to stop this now, instead of bringing all stakeholders together and trying to come up with a solution that will benefit everyone. And that is something that we have always tried to do. To always work from a multi stakeholder approach, and to not only think nothing ever good happens after midnight, but let's figure out how we can manage this in a better way. Many nighttime policies are more than 100 years old. And this is a problem we see everywhere in the world that these policies have been created in a time before there was even internet, to say the least. So it's really important that nighttime governance and all these policies are updated. And that's why I think so many cities have jumped on this topic at the moment.

J Jess Reia 26:51

Fascinating. So it's also a job that includes changing the public perception about night and people cohabitating in the night, and dealing with all sorts of policies and regulations, sounds like a really tough job. I think if you could share with us, one or two examples of projects you've worked on as Night Mayor of Amsterdam, the lessons learned, and it could be like even best practices or else things that did not work out and could serve as a cautionary tale for other cities.

M Mirik Milan 27:23

Oh, yeah. 100%. So I think one of the biggest accomplishments that we were able to do with our team was the introduction of 24 hour license venues in Amsterdam. That was something that was never done before, we had closing hours around 3 or 4 am. We had a really great Mayor Eberhard van der Laanbar, unfortunately, passed away in 2017. If you want to improve policies at night, you really need to have a mayor or city council that has a lot of courage and wants to move forward. What we did with the 24 hour licenses, and I think was really radical about it, is that for the first time, we didn't just look at, is this building safe? Do you have four walls, a roof and a bouncer in front of the door? But we really looked at the creative content that the group hosting or entering the building was offering, and how does that add to the culture offering in Amsterdam? So we first laid out a strategy. And we laid out a vision for the kind of 24 hour venues that would add to the cultural value of Amsterdam. And we came to the conclusion that multidisciplinary venues, things that have for instance a bar, gallery, co-working space, a raving nightclub, but maybe also there's even one building which has a

kindergarten. It's very important to have a mix of functions. And when we started, the first venue was introduced in 2014. When we first started with the introduction of these licenses, which wasn't city-wide. And that's always good advice that we give, if you want to change something with nighttime policies, it's not always about creating a level playing field. Sometimes you may have to just run a pilot and test something in a small area or a neighborhood and see how it goes instead of always thinking about changing the whole city in one go. Because what will most likely happen is that after a couple of weeks, there will be more incidents that would be not regulated in a proper way, there wouldn't be enough people looking into it and then it would be shut down very quickly. So, we always say is, do pilots or do it in a controlled manner. And that has given us really a lot of great results because we started with five licenses. At the moment, there are 15 of these venues spread all around the city, and another five licenses will be introduced very soon. And I think what's important about the 24 hour license is that the big problem in nightlife all around the world is when people leave, they all leave at the same time. And then you have all the patrons out on the street at night and this is where the most conflicts and most incidents occur. So if people have the ability to just leave when it's time to go home, there's a better flow of the people. Because now you have an option, either you're going to stay inside or you're going to go home, but you're not going to hang out in front of the door and make a mess, right. So that has led to really great results for us. This project is now continuing over the years, we're not 10 years in, and it's still growing and growing.

J Jess Reia 31:25

It's interesting to see how some of these problems are so similar because we just had this conversation over and over again in Montreal about the closing times, and trying to convince people that have everyone leaving at the same time, usually 3am in the streets that's where and when conflicts emerge.

M Mirik Milan 31:43

Yeah. And that is so true. Because you see that everywhere. And I think you know, alcohol related violence is a really big issue. We really focus on curated nightlife. In Amsterdam, just last week, we had the Amsterdam Dance Event, which is the biggest electronic music conference and festival around the world. We had 460,000 people attending and more than 1000 events that were taking place over five days. First of all, together with the mayor, we decided that all venues would get an 8am curfew instead of the 4am they would normally have, which is similar to South by Southwest or similar to when Mutek is happening in Montreal. All of the police data which was published in the newspaper after the event, and also from the recent years, showed that it was not busier for the police than a regular Saturday night. And I think that's really powerful. Because what does it say? It says that as soon as people are coming for their favorite artists, or they're coming for a band, or they're coming for a specific show, they won't be rolling down the street fighting and making a mess afterwards. So if there's a possibility, so we always advice cities to invest in their curated nightlife, in their cultural nightlife, and focus a little bit less on drinking. Just make sure there's good harm reduction and educational programs that will really help manage the night better and in a proper way.

J Jess Reia 33:41

Since you mentioned violence and harm reduction, these are really significant topics. Safety is always a big concern for governments and citizens. So how can we, on the one hand, ensure that we have safe environments, that nightlife can be safe and inclusive, but on the other hand, we also prevent the city from deploying more surveillance or control and law enforcement, bothering people who are just enjoying nightlife or working at night in the city. So how can we find balance between like seeking more safety that's very important, but also doing this in a responsible, meaningful way for our cities?

M

Mirik Milan 34:27

Yeah, I think definitely in my time in Amsterdam, but also all around the world. It's data gathering in a responsible way is very important. And I'm not speaking about more cameras, or more surveillance, I'm really speaking about gathering data of where the accidents and incidents really happen. So we did a really big project on the Rembrandtplein, which is one of our most important nightlife squares in the city. This project has now been rolled out to other nightlife districts in Amsterdam, like the Red Light District, and also Leidseplein, which is another square. We very much looked at the police data. And we did like a big search where we went with all the nighttime operators, with the residents living in the neighborhood, and the city together, and we went out at night. And we just started noting down what kind of incidents were happening, what were the reasons people would feel unsafe, and how could we improve it. Out of this project, there came a 360 approach, which is really interesting, and had a huge impact. We managed to get down alcohol related violence by 20% and reports of nuisance by 28%, to almost 30%. And those are big numbers that politicians and mayor's like, the numbers that you need to get more funding. So this was actually a three way approach. First of all, we had a direct line of communication through a simple web app, so to a simple website, which you can just run from your phone without having to download anything. And you could report a complaint or an incident to the city and the information would go directly to the first community officer which was in the neighborhood. And there was also a possibility for direct line of communication between the city residents and the community officer. And that really helped tremendously because really often, if you have to get out of bed at 3am when there's somebody on your doorstep and they're screaming and shouting or there's a fight or something happening, by the time this information reaches a police the nuisance is already gone. So that helped tremendous and it was really important. But also we looked at the public space. How can we clean up this public space? How can we make sure in Amsterdam there's less bikes on the street? How do we make sure that the lighting is done in a proper way, because often people think that lighting should always be more. Yes, in dark alleys good lighting is important to prevent public urination or all kinds of other activities. But when it comes to a big nightlife square, we managed to take down one of these really big screens, like an advertisement screen, we managed to get down to brightness and intensity of this the screen by more than 60%. So we really looked at the atmosphere. And the last last part was that we installed square hosts, either social workers or non aggressive intermediates, that were an extra eyes and ears to help the police at night. So in this district, there were 20 every night on the weekends. And by taking away the police force from the square, with their big squad cars and horses, and by bringing them more to the side alley and out of the picture, that really made sure the whole atmosphere in the area is less aggressive, definitely late at night. And if there was an incident, then the police would come in, they would have eyes and ears on the street that would inform them what happened, and who needs to be taken out of the situation to calm things down

again. And this project has been now as I said rolled out to other entertainment districts in the city and has had a huge impact. And it was very positive. So it's possible if we all work together to find solutions.

M

Mirik Milan 34:27

Yeah, and this sounds like it is work for many people in different groups and organizations and departments. So it must be really hard to coordinate. And I'm glad you mentioned the light pollution and dark skies because this is a growing movement about decreasing light pollution and protecting wildlife in cities. And it also makes me think about, often we talk about big cities metropolis, like Amsterdam, Berlin, Montreal, Toronto. And what about small and medium sized cities? Do they need nightlife governance mechanisms as well in your opinion? Are we thinking about like the medium and small sized cities, cities around the world?

M

Mirik Milan 39:42

If you would have a city from 100k to 200k inhabitants upwards, you would have a small scene. Small cities and even in rural areas, must have good cultural spaces where people can produce, where people can come together, and where people can interact. I think it's really valuable for the social texture and the social construct in areas. So, this is definitely not something that is only needed for big cities. There are some really interesting projects all around the world, there's actually a club owner from Berlin that has a project called Happy Locals, where they convince people to give space to young creatives to help them develop their talents in rural areas and in small towns. And Rural Radicals is another one that converts barnhouses and industrial areas into places of creativity.

J

Jess Reia 41:06

That sounds fantastic. I'm from Latin America and we have some of the largest cities in the world. But when I look at some maps, and trying to understand and measure nightlife, I see a lot of these efforts taking place in the Global North in a more organized or institutionalized way. So the question that I have for myself, and I've been talking to colleagues for a long time, what about the Global South? We saw some initiatives like in Cali, Colombia, in Santiago de Chile, that didn't last for a long time. So I would love to hear your thoughts on the Global South cities because they might have other forms to govern night that aren't equivalent or different than in the Global North.

M

Mirik Milan 42:05

Yeah, 100%. So we had the opportunity to travel to the Global South a lot. So Cali, Colombia, I've actually been there myself and spoke to the mayor back then. And it was very interesting. The first time I had a conversation with the police commissioner, the first thing he said was, safety is not about more police. And that is also something that really caught our attention. And that's why we started a project together with UNHabitat, to think about how can you develop more safety and wellbeing through bottom up initiatives, and nighttime governance. Safety really is a community aspect. Lighting is definitely also a big part of that. But also what we

need to understand is that different cities are on the same timeline, but they're just at a different place on that timeline. We recently launched a global nighttime manifesto, that was a follow up project from the global nighttime recovery plan, which was a seven chapter white paper, which we published. If you would allow me, it's freely downloadable. You can download it on nighttime.org, where you can find a lot of stuff about nighttime governance. But we realize when we were writing this white paper that you can call it global, if you haven't spoken also to the Global South and to people in other regions. And we did research for example, in Sub Saharan Africa in Kenya and South Africa and they also want to speak about nighttime governance and nighttime advocacy. And we just need to make sure that we also give them the tools to speak about it because there are a lot of cities in the world where there are differences and there are maybe governments that are not as open and tolerant as some cities in the Western world. So I think it's very much about sharing tools and knowledge and understanding on what nighttime governance is and how you can work together. What it always comes back to is, sit down, put your ideas on paper, bring the right people together to share knowledge and try to influence decision makers in your city or in the area that you live.

J

Jess Reia 45:09

This is a conversation we have often about how we can include folks in the global south as well, because there are amazing initiatives happening there. The city of Bogota conducted this research and they published a report, it's one of the most interesting that I've seen in a long time. In Rio too, and I'm glad you talk about the government's and sometimes we don't have any kind of window of opportunity to talk to the local governments. And I think Rio de Janeiro, Brazil also faces this. It's a city with a vibrant nightlife and cultural life, and you can see the harm that sometimes a mandate and a mayor can cause to the nightlife ecosystem in the city. So it pushed them to organize and create their own mechanisms, sometimes not as consolidated as the ones we see in other cities. But yeah, I'm happy you're having this kind of conversations worldwide. And as you mentioned, the global nighttime recovery plan. I was very happy to participate in chapter five, and we were writing about shuddering COVID, in a lockdown here in Quebec. And that was an interesting experiencing, at the night council we're constantly thinking about how can we think and imagine what nice life will look like, while we're still going through this really hard process. Because as you know, the pandemic took quite a hit on nightlife. And now that all the chapters are publish, and people can download them, and can take a look at that. Could you share with us a little bit like what are the main lessons in that process? Any knowledge gaps that we still need to address now, a year later?

M

Mirik Milan 46:53

For sure. So I think when it comes to the knowledge gaps, it is very much about nighttime data. So first of all, understanding what nighttime data actually is, how to use it, how to treat it. What are the fields that we need to research? How can we improve our skills without compromising people? There's also a lot of nighttime activity that is maybe not 100% legal and if it's not legal or people don't feel comfortable speaking out about what they're doing at night, how do we make sure that we still capture it, and that we do something good for the community, but not expose them to any harm. So that's definitely one of the gaps. What we also learned during the pandemic, and it's an important topic at the moment, everything that is happening in web three, so metaverse, blockchain and crypto technologies. I see already now in any music conference or nightlife conference that I'm going to how important it will be for our scene. How

setting up a more equitable way to engage with your fans and engage with your community. For me as a promote that was a frustration, you invest a lot of time in making content at your parties and at your events and at your festivals. And then you have to pay big tech to reach your own fans. So I think that's definitely something we learned. How can we make it more equal? How do we make sure that we have access to our own data, and that we can reach our own fans in an easy way. So I really think there's a big opportunity for web three and all technologies associated with it for nightlife industries and nighttime actors.

J Jess Reia 49:15

Yeah, open data sets has been an issue here in Montreal and in many different places. But I can speak from our experience here trying to get the city to open more datasets for us. It's really tricky because, of course, we need to comply with different regulations and think about data protection and privacy, but at the same time, we could do so much better. I remember, this was the underlying discussion during the pandemic, how can we understand the impact of the pandemic on nightlife culture here if we don't even have the official and unofficial numbers? We do have amazing researchers and scholars thinking about this, but it would be great for the cities to cooperate and see that night can and should be better mapped, measured, and understood. And also you mentioned the informal illegal night.

M Mirik Milan 50:12

Yeah. 100%. If I can tap in into what you're saying. I think a big challenge in cities worldwide is the rapid loss of creative space. Really often, creatives, creative communities, and creative spaces are a victim of their own success. They help to develop new neighborhoods and areas. And over the course of the last 40 years, creative scenes and nightlife scenes have helped to develop formal industrial areas into very vibrant neighborhoods and hotspots. And that's also why we have started a project called The Create Footprint. The Creative Footprint is a way to measure an index of creative space and map creative space to really show the value to cities and city governments why these places need to be protected, what is the long term value that they create, and how they impact the identity of the city and why companies and people chose to move somewhere, because you don't move to London for the weather.

J Jess Reia 51:34

Yeah, that's true. Not to Montreal for the weather as well. So, before we wrap up, where can people go if they want to learn more about your work, about night mayors, about VibeLab?

M Mirik Milan 51:47

Yeah, for sure. So over the course of the last couple of years, we have developed a very big database of knowledge, research, reports, and tools. So I would invite everyone to go to our open source platform, which is called nighttime.org. If you are an aspiring nightlife advocate, doesn't matter where you live, in what city around the world, you will find all kinds of tools and information there. Just dig a little bit into the website, and you will find very easy ways to get started. Please also have a look at Creative Footprint at creative-footprint.org. There you can

download or read footprint reports that we have done in cities like New York, Tokyo, but also smaller cities like Stockholm, and we're also researching Montreal now. There are a lot of nightlife strategies and ideas and policies which are listed there, which I think is interesting to have a look at. There are more and more conferences on this topic being organized around the world. Montreal 24/24 is a great resource as well. But there's also many, many night mayors around the world. So yeah, those are some great starting points to start researching and get to know a little bit better.

 Jess Reia 53:23

Okay, thank you so much. That's about all we have time for today. And thanks again, Mirik. It's great to learn with you. And it was a pleasure talking to you. And thank you listeners, as always for joining us. And we'll be back next week with another episode of threesixtyCITY.

 Mirik Milan 53:41

Thank you so much.