

Scott Rechler:

Welcome to recalibrate reality, the future of New York, I'm Scott Rechler, chair of the regional plan association and CEO and chair of RXR. Our guest today is Alex Greenwald, the president and CEO of the national September 11th, Memorial and museum. In this episode, you'll hear how Alison her team navigating COVID-19 and our discussion on the parallels of how our city recovered post nine 11 and how we can recalibrate for a post COVID world. So now let's recap it reality with Alice Greenwald. Alice, welcome to recalibrate reality, the future of New York you're as vice chair of the board of the Memorial museum. I have had the pleasure to experience your leadership firsthand. It's been quite impressive how you've guided Memorial and museum through these unprecedented times, and because of your leadership, I'm confident that the organization will emerge stronger on the other side. So thank you for joining me today. I've been looking forward to having this conversation.

Alice Greenwald:

Well, thank you for inviting me, Scott, and it is a pleasure to speak with you and thank you for the kind words.

Scott Rechler:

Pleasure. So, so let's, let's start, right? The attacks of September 11th had such a profound impact on the country. And for many of us who lived and worked in the city at the time of the attack, it was like this fateful day, but it feels like it was yesterday, right? The sense of loss, the sense of hopelessness, anxiety, as well as the, the unity and determination that we came together as a city, you know, following the attacks. And it was also clear that the world following nine 11 would never be the same again. And as you talk about, you know, nine, 12 the day after, but here we are today and we face a similar crisis that is no less profound with COVID 19. And I thought it would be great to start with asking you to sort of share your views on what are some of the parallels from what the attacks were 20 years ago, and some of the uncertainty that existed in the days following the attack. And then I think most importantly, how we came together to heal and, and move forward as a community.

Alice Greenwald:

I think you actually hit the nail on the head in some way, when you talked about the sense of profound change, like this was a moment when the world changed almost 20 years ago and this past year was another moment when we know intuitively that the world has changed. There's been this seismic shift if you will, but we have seen people rise to the occasion, these acts of selflessness and courage and heroism in nine 11, you know, the day of nine 11, certainly, you know, all the first responders just running into danger as people were, you know, fleeing for their lives, the selflessness of rescuers of the recovery workers, the people who rushed to the scene, just saying, what can I do? How can I help the volunteers? All of that, you know, we've seen a similar kind of selflessness, courage heroism in the frontline responders.

Alice Greenwald:

And I, you know, the, the healthcare workers, the people who go in every day and in the early months of the pandemic, not really knowing what they were dealing with and yet putting themselves on the line to help other people after nine 11. You may recall you were in the city, the people standing of what was called point, thank you. On the West side highway with the signs and clapping and cheering, as the trucks filled with first responders and recovery workers were rolling down to ground zero. It was. And then of course, you know, last year we saw that again, different way of expressing it, but the people

who were singing from their balconies and clapping at 7:00 PM every night, and the first response vehicles, the fire trucks going to the front of the doors of hospitals and medical centers to cheer on the workers, going in to do the work.

Scott Rechler:

And, and to your point that, you know, that responding in the heat of that moment as, as you responded to hitting the moment, and I got to watch, you know, it'd be interesting to sort of get your sense of those early days when we began to see the severity of COVID-19 and the implications it was going to have on our institution than I love Memorial and museum, and some of the decisions that you need to make quickly to adapt and how you've been able to navigate through that, some of the, the, the more difficult decisions. And then ultimately, you know, as we look forward, how many of those types of changes that you've made you think are going to be consistent to the new normal, just like we saw post nine 11, there were a lot of things that were put in place post nine 11, that became a way of life as we move forward. Just I'm curious as to how you, how you went through that process.

Alice Greenwald:

I think like so many cultural organizations in some respects, the impact of COVID was immediately devastating. You know, it wasn't gradual, it was one day we're open and the next day we're closed. You know, we entered into a period of such financial difficulty that, you know, it was unprecedented. We, we were not prepared for it. We had, because we had thought about potential dips in attendance begun to build a reserve, a cash reserve, but this is a young institution we opened without an endowment. So we were extremely vulnerable as a result of closure and the lack of attendance and no earned revenue, part of our austerity budgeting, we, you know, slash compensation. And we also had to make the heartbreaking decision to reduce our workforce, which we did by a stunning 60%. And I have to tell you, it was the hardest thing I have ever done in my entire professional career.

Alice Greenwald:

These are people I had worked with some, for almost 14 years members of the executive team down to people who are on the floor of the museum. It was really difficult. And the only way that I could make sense of it honestly, was that it was an amputation to save a life. That's how I had to look at it to get through it. But I think overall, it, it was, it was pragmatic and strangely hopeful because by making the proactive decisions to save the life of the institution, we were actually saying, we believed there was a future.

Scott Rechler:

Yeah. And when we think about it, the way you're describing it, right, was to ensure that we're preserving the nucleus of the values and everything that the museum and Memorial stand for so that we can survive to the other side of COVID. And that, that, that makes a lot of sense. You know, one of the takeaways also, as I listened to you describe this is really the experience that the Memorial museum went through, where similar to so many of the cultural institutions, and there were many that were fortunate enough to be able to have the support of a large board and the staying power to get through this. The other sort of takeaway was how it was almost like a tsunami, right? It just indiscriminate destruction of anything in its way COVID-19 and, and the ability to survive, you know, was challenging even for the best of class institutions, but it's all those smaller cultural institutions and arts and, and small businesses and restaurants that really, you know, they weren't even able to keep that nucleus that you described, right. They've had to shut down. And I think part of the challenge on recovering on the

other side is the, is actually helping reignite those smaller institutions, those smaller businesses, smaller restaurant. That is part of the, the essence of where our, what our city is all about. Right. And that's going to be more challenging as we got there.

Alice Greenwald:

I, I would have to agree, you know, we've reopened the Memorial and the museum now, as you know, and I want those restaurants to come back. I want those resources there. You know, it is part of the fabric of lower Manhattan and the revitalization of lower Manhattan that we saw after nine 11. And, you know, in my heart of hearts, I believe they will, but we are in a holding pattern as we await the resurgence of tourism to our city. And as people get vaccinated and we more and more can resume normal patterns of behavior,

Scott Rechler:

You know, to that point, the museum and Memorial made the decision in July, it's on July 4th to reopen the Memorial and then followed on September 12th to open up the museum. And I thought it was a very bold decision because one of my concerns in COVID versus nine 11 is the sense of an importance that people are placing on civic responsibility and symbolism of moving forward. And, you know, the post nine 11, I recall living through the trauma, but the, the sense of, of the, of the people in the community was, you know, we're not going to let this beat us. We're, we're going to come together and we're going to change the way that we live and the way that we work in the way we operate to know that. And then now have to co-exist with this new threat of terrorism that we never knew existed before this degree. And it hit us in our city, in our Homeland, but we did it. And it was sort of this, this, this mission, this unifying force that we found ways to get people back into the workplace, into the restaurants, into the museums, into the stock exchange, we found a way to move it forward. I think opening while bold was really important symbolically for, for the, for the museum. And I'm curious when you were thinking that through, have you seen that experience of people who have come to the Memorial and come to the museum?

Alice Greenwald:

Absolutely. You know, one thing that happened after nine 11, that couldn't happen with COVID, you will recall that in the immediate days, weeks and months after nine 11, there was this urge to be together with one's loved ones with family, with our neighbors, with the community, you have the vigils immediately in union park, all over the city, union square. You know, you, you had this coming together. And of course the pandemic makes that impossible. We could not from months and months and months come together. So I think one of the motivations and the, the sense of imperative in reopening the Memorial first for the July 4th weekend was that it was a way to provide a safe, outdoor destination where the community could come together safely, that the safety piece of this was critical. We're in a pandemic, but outdoor destinations were permissible. This is an eight acre outdoor park, a Plaza, but it's also this place where you are confronting unimaginable loss and profound grief as a community, but you're surrounded by renewal.

Alice Greenwald:

And those two things together, I think, made this a destination that needed to be available to our city at this moment in time that yes, we could come together to grieve safely, but we could also be reminded that out of disaster, out of the unthinkable, we are able to prevail. We can meet adversity, and that's very much the message of the Memorial, but the imperative, the social responsibility that you

mentioned was really dominant that we had to show that this place of memory and renewal was available for everyone. And people came, they are still coming, you know, by the thousands to the Memorial, because it is a safe place. You know? So I think the, you know, the lesson for me is that these places, these places of culture and authenticity in a virtual moment, when everything else is so virtual, you know, being in a museum, seeing that artwork, face-to-face experiencing the nine 11 Memorial, the, where these events happened, it could not be, it may be the most authentic place in New York city. From that perspective, the place where the 21st century began getting in touch with the authentic is people are hungry for it. And I think part of our job as a cultural organization is to help the public, make it possible, to experience the authentic.

Scott Rechler:

Yeah. Then I think there's a great decision. And one that took a lot of courage at the time, and a lot of ingenuity to think through how that you're going to be able to operate at a time where you had to coexist with COVID in a matter that that was safe and responsible. And I think that we need more of that as we continue to move forward in through this new abnormal and even into the new normal, where COVID really isn't going to disappear, we just have to, re-imagine how we do things in a safe and responsible way, but we need to move this city. This city forward, I want to pivot this year will Mark the 20 years since the, since the attack. And the, you know, as you think about how the museum has evolved really become, you know, a universal symbol of resiliency and recovery.

Scott Rechler:

And, and, you know, for me, as I think about it, you know, one of the moments that sticks in my head the most was having the opportunity to join you after the, the shootings, the horrible shootings at Parkland, and some of the students came to the museum that were in town prescheduled and they came to the museum and had the opportunity to have some of the museum board members that lost some family members and colleagues share their feelings with them and their pain with them, and their sense of hopelessness and how it really, you know, resonated with these, these, these children about that. This is it's normal to feel this way. This is normal. It's not going to go away tomorrow. And that this is, you know, unfair, and, but it's now unfairly a part of their lives that they have to move forward with. And, and so I think as you think about the museum and Memorial, and that sense of being the, this, this hub for resiliency and recovery going forward, you know, I think it's going to be ultra critical coming out of COVID. And I don't want to get your show to take us to, as you think about that, what are ways that you can expand programming or engage differently to ensure that we are, that, that beacon for resiliency and recovery,

Alice Greenwald:

You know, it's so interesting Scott, because of all the experiences I've had at the Memorial museum. And I've had some amazing experiences that visit that you're mentioning of the students who were part of a wind symphony student band, right from the Marjory Stoneman Douglas high school. I learned more in that visit about the mission of the Memorial and that I had ever really understood before. And you really hit the nail on the head. We were told after these kids came, that it was the most meaningful part of their visit to New York. And mind you, this was a group that had been invited to New York, well, before the shooting to perform a Carnegie home. And they made the decision to do that, regardless of what had happened, that it was important to keep their commitment, but they also made the decision to come to the Memorial and museum.

Alice Greenwald:

And it was a very personal decision. One of the members of the band was one of the victims of the shooting. And another member of the band was I believe the niece of a nine 11 recovery worker who was at that time, terminally ill with nine 11 related illness. So they, there was this sense that they needed to almost make a pilgrimage to the nine 11 Memorial and museum. And in the conversation that you're referencing, where members of the board and, and, you know, family members of victims spoke to them, the message really was because we wish we didn't know how you feel, but we do so immediately, there was this sense of calm mom and understanding of people who could see their pain, their disequilibrium, they recognized a commonplace. And there was this sense of, you know, people are good people. Well, meaning people are going to tell you that time heals all wounds, but it won't, it won't, don't be, you know, you know, this pain is going to be with you forever, but even so, because you've gone through this experience, you now live at a deeper level of understanding, okay.

Alice Greenwald:

You know, something other people don't know, we know that because we've lived this, you know, that, and with that deeper level of understanding, you can continue to move forward and be contributing members of your school, community of your water community, and of society as a whole. It was the most affirmative message I had ever heard to people who were literally in extraordinary pain, emotional pain. This is a place that is a Testament to the most profound grief imaginable. The loss of innocent lives in the most horrific attack in our nation's history, you know, in terms of loss of life, by it, you know, due to a, an a, an attack by an outside entity, you know, that this place is sacred ground because it is the place where these horrific things happen, this loss of life. But it's also the place where the current of building back up.

Alice Greenwald:

It's the foundation, literally the foundation for building a better place, a better world. And that message is core to the experience of this museum. So I believe going forward, we have an obligation and I felt this not just in COVID times, but ever since that Marjorie Stoneman Douglas student visit that our job is to balance the obligation to commemoration, which is core to our mission, the need to educate people about what happened on nine 11, why these people died, but maybe the most important thing you want people to take away is how we respond to these things and our capacity for compassion and empathy and service to one another. You know, I believe that when you go through the Memorial museum and you come out onto the Memorial, what you take with you is a profound understanding that there are things that will happen, terrible things that will happen in this world, that we cannot always control.

Alice Greenwald:

We can't control when people with the means and the motivation and the methods to do harm to other people, they'll get away with it. Sometimes we can try our best to prevent it, but there are times when it will happen. COVID, you know, that's not humanly perpetrated, it's a natural event, but it has caused profound, an unthinkable loss of life. Through these horrible things can happen that we have no control over. But the one thing we do have control over is how we respond to them. And when they're humanly perpetrated, yes, you want to hold the perpetrators accountable. But beyond that, you also want to be responsive to the pain and suffering of other people, the need for compassion and the recognition that we are literally all in this together. I always say terrorism is indiscriminate mass murder. It doesn't make distinctions between people's race or nationality or ethnicity or age or workplace, right.

Alice Greenwald:

People from over 90 nations were killed on nine 11. They were two and a half to 85. They were from literally every sector of the workplace of the economy. Every ethnicity it could have been me. That's the message. This is a microcosm of the world. When these things happen, it could have been me. So the first thing, the first obligation we have as human beings is to recognize ourselves in someone else's story, right? And that's where empathy begins. So what I saw three years ago, when those students came to visit was a demonstration of active empathy, right? Recognizing their pain, not white, washing it, not telling them it was going to be okay because it won't be okay, but you can move forward. You have it within you to move forward, to be resilient and to find hope and that's message of this museum. That's what we call nine 12. This is a museum. The nine 11 museum is as much about nine 12 as it is about nine 11. Right?

Scott Rechler:

And it's in this about seats there, those moments of crisis being opportunities for people and institutions to rise to another level and, and have that sense of, of commitment to making things better on the other side. And I think that speaks to how you responded after the Parkland students just joined us. And I think in post COVID into your earlier remarks, as real strong parallels to our healthcare workers and others that have been the front line and have risen to that and have a whole new perspective going forward. So, you know, just shifting again, you recently wrote about the images that have marked various moments in our nation's history, similar to nine 11, and the January six attack was obviously unthinkable to the majority of Americans. And again, a sacred site that was attacked and like nine 11, something that we're going to always remember going to be images in our mind of people just storming the Capitol, climbing the walls, and you know, but we're going to recover and we're going to, we're going to press on. So it, again, from your standpoint, when you think about those images now that are instilled in people's heads, what are the lessons of the, of the days after the attacks of nine 11, that gives you hope for the future when you see something like that?

Alice Greenwald:

Yeah. It's so it's so hard, you know, I do feel that like nine 11 and like other moments in our lifetimes that we'll never forget, you know, I mean, I see a picture of Dr. King behind you and that image of, you know, the, his three associates pointing to the assassin while he's laying at their feet dying, that's an image I will never not have in my head. I will never not have an image of the towers burning. I will never not have an image of what you just described has happened on January 6th. But in the instances that we've seen before, including nine 11, including the profoundly tragic senseless loss of Dr. King, we continued the work. We continued to build the civil rights movement. We've continued to rebuild our city and our nation, you know, and I believe as horrific and unthinkable as those events were on January six, we saw something profoundly disturbing that I believe we must believe we can get beyond.

Alice Greenwald:

And the question is, how do we get beyond it? And you and I have discussed. And I actually would love to hear your thoughts on this because, you know, we've talked about the need for listening harder, right? I shared with you one story that again was one of those moments in my amazing experience with this Memorial and museum that I will never forget, but it was a teaching moment for me. And that was with president George W. Bush. A group of us had gone out to Dallas, to his offices to film him for a video that we show in the museum. And before the taping, he invited us into his office to kind of relax



and chat. And he's a very chatty kind of guy. And he was sitting behind his desk and he looks at me and he says, so you want another lesson at nine 11?

Alice Greenwald:

And I'm a little taken aback. And I'm like, okay. Yeah. Why don't you tell me, sir, please tell me what you think the lesson of nine 11 is. And he looked at me and he said the following, and I've never forgotten it. He said, if we do not recognize that the circumstances under which people live elsewhere has a direct impact on our national security. Then we have missed the lesson of nine 11. And I would have to say, when I think about January six, maybe we have to confront the fact that the circumstances under which people live here can also have an impact on our national security. And so how do we become more active listeners, more cognizant of what's going on so that these things do not have to happen. And we can find other ways to negotiate differences than terrorist activity or extreme violence. I'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

Scott Rechler:

Yeah, no, I, I, I think then that George Bush story is, is, is terrific. And I think it resonates in your point of bringing it back domestically. I mean, I was coincidentally being interviewed by Fox business, watching this live unfold on, on TV. And they asked me what my impressions were. And I said, you know, it really invoked the same feelings that I had during nine 11 when I was watching the trade centers, attacked, you know, the sacred sites, symbolism of that and the pain that you felt, how could this possibly be happening at that time? But as you noted that that for was, was foreign terrorist attacking our, our, our domestic land versus here. We had the citizens attacking the sacred side of, of the, the Capitol. And so, you know, it, it's obviously really disturbing. I have no sympathy for the, those terrorists. And I think as you pointed out, they need to be held accountable, but I also, you know, as you think back and take a step back and take a breath away, going back to your conversation with the former president Bush is you, you realize that this tack didn't happen in a vacuum, right?

Scott Rechler:

It felt like the culmination of years and anger of anger and division, that's been fermenting in our country. And so there's emotional aspects, not only of the attack itself, but how we ended up where we are today, because whether some people like it or not, you know, with the exception of Joe Biden, more Americans voted for Donald Trump than any other candidate for president in history. So, so our country is going through an incredibly rapid change. Inequality was high before COVID COVID is going to widen it to make it even worse. And, and more and more, I think of our, our public are feeling disenfranchised and losing faith in the institutions to give them their fair shot. And, and the, the result of that, I think to your point is they're feeling not heard. And their only way to respond to feel heard is to become more extreme.

Scott Rechler:

And so I think we need to focus on getting into the root of the problem of, of trying to deal with the, the widening inequality and, and making sure that the people's voices are heard. And particularly again, is we're going to be coming out of COVID where a part of this economy is going to be doing extraordinarily well, but there's going to be a wide breadth of this, of our country that are going to continue to suffer. Who's been dislocated from jobs that don't exist anymore, and we don't have systems or policies or processes in place to help them have an opportunity to rebuild their lives for their families. And so, you

know, I think we're at a critical point and that parallel to what happened on nine 11, I think is true today within our country itself.

Alice Greenwald:

Yeah. I agree with you, you know what I talked before about takeaways from the museum experience, and one of the other takeaways of course, is the in defensibility of terrorism or extreme violence as a response to political grievance, you know, just, we got to find other ways to negotiate. We have to find other ways to address the issues and not allow it to get to the point where people's lives are taken. Yeah.

Scott Rechler:

And, and, and, and to your point, even the symbolism, I'll never forget the, you know, again, on nine 11, when, when George W. Bush went down to ground zero in the heat of that moment, and with the bull horn, you know, basically said, we're here, we're here for you. Right. And that, and how that, again, gave us as a country, the courage and the fortitude to move forward in those, in those tart days that, that existed at that time. So to pivot back to New York again, because we're about to have a new mayor in New York, the primaries in, in June. And I want you to imagine that with this new mayor comes into office and wisely appoints you to be the czar of all cultural institutions in, in New York city and, and how they should adapt in a post COVID world to be able to move forward rebuilds for themselves and help our city rebuild and recovery. And if you were in that role, I'm curious, you know, what would some of your key initiatives be?

Alice Greenwald:

Well, first I would politely decline, but let's take this as a hypothetical, you know, a couple of thoughts, one of the great outcomes of this terrible passage we've been in for the last year has been increased regular communication among the various cultural institutions in the city. There's something called the New York city museum round table task force, sharing information strategies, sharing their problems, comparing experiences. And certainly this happened before COVID. But now I think there's an even greater sense of commonality and common purpose that we're all in this together. And, you know, we do better for ourselves if we help each other, which is, it's not competitive, it's supportive, and it's not about competing for the same resources. It's about recognizing what benefits one organization can actually maybe benefit all of them and the city benefits as a result. So, you know, when tourism to New York city does rebound and it will rebound, it's just gonna be on the timetable.

Alice Greenwald:

It's on, we're all going to be, the beneficiary is it's not going to just affect the med or MoMA or the Whitney or the nine 11 one way. It's going to affect really invigorating the entire city. So if I were in that position, I would be looking for ways to leverage financial support in favor of programs that encourage and foster collaboration between institutions. And, you know, I recognize that it's always about resources. So maybe it's not always looking to the city to be the financial savior, because God knows there's enough to be spending resources on, but, you know, my second sort of point of focus would be related to the first but slightly different. And it actually picks up on something you said earlier, which is that like the nine 11 Memorial museum, the cultural sector as a whole has been extremely hard hit in terms of personnel actions, the layoffs, the furloughs, the reductions in comp, the loss of benefits and culture is key to New York.



Alice Greenwald:

City's vitality. And I believe we're at risk of losing talent as a city, out of the sector of culture, into other areas. People will go where they can find a livelihood and we're going to lose, and we've already begun to lose some really, really great talent. So I believe we need to find creative ways to keep people with great work experience, great deep knowledge, and increase the options and opportunities to move them back into the cultural job market, reinvigorate the staffing of cultural organizations, whether through networking or potentially grants and supportive staff development, but also by thinking out of the box. And, and, you know, maybe this is a moment in the cultural world where we have to look at something like job Sharon. Now, if you have somebody who has great expertise in 19th century European painting, well, maybe more than one institution can benefit from that expertise.

Alice Greenwald:

And if you have the collaborative spirit and say, well, this can be a shared job, you know, three weeks, three days a week there, you know, two days a week here, or one week there one week there, you would give that person a full-time job at half the cost for each institution or percentage of the cost. You'd be saving that expertise and talent for the benefit of the city as a whole. And it may be a temporary bandaid, but it may be a model for the future. Maybe we don't need to be spending money in all different places at the same time. Maybe we can work together to achieve what's best for all of these institutions as a, as a whole. So I'd want to be thinking really creatively because the resources are not going to be there immediately. Tourism is not going to come back, you know, in full pre COVID force right away, it's gradual. So while we're in this gradual recovery, let's figure out ways to work together to help each other while helping ourselves.

Scott Rechler:

No, I completely agree. As we recalibrate for world post COVID, we have to think outside the box, we have to think boldly. And we have to think in a more unifying way. And I, you know, thinking about ways that we can leverage each other's skills, expertise in the ingredients that we all can bring to help revive our city separately. Cause they're interconnected. Is it going to be, what are the, the future of our city is going to be all about and that's going to be the path forward. So I completely agree with that. So you can't turn down the mayor if he asks you to be the cultural czar, but I appreciate your thoughts today. This has been a great conversation. I and the city. And it's fortunate to have you, we're fortunate to have you at the Memorial and museum, and hopefully you'll continue to voice your, your insights that you've garnered after all these years more broadly as we go through this process of recalibrating reality. So thank you. Bye-bye bye. That concludes this week's episode of recalibrate reality as recalibrate for world post COVID. We should look to the Christ of the past to provide a model for the future and to give us hope that there will be brighter days ahead. I'd like to thank the national September 11th, Memorial and museum. I'd like to thank the 92nd street Y and the regional plan association. And I'd like to thank the team who made this episode possible from 75 Rockefeller Plaza in New York. See you next week.