Episode Book

EPISODE #5931

What the Council on Vertical Urbanism Actually Decides

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SYNOPSIS

The Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat spent 56 years cataloguing height records — then renamed itself the Council on Vertical Urbanism. Daniel looked up Jerusalem's Marom Tower on its Skyscraper Center database and found a much stranger story underneath: an organisation founded in 1969 by an engineer worried about livability, not records, now handing out trophies that developers put on brochures. Can a body that both chronicles tall buildings and rewards them stay neutral? And does its new "responsible density" language hold up against the tower rising next to Yitzhak Navon station?

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Daniel was walking past the Marom Tower a couple of nights ago. It's the one going up next to the Yitzhak Navon railway station, forty-one stories by his count, and it's already visibly taller than anything around it.



Herman

And he did what any reasonable person does when confronted with a very large building. He went home and looked it up.



Corn

He looked it up on the Skyscraper Center, found that it's set to beat Tower One at Holyland by about fifty-four metres, and then got curious about the thing underneath the database. Which is the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat.



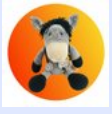
Herman

The organisation behind the website.



Corn

And Daniel's question is really this. He's an admirer of skyscrapers. He's not neutral about them. But he lives in a city that argues about them constantly, heritage, luxury, absentee investors, apartments sitting dark while people can't afford rent. And he's noticed that these criticisms tend to blend the building with the developer, the tower with the policy. So he wants to know whether the international body that studies tall buildings for a living has actually developed serious answers to those criticisms. Or whether the economics of very tall buildings make some of those problems structural.



Herman

Which is a much harder question than it looks.



Corn

It is. So who actually is this council, and why did it just change its name?



Herman

Here's the thing that makes this episode worth doing. The organisation Daniel used to look up a building in Jerusalem is not a passive database. It is the global arbiter of what counts as a tall building, and which one is the tallest in the world. When your building gets a height on the Skyscraper Center, that's not a wiki entry, that's a ruling.



Corn

A ruling from whom, though?



Herman

From an organisation that in October last year dropped the words "tall buildings" from its own name. It's now the Council on Vertical Urbanism. Fifty-six years as the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat, and then the height comes out of the title.



Corn

That's a strange thing for the height people to do.



Herman

It is. Their stated mandate now is to define and steward responsible density in cities worldwide. That's the language. Responsible density.



Corn

So an organisation that spent five decades cataloguing height records has publicly shifted its language away from height. Which either means it worked out that height alone was never the answer, or that somebody in a marketing department needed a new deck.



Herman

And the Jerusalem case is exactly the test. The Marom Tower and the wider Gateway quarter are precisely the kind of project the CVU claims to have principles for. Heritage, density, affordability, community. So we can hold the principles against the actual building.



Corn

Right. Start with what this organisation actually is. Because the name change is the least interesting thing about it.



Herman

The least interesting thing is actually the founding story. It starts in 1969 at Lehigh University, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, with a man named Lynn Beedle. And the body he created was the Joint Committee on Tall Buildings, set up by two engineering associations, the IABSE and the ASCE. It gets renamed the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat in 1976, and in 1979 it's admitted as a UNESCO Category B NGO.



Corn

That last bit is the one that surprises me. UNESCO.



Herman

It gives it standing. It's not just a club of structural engineers. It has a role in the international system.



Corn

Where does the actual idea come from?



Herman

This is the part I find good. Beedle dates it to the afternoon of Friday, the thirteenth of September, 1968, at an engineering congress in New York, right after a talk on tall steel buildings. And what set him off was not a love of height. It was the exploding urban



Herman (continued)

population, and what he called the frequent neglect of human factors at the expense of livability and the quality of life.



Corn

The organisation was founded by a man worried about livability.



Herman

Worried about livability. Not excited about record-breaking.



Corn

That lands differently than I expected.



Herman

And you can see it in the definition he wrote. A tall building, he said, is not defined by its height or number of stories. The important criterion is whether the design is influenced by some aspect of tallness.



Corn

So the definition has nothing to do with size.



Herman

Nothing. It's a design problem, not a measurement. Which means the 2025 rebrand is not a break with the founding idea. It's a return to it, sixty years late.



Corn

The seed was always there. They just finally planted it.



Herman

That's a fair way to put it. Though I'd note the seed sat in a drawer for the better part of six decades while the organisation got famous for the opposite thing.



Corn

The height table.



Herman

The headquarters moves from Lehigh to the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago in October 2003. These days it's based at the Monroe Building in Chicago, with offices in Chicago, Shanghai, Toronto and Venice. And the database, the Skyscraper Center, holds over forty thousand tall buildings.



Corn

Forty thousand. That's a lot of entries.



Herman

It's the reference. If you want to know the floor count, the structural system, the status, the architect of almost anything tall anywhere, that's where you go. And the record side is the famous side. It's the body that confers World's Tallest Building. Which is a title, not a measurement. Somebody has to decide who gets it.



Corn

Who else is in the room? Who actually participates?



Herman

This is where it gets a bit soft. Membership claims diverge. Wikipedia cites over four hundred and fifty thousand individuals. The organisation's own brand launch page claims over a million professionals.



Corn

A factor of two.



Herman

A factor of two, with no explanation attached. And this is an organisation whose entire brand is authoritative data.



Corn

It measures buildings to the metre and its own membership to the nearest half million.



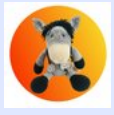
Herman

That's the tension in miniature. Though in fairness, the numbers probably aren't measuring the same thing. One of them may be counting chapter members, event attendees, database contributors. Nobody defines the term.



Corn

Who runs it?



Herman

The CEO is Javier Quintana de Uña. Board chair is Shonn Mills. There's a Wikipedia note listing a previous chair, which is probably just outdated.



Corn

What does it actually do besides keep the database?



Herman

Conferences and world congresses, which are the centre of the calendar. A global awards programme. Research projects, academic collaborations, and more than fifty chapters across six continents. And it publishes Vertical Urbanism Magazine, which used to be the peer-reviewed journal. Plus guidebooks and monographs.



Corn

So it's a conference, a prize, a journal and a database.



Herman

Wearing a single hat.



Corn

And the prize is the interesting bit. Tell me about the awards.



Herman

The big one is Best Tall Building Overall. The 2024 winner was Pan Pacific Orchard in Singapore. A hotel, layered sky terraces, planted voids cut into the mass, greenery all the way up. It's not a glass slab. It's a building designed around air and plants.



Corn

What did that cost, do we know?



Herman

No figure. But the choice tells you what the jury rewards. And 2025 went to ZIN in Noord, Brussels. That one is a mixed-use project, part retrofit, part new build. So two years running, the top prize went to buildings that are not the tallest thing in the room.



Corn

They stopped giving the prize to the record.



Herman

That's the shift, visible in the awards before it was visible in the name.



Corn

And the name. Take me through the four pillars.



Herman

Verticality, sustainability, livability and innovation. Verticality is the layered, connected idea. Skybridges, pedways, transit integrated into the building rather than beside it. Sustainability is embodied carbon, green roofs, vertical forests, the regenerative language. Livability is the one that matters most for today. Schools, markets, health services within walking distance. Rooftop gardens. Vertical courtyards.



Corn

And the fourth?



Herman

Innovation. Inventive, resilient, flexible, holistic. And here's the thing. Under innovation, they list financing structures and regulatory frameworks.



Corn

Financing.



Herman

Financing. They put money in the design pillar.



Corn

Which means they know the money is the design. You can't separate them.



Herman

And housing availability and affordability is named as a driver. That's the phrase. A driver.



Corn

Named as a driver. Not studied as a topic.



Herman

That distinction is going to come back when we get to Jerusalem. Hold it.



Corn

What's the rhetoric around the launch?



Herman

Quintana de Uña's line is that vertical urbanism isn't just about height. It's about designing upward in smarter, more integrated ways to deliver sustainable, connected and human-centered cities. Mills adds that the rebrand reflects what's already happening in fast-growing cities, where density has to be reimagined not as taller towers but as



Herman (continued)

three-dimensional, connected systems.



Corn

Three-dimensional systems. That's the pitch.



Herman

And the empirical case underneath it is the UN projection they lean on. Sixty-eight percent of the world's population urban by 2050.



Corn

So the argument is that the people are coming either way.



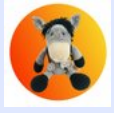
Herman

The people are coming either way. The only question is what shape you build for them.



Corn

Now, the thing I keep circling. This is an organisation that says it is not an advocate for tall buildings. Its own historical sketch says it plainly. It is not an advocate for tall buildings per se, but where they are viable, it encourages the use of the latest knowledge. That's the position.



Herman

And yet it hands out World's Tallest Building, and it gives a prize every year that developers put on their brochures.



Corn

So which is it? Neutral arbiter or tastemaker?



Herman

Both, and the tension is real. The database is a record. The prize is a recommendation. You cannot be a pure chronicler and also hand out the trophy that sells the next project.



Corn

The trophy is the problem. You don't give an award for something you're neutral about.



Herman

A neutral arbiter doesn't have a Best Tall Building. It has a building register.



Corn

So the rebrand is partly an admission. They've noticed that the trophy carries weight.



Herman

I think that's right. And the interesting thing is that they've responded by widening the category rather than abandoning it. The award still exists. But the criteria have moved toward mixed use, retrofit, greenery, public programme.



Corn

They kept the trophy and changed what it's for.



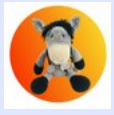
Herman

That's the organisation in one sentence.



Corn

Now bring it back to the building Daniel was standing next to.



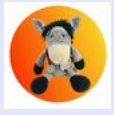
Herman

The Marom Tower. Daniel said forty-one floors. The Skyscraper Center says forty. He's one off, which for a building under construction is basically the same number.



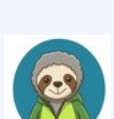
Corn

One floor. I'll allow it.



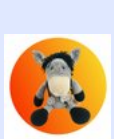
Herman

All concrete, not steel. Office, hotel and museum. Around eighty thousand square metres of tower floor area. Construction started in 2021, completion expected this year. Developer is Yaffo Properties. Design architect is Ian Bader Architects.



Corn

Office, hotel, museum.



Herman

Not a single residential unit in the programme. Which matters enormously for the argument, because the loudest criticism of tall buildings in Jerusalem is that they're luxury apartment blocks for people who don't live here. The tallest thing going up in the city is not that.



Corn

That's the counterexample sitting right there.



Herman

It is. And then look at what it's beating. Holyland Tower One, the current tallest, is a hundred and twenty-one metres, three hundred and ninety-seven feet, thirty-two to thirty-four floors, residential, completed 2009.



Corn

And the Holyland name carries baggage.



Herman

It carries a lot. The Holyland affair is the backdrop to why residents of this city look at a tall residential tower and reach for the worst explanation.



Corn

Fifty-four metres taller, Daniel said.



Herman

Which puts Marom around a hundred and seventy-five metres. But here's the detail I love. The Skyscraper Center lists Marom's height as not yet ratified.



Corn

Not yet ratified by whom?



Herman

By the Council. The same organisation Daniel used to look the building up.



Corn

So the database he trusts lists the building, and the number in it isn't final.



Herman

The building exists. Its height is a proposal until the arbiter signs off.



Corn

That's the whole episode in one line. The record is not the fact.



Herman

And it's not a small thing. The Marom Tower will be the tallest building in Jerusalem, and the organisation that decides what counts as tall hasn't formally agreed on how tall it is.



Corn

Now the Gateway quarter around it.



Herman

Roughly seven hundred dunams. A hundred and seventy-three acres. About twenty towers, up to around forty stories. Between one point two and one point two five million square metres of construction. Around sixty thousand new jobs. About one point four billion shekels in initial investment.



Corn

Sixty thousand jobs is the public-good argument.



Herman

It's the strongest card they have. And it sits against the criticism that this is a quarter for capital, not for people.



Corn

What do the planners say about heritage? Because that's the fight in this city.



Herman

Their line is that Jerusalem cannot expand its borders, so it must densify. And they acknowledge, in the same breath, that residents worry about a building spree changing the character of the capital.



Corn

They concede the point and build anyway.



Herman

They concede the concern and reject the conclusion. The argument is that the alternative to density is not a preserved low-rise Jerusalem. The alternative is a different kind of growth, further out, on land the city doesn't have.



Corn

So the choice isn't towers or heritage. It's towers or a sprawl that eats something else.



Herman

That's their case. And it's a serious case. It deserves to be argued on those terms, not dismissed.



Corn

And what Daniel is getting at is the distinction underneath all of it. That the criticism blends the building with the decisions around it.



Herman

And the CVU's own pillars actually support that distinction. Financing structures and regulatory frameworks sit under innovation. Housing availability and affordability is named as a driver. The organisation treats those as design-and-policy variables. Not as properties of tallness itself.



Corn

Which is the opposite of what the critics assume. They assume the height causes the problem.



Herman

The CVU's position is that the height is neutral and the framework around it is not.



Corn

Do they prove it?



Herman

No. And this is where the episode gets honest. I went looking for the organisation's research on affordability and the economics of tall buildings. There isn't any that I could find.



Corn

None?



Herman

Nothing dedicated. No study, no metric, no policy paper. The pillars name affordability as a driver, and that's where it stops. Adjectives, not numbers.



Corn

So they've measured height for fifty-six years and housing affordability for zero.



Herman

That's the asymmetry. An organisation that spent half a century building the world's most precise height database has not produced a comparable body of work on who actually lives in the buildings.



Corn

The industry's central body measures height in metres and affordability in adjectives.



Herman

And that sentence is the finding.



Corn

But I want to push you on Daniel's economic hypothesis. Because this is the hard part. His suspicion is that the engineering and construction costs of very tall buildings make them viable mainly for high-value commercial or residential use. Which would mean some social problems are baked into the economics, not just the policy.



Herman

And the honest answer is that we don't know. Not because the question is unanswerable, but because the organisation best placed to answer it hasn't published the work.



Corn

So it's not refuted. It's not corroborated.



Herman

It's open. And the fact that it's open, after this many years, is itself informative. If the answer were flattering, you'd expect it to be on the website.



Corn

If the answer were flattering, it wouldn't be a question.



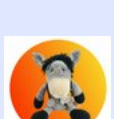
Herman

That's a slightly cynical way to put it, and I don't entirely disagree.



Corn

Let me put the steelman for the towers. The costs of going very tall are real. You need a core, you need a lift system, you need foundations that go down as far as the building goes up. Every extra floor costs more per square metre than the one below it.



Herman

Superlinear cost. That's the phrase.



Corn

And if cost per square metre rises with height, then to make the numbers work, you need revenue per square metre to rise too. Which means premium office, premium hotel, premium apartments. The cheap floors don't exist, because cheap floors don't pay for the core.



Herman

That's the mechanism Daniel is describing. And it's not obviously wrong. It's the economics of the thing.



Corn

But here's where I'd push back on my own case. The Marom Tower is a museum and a hotel.



Herman

A museum is not high revenue per square metre. A museum is often negative revenue per square metre.



Corn

So the pure-economics story doesn't explain the building Daniel was looking at. Something else is going on there. Probably a land deal, probably a public-interest requirement, possibly a developer who wants the address.



Herman

Or a city that wants a landmark at the gateway to its new transit hub.



Corn

Which is a policy decision, not an economic inevitability.



Herman

So the honest position is that the economics push toward high-value use, but they don't determine it. A city can buy the difference with zoning, with incentives, with a land grant.



Corn

And that's the answer to Daniel's question, isn't it. The social problems aren't embedded in the height. They're embedded in the deal.



Herman

I think that's close. The height raises the floor on what the building has to earn. What it earns and who pays is still a choice somebody makes.



Corn

Now let's take the CVU's own framing seriously. Can vertical development be economically viable, architecturally sensitive and socially inclusive at the same time? Their four pillars say yes.



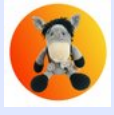
Herman

If you design for all four at once. Verticality, sustainability, livability, innovation. The pillars are the answer.



Corn

But pillars are principles, not evidence.



Herman

Principles, not evidence. And I think that's the fairest verdict on the whole organisation. It has moved from cataloguing to advocating. It has not yet moved from advocating to evidencing.



Corn

It has a position and a press release.



Herman

It has a position, a press release, a prize and a database.



Corn

And the database is the only part with numbers in it.



Herman

The database is the only part with numbers in it.



Corn

Which brings me to the thing that bothers me about the rebrand. If you're going to say responsible density, you've taken on a claim you have to defend. Cataloguing was safe. Advocating is exposed.



Herman

They've taken on a burden they didn't have before. And the mechanism they'd need to carry it, the affordability research, isn't there yet.



Corn

So the name change made them a target.



Herman

It made them answerable. Which may be the point.



Corn

Let's talk about Jerusalem as the test case, because that's where the general argument meets a specific street. If the planners are right that the city cannot expand its borders, then the choice isn't towers or heritage. It's towers or sprawl somewhere else.



Herman

And the CVU's principles will be judged by what actually gets built in the Gateway, not by what the pillars say.



Corn

Which means the interesting question isn't whether the CVU has principles. It's whether the Gateway proves them.



Herman

And we'll know in ten years, not next month.



Corn

That's the problem with urbanism. The feedback loop is longer than a career.



Herman

Longer than a career, shorter than a city.



Corn

Somewhere in this is Daniel's original distinction, and I want to make sure we do it justice. He said the criticisms conflate the buildings with the decisions of developers, investors and policymakers.



Herman

And I think he's right about that, but I'd add a wrinkle. The critics aren't being stupid when they conflate them. They're responding to what they see on the ground.



Corn

Which is dark windows.



Herman

Dark windows in buildings they can't afford, in a city where they can't afford anything. From the street, the difference between the building and the investment decision is invisible. You just see a tower with nobody home.



Corn

So the distinction is intellectually correct and experientially useless.



Herman

The distinction is correct and it doesn't help the person standing outside.



Corn

Which is where policy comes back in. The absentee investor problem isn't a skyscraper problem. It's a tax problem, an ownership-registration problem, a policy problem.



Herman

And it would be exactly as corrosive in a five-storey building. It's just less visible from the bus.



Corn

That's the line. A vacant apartment on the fourth floor and a vacant apartment on the thirtieth are the same social fact. Only one of them blocks your view.



Herman

Which is why the argument about height keeps getting confused with the argument about ownership, when they're separate questions that happen to share an address.



Corn

Let me try to land this. The CVU exists to answer the question Daniel is asking. It has principles for vertical urbanism, it has a prize that rewards the right things, it has a database that's the best in the world at what it measures. And what it doesn't have is the affordability research that would test its own claims.



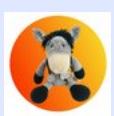
Herman

And the most defensible conclusion is that it's an organisation in transition. It knows height alone was never the answer. It's said so, in its own name. But it hasn't yet replaced the height framework with anything as rigorous.



Corn

It's got the vocabulary and not the numbers. So the short answer to Daniel is yes, the criticisms do conflate things, and no, the international body hasn't produced the research that would settle it.



Herman

And the reason that matters isn't academic. It's that Jerusalem is about to build twenty towers on the strength of the claim that density is responsible. Somebody should be able to check that later.



Corn

The record is the only thing anyone will have.



Herman

And right now the record is height.



Herman

Hang on. Before we go further, I want to flag one thing about how the Council actually decides what counts, because it's stranger than it looks.



Corn

The ratification thing.



Herman

Because the definition Beedle wrote is so loose. If a tall building is anything whose design is influenced by tallness, then almost anything can qualify.



Corn

Which means tall is a category they invented.



Herman

And can redefine. Which means World's Tallest Building is a title they award, not a measurement they take.



Hilbert

It's a measurement. It's just not the one you think.



Corn

Alright.



Hilbert

The height that goes on the record isn't the height of the building. It's the height to the architectural top, and then it depends what counts as the architectural top. That's the argument. It's been the argument since the sixties.



Herman

So somebody decides.



Hilbert

A committee decides. I sat on one. I won't say which. We spent an afternoon on a spire.



Corn

An entire afternoon on a spire.



Hilbert

Whether it counted. Whether it was architecture or ornament. If it counts, the building's a hundred metres taller. If it doesn't, it isn't. Same building. Same steel. Same people living in it.



Herman

And the committee decided?



Hilbert

We voted. It wasn't close enough to be a measurement, so it was a vote.



Corn

How do you vote on a spire?



Hilbert

You vote on it. There were eleven of us. The chair had a train to catch.



Herman

What was the reference material? There must have been precedent.



Hilbert

There was a photocopy. A newsletter from the university, from the seventies. That was the precedent. We passed it around. Some of it was illegible.



Corn

So the ruling on one of the most contested questions in the field rested on a photocopy.



Hilbert

The photocopy and eleven people and a train.



Herman

How did it resolve?



Hilbert

It didn't resolve. We were tied.



Corn

Of course you were.



Hilbert

The chair tossed a coin. Right there, in the room. Heads it counts. Tails it doesn't.



Herman

And?



Hilbert

I'm not going to tell you which side came up.



Corn

You're not going to tell us.



Hilbert

No. I'm not. But I'll tell you I still have the coin. It's in my wallet. I've had it in my wallet since that afternoon and it's brought me nothing but good luck, so it stays.



Herman

You keep the coin that decided a height record in your wallet.



Hilbert

I keep the coin. And the important thing is what it means about the record. It's a coin. Somebody tossed a coin. And that number went on the record and stayed there, because nobody was going to re-open it. Nobody had the time or the appetite.



Corn

The authority is real, and it rests on a coin toss in a basement in Chicago.



Hilbert

Basement, no windows. Four o'clock in the afternoon and no way to know if it was raining. That's how it goes. Somebody has to decide, and the deciding has to stop, because you cannot run a database on a permanent argument.



Herman

The ruling is a decision, not a discovery.



Hilbert

It's a decision. That's what I'm saying. The number on the record isn't the truth of the building. It's what a handful of people were willing to live with on a Tuesday.



Corn

The Marom Tower's height is still listed as unratified.



Hilbert

Because nobody has been willing to live with it yet. Give it a year. Somebody'll toss something.



Corn

Hilbert, that's a remarkable thing to have on your person.



Hilbert

It's a coin. What else would I keep in there.



Herman

Where does that leave Daniel's question about whether skyscrapers can serve the public good?



Corn

In an interesting place, actually. Because Hilbert just told us something we couldn't have got from the website. The record is a decision. The title is a decision. The definition of tall is a decision.



Herman

If the crown is a coin toss, then the building underneath it is a set of choices somebody made. And so is everything that follows from it. Who gets to live there, who gets to build it, what the ground floor does.



Corn

Which is the answer to Daniel's economic question. If the social problems were embedded in the height itself, no decision could change them. But if they're decisions, they're changeable.



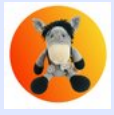
Herman

They're changeable by somebody.



Corn

By somebody. Which is a less reassuring answer and a more accurate one.



Herman

The CVU is one of the somebodies. It has the record, it has the prize, it has the principles. If it wants the next decade to be evidence, that's its call to make.



Corn

It could publish the affordability work. It has the network. Fifty chapters, six continents, forty thousand buildings in the database.



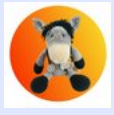
Herman

The data is sitting right there.



Corn

The data is sitting right there and the organisation is currently using it to measure height.



Herman

There's one more thing I want to put on the table, which is the cutting-room floor, and it's this. The definition Beedle wrote in 1968 is a design-problem definition, not a size definition. And the rebrand is essentially the organisation admitting that for fifty-six years it marketed the size and neglected the definition it was founded on.



Corn

The founder was worried about livability and the organisation spent half a century counting metres.



Herman

The name change is the correction.



Corn

Late is better than never.



Herman

The Jerusalem Gateway will be the test case for whether the correction actually took, because twenty towers are going up on the claim that density is responsible. If the CVU never publishes the work, then the claim gets made and never checked, and the only thing we'll have is the height.



Corn

Which somebody decided with a coin.



Herman

Which somebody decided with a coin in a windowless room.



Corn

Daniel started this standing in front of the Marom Tower. And the thing about the building is that it's a fact. The concrete is poured. The floors exist. But its height isn't ratified, its social meaning isn't settled, and whether it proves the CVU's principles or just demonstrates its silence is still open.



Herman

The building is a fact and what it means is still a decision. That's where we leave it.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer, and to that coin, wherever it is.



Herman

If you want more of this, try episode three sixty, The Ghost Towers of Jerusalem; episode four thirteen, The Skyscraper Lie; and episode forty eighteen, Vertical Cities. This has been My Weird Prompts. The human-AI collaboration podcast.



Corn

Send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot. We'll be back soon.

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What the research for this episode read before the script was written. Primary sources first.

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