



## S2:E10 CURATING A CULTURAL POWERHOUSE

### Simon Cane in conversation with Stephanie Fortunato

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[THEME MUSIC]

[00:00:05] **Stephanie Fortunato:** Hello and welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of a series brought to you by AEA Consulting and the Global Cultural Districts Network, in which we explore what's happening around the world at those busy, and sometimes congested intersections of culture and urban life.

You'll find the series and supporting materials at [www.thethreebells.net](http://www.thethreebells.net). And if you like our content, please tell your friends, subscribe and give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice. Today I'm speaking to you from Rhode Island, the ancestral land of the Narraganset, the Wampanoag, the Pokanoket, and other indigenous peoples.

I pay my respects to those who have and continue to live here and to all First Nations people of the many lands on which we are listening from today. My name is Stephanie Fortunato and I'm the Director of Special Projects for the GCDN, and I am super excited about today's episode – an interview with a GCDN member from the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, whose work I've had the chance to learn more about over the past few months.

Simon Cane is Executive Director of UCL Culture, a multifaceted department that uses cultural assets in the form of historic and contemporary collections, performance spaces, public art, and know-how to engage and connect UCL research with the world. His background is rooted in material culture and its preservation.

His work today encompasses a mix of placemaking, public art, and coalition building, and he is equally interested in the power of knowledge and culture, their production and their sharing and impact, all of which we will no doubt come through in our conversation today. And with that, hello Simon.

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**Simon Cane:** Hi Stephanie. How are you doing?

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** Good. How are you?



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**Simon Cane:** I'm really well, thank you, in a relatively warm London today. It's really lovely autumnal day here.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** Let's jump right in here. So I'm always interested in learning more about how people came to be doing what they're doing. And I hope the listeners are too, because I often start my interviews down this path.

But you came from the museum sector starting out as a conservator, then taking on other roles in a range of institutions, culminating as director of Birmingham Museums Trust before you moved to UCL in 2015. In some ways this is an unlikely starting place, but as a museum person myself turned cultural planner, it's also quite a natural evolution.

But how did it happen for you?

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**Simon Cane:** Yeah, like many people, Stephanie, it was kind of by accident. I joined museums when I was 16. I left school when I was 16 years old. And, uh, I was an apprentice at Hampshire County Council Museum Service and we were engaged in the restoration of steam engines, so steam traction engines used on farms, you know, and engineering. So I spent five years, you know, getting my hands dirty, really formative years before I went back into education and then back into work, and then I, I then undertook my master's degree later on in my career. And I just kind of, it was just opportunity, you know, and I was brought up in the countryside on a farm where we used lots of old machinery and I was really interested in mechanics and that kind of thing.

So that's kind of, it suited me at that time to go into that kind of career. You know, it was a very rural setting, you know, the school I went to was okay, but it wasn't great. So it was just, you know, finding my way in. I had an interest in museums. I used to visit them with my mum all the time. Had an interest in history.

So again, just fell into it and then just developed my career through practice. So through working with some really great people, really influenced my career, like, pushed me in different directions and gave me the confidence to try new things. So yeah, I really was started out with that material culture aspect.

But really, the kind of revelation for me was that it's really about people. Stuff's important and I still like stuff, by the way, objects are really important, but it's actually, it's about stories and people that they relate to that, that's what really culture for me is all about.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** What is your role at UCL?



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**Simon Cane:** So, I'm currently leading the programme around cultural engagement, particularly in East London. So we're building new campus on the Olympic Park.

And I started in 2015 before we even broke ground. And it's about how do we connect with those communities around the Olympic Park. How does the university meaningfully impact on those people around the park? How to create opportunities for them? And that's kind of encompassed in the ideas of inclusive growth and economy and inclusive innovation.

So thinking about how we do that, and we are one of five partners on the Olympic Park. So I'm also working on what it means to be a partnership and how we deliver as partners to those local communities.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** Who are those other partners?

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**Simon Cane:** Yeah, I should mention them, shouldn't I? I should.

**Stephanie Fortunato:** (laughs) A little bit.

**Simon Cane:** So the London College of Fashion are moving. They have six campuses across London. They're moving into a, a single campus. Sadler's Wells, London's oldest running theatre, so they're opening a new theatre in East London, which was really focusing on young people and something called the Hip Hop Academy.

The BBC are moving their operations from Maida Vale, which is their sound stage and the Radio Three orchestra. So they're moving all of that down to the East Bank. And the V&A are opening a new museum and moving all of their stored collections to an adjacent site on a place called Here East, where their collections will be accessible to the public.

Um, so we have this kind of powerful combination, a very large, very confident organisations on the whole who have strong profiles and strong presences. And what's really interesting seeing how you develop a partnership between these super confident, you know, world class organisations.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** In doing my research, I read the East Bank work described as a powerhouse for innovation, creativity, and learning. And I think that's exactly what you've just described there. (laughs)

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**Simon Cane:** Yep. It certainly is a powerhouse, but we are contributing to the Olympic legacy. So when 2012 games were first mooted, it was very clear there had to be a legacy for these games. And we hear that this talked about a lot, but there had to be this idea of an inclusive growth and inclusive economy, so benefit flowing through to the local communities.



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**Simon Cane:** So it wasn't simply having a flashy games, having a moment, and then it all kind of crumbling. This was really about creating a lasting legacy, and that's what we're invested in. And it was the London Legacy Development Corporation, I think realised that they needed these kind of anchor institutions. And this is, you know, well understood in our sector, isn't it? In GCDN?

You know, if you want to create a sense of place and you want it to be successful, you need a mixture of activity. You can't simply have housing or industry or tech, you know, you need to bring in a mixture of organisations in the public realm. And that will help to develop an identity and attract people to the space in a different way.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** And so what are you all doing together to help to facilitate that ambitious agenda, um, how are the partners realising uh, some of that ambition today?

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**Simon Cane:** So we're looking at different forms of partnership working. So in terms of the inclusive economy, inclusive growth, we're working together on a programme called New Talent Future Leaders, which we've acquired about a £3 million funding scheme for, which is about developing engagement with schools um, to make them more aware, young people, more aware of careers in the cultural sector. And this is about a talent pipeline. So it's looking at all that fantastic talent in the boroughs who wouldn't normally perhaps access, you know, careers in the cultural sector. So we start with the schools. We then introduce them to cultural organisations. So create opportunities for them to engage, go behind the scenes, learn about what goes on in a cultural organisation, the roles that you could undertake.

We then support a range of traineeships in these organisations. We're developing an apprenticeship programme as well. And we also have something called the Freelance Exchange where we are creating mentoring for young people. And with that sort of 18 to 30 who are moving into the, the gig economy to help them understand, you know, what it means to be a freelancer.

So how everything from how do you do taxes, to how to network. So we have this range of activities and the idea is that we create new routes in for those young people from the boroughs. And these boroughs are some of the most diverse you'll find in England, yet, let alone London, incredibly diverse boroughs.

And by this means we'll start to see a diversification of our workforces and of the sector, because that's a huge challenge in the UK.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** You know, I think it's interesting because no place is ever a blank space, and when sometimes these developments come, you know, sort of to the conversation, there are developers who are talking about the impact to the community, economic, social, cultural, educational, right?



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**Stephanie Fortunato:** And we don't always see that being embraced as a sort of shared vision of all the partners and players. Uh, what does it mean for you to be coming from a university into these conversations and into these partnerships that are creating this whole host of new opportunities for young people from the boroughs?

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**Simon Cane:** Yep. So first of all, I think we have to tread carefully and we have to acknowledge that there is, there are ecosystems and networks that already exist. So we've tried to be very carefully not stepping on toes. So understanding that ecosystem, engaging with people and what the service provider we work with knows these boroughs very well.

So it's about kind of, we look at models of co-production, so we try and level up the conversation before we start acknowledging the different powers in the room and the different partners, and then working out how we can make that work. We have a youth board that informs these programmes as well, that's run by New Direction, who are our service provider.

So that youth board feeds back in that youth voice into the decision making. So there's a reflective process and we always look to make sure that the youth voice is in there and is not just in there. It's actually front and centre. So they are helping us design programmes, reflecting on those programmes, improve those programmes. We're working with four boroughs. So the way London works, it's divided up into a number of boroughs and there are four designated Olympic boroughs. And of course there are politics involved with that. And we have to understand, you know, the tensions that can occur and think about, well, what do those boroughs need?

Because they all have similar needs, but they also have very specific needs as well. So we have to you know, deal with that tension and calibrate our engagement accordingly. But it's not something you could rush into. This has been developed.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** I'm kind of interested in the art space strategies that you have been helping to implement alongside these partnerships and alongside creating the training opportunities.

What are you doing to together with the other cultural institutions to help facilitate that?

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**Simon Cane:** Yep. So this is quite a challenging space. So what's been going on is the partners tend to work in different sets, so not all the time is it all the partners working together. So there might be projects where certain partners work together, say BBC, Sadler's Wells, V&A, and London College of Fashion.

So there, there's different sort of pairings and different combinations of partners.



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**Simon Cane:** But one, our most recent project to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Olympic Games, we've just celebrated that in August 2022, was a programme of cultural events in the park where we jointly appointed a curatorial platform that was led by gal-dem who are a major arts collective in London who put on a major series of art interventions.

So they work specifically with young people of colour from marginalised genders and they commissioned four artists to think about their daily lives and how they've been changed by the pandemic and they had manifestations on the park. So literally, you know, we had artworks who were put together and placed in and around the park.

And then we also had a large scale performance piece that they created with young people from the area. And that was in, in partnership particularly with Sadler's Wells. So it was a dance and song piece that was then projected onto the sides of the buildings down of the new buildings we're creating in the park.

So that's a really good example of where the partnership sort of came together to develop a shared programme. And this was our first kind of toe in the water to think about how we might want to work in the future. We're very interested in how, how we can come together to, to animate these public spaces collectively rather than it being led by an individual.

So it was a really interesting piece of work for us. Quite challenging actually.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** Can you speak a little bit to some of the challenges?

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**Simon Cane:** So, number one, resourcing. So the expectations from some of our stakeholders was quite significant. And as all anyone listening to this will know, putting on high profile public programming is an expensive business. So, first of all, we didn't necessarily have the resources that we would like, so we had to work smart.

And then you've got five organisations, so you've literally got to work out what's communication and what's the decision making structure between those organisations and how do we ensure that the content we are producing reflects well on those organisations. And there are no surprises in there for any of those organisations.

So it, it's super challenging space to come into, given that everybody also has a day job around this. So everyone's involved in projects delivery around their own projects. So this is done as an additional piece of work. So that creates additional stress and strain on individuals.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** I can't ask you for a favour because that wouldn't be fair, but can you share one of the more impactful or meaningful partnerships with an artist that you've been able to facilitate there?



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**Simon Cane:** Well, that's a good question. I'm just gonna try and cast my mind back to some of the work that we've done. So there was a project called H is for Hostile Environment by Edwin Mingard and Keren Weitzberg.

So they created a moving image piece that explores the issue of migration and asylum-seeking in East London. So this generates from the government, the government at the time and previously have talked about this idea of a hostile environment for immigrants. And this piece really describes and explores that from the perspective of the immigrant, from a number of immigrants in London who find themselves become non-citizens because of their status becomes non, you know, non-citizen status. Some of those are people who've lived here for some time, and it's a really powerful piece of filmmaking that tells this story in such a powerful way, these individual stories.

But the common thread is whether they'll be people who arrived a few months ago or whether they've been here for 20, 30 years. This hostile environment was created for them, and it's a very, very moving piece. So Keren Weitzberg is an interdisciplinary historian, so she works at the intersection of science and technology studies at UCL.

So she's looked, she's done a book on- it's working with the borders around Somalia and the predicaments of belonging in Kenya, for instance. And then Edward Mingard is a socially engaged artist. And then obviously they engaged with individuals on a very personal level and it's very personal form, and it's all the more powerful for understanding that, and it looks at different ages and so forth.

So it, it's a stunning piece of work and really makes us, gives us pause for thought and really shows the power for me of that kind of cultural intervention to tell a story and to shine a light on it. And quite clearly shows some of the absurdities that, that come up when we start to take these kind of, these exclusive views of the world and we see ourselves as isolationists and obviously in a post Brexit Britain, it's obviously even resonates even more.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** I wanna come back to something which is your um, roots, as a conservator.

Thinking about material culture, thinking about the stories that we tell from objects, I know you've done a lot of work in thinking about iconoclasm, and I wondered if you would just give us a little insight to some of your thoughts about that, the changing narratives.

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**Simon Cane:** Yeah. Well, it's been an interesting week, hasn't it? Because we've had, the oil protestors throwing a can of soup at the Van Gogh sunflowers in the UK and then gluing themselves to the frame, and that's been replicated around the world.



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**Simon Cane:** And it's been really interesting, you know, listening, there's outrage, obviously the, the easy reaction to this is outrage. And so everybody gets outraged at these young people doing these terrible things and it's doing no good whatsoever. But I would say, well, art and whether it be public art, you know, in terms of statues and so forth, it's always acted as a lightning rod for discussion and debate.

It's been used time and memorial for people to express their feelings or their um, anger about certain issues. And I think it's quite healthy in a way. Now, the care of the work is clearly paramount, obviously from a, with a conservator's head. I care about the work and I don't want it to be damaged.

However, I can't outright condemn those people for what they're doing because they feel so strongly and their point is that actually this painting won't matter if by 2050 we haven't dealt with the issue of the climate crisis. Now, does it justify they're attacking the picture?

Probably not. But we need to think more carefully about this and we need to understand it in the broader context. The danger is, and what my real concern in terms of the response to this and the government, also the government's response to the removal of the coast and statue around Black Lives Matter is to bring in more laws to limit people's power to protest.

And that really worries me. You know, I don't want the idea of preservation of art become a mechanism by which we reduce people's ability to protest. That's counterintuitive and frankly ridiculous. So we have to, you know, we have to kind of take that on board. And the other option is that we start to put so much protection around the art of course that it becomes, you know, you can't actually get near it or it's so overly protected that you can't really enjoy it.

There's a balance here, as a conservator, people are often surprised me to talk like this, but it isn't, I absolutely believe in the protection of our cultural heritage, and it's very important that we preserve it. But not at any cost. You know, there has to be, there must be some balance here for me, and particularly that point about the idea that the protection of art becomes a mechanism by which we suppress protest is simply, yeah, simply unacceptable to me.

So it's complicated, right? And I understand people's, people respond very emotionally to this, and there's nothing wrong with that, but it's a, it's usually more complicated and complex than we think.

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Well, it's just sort of like real life, I suppose. (laughs)

**Simon Cane:** Yeah. Indeed. And particularly statues. I mean, the Rhode statue, you know, and you need to understand what lies behind it. So Rhodes must fall. For instance, the statue at the University of Rhodes here, the University of South Africa, Cape Town, you know, the university, the, everybody wanted, the students, staff wanted it removed.





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**Simon Cane:** The university said, oh, we'll review it. So they the people there said this is not acceptable. We're going to, we are gonna remove it ourselves because we're not gonna have a, you know, a process around it. It needs to go. And it was the same in Bristol with the taking down of the Colston statue, which is a really significant moment in this country.

There was a whole history behind that moment, a whole history of inaction. And again, the response from a government level was to try and think about different legislation to restrict, to, to increase powers of police and so forth and restrict people's liberties. So I think that what we are seeing as a result, all of this protest that came out of Black Lives Matter is you know, some might describe it as a festering sore, but these issues, these issues of oppression have been repressed, have been squashed, and they're coming out and you can't get away with it.

You know, they, we, it will come out eventually, and this is simply the time for it to happen. And that we have to address that in a really considered and grown up way and listen to the voices, the various voices. Not just one side or the other, but we need to try and bring some balance. And it's very hard to bring balance into some of those spaces because there's a lot of hurt um, and it may be uncomfortable and it is, for me, I find it personally, I find it really uncomfortable, but we have to do that. You know, it's not something that we can dodge. Um, for me, that's what a lot of these protests are about, is saying, actually we have to deal with this. And we, and I agree with that.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** I mean, actually before when you were talking about some of the challenges of putting together the cultural programmes this past summer at East Bank, I imagined that it was some of the content that the youths were putting forward and the artworks that they were creating that might have been some of that challenging context there.

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**Simon Cane:** Absolutely. And the organisation gal-dem, who we used, you know, are, you know, some might describe them as radical, but their role is to challenge. And, you know, and there is that idea that art should, how, what's the phrase? You know, it should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comforted, you know?

It's, and really that's what it's about for me and also I've always believed that, you know, you need some grit in the oyster.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** I wanna take a minute to go back to place. We've talked a little bit about what's going on at East Bank, and that's only one of the areas of London where you are at the centre of a set of complex partnerships and collaborations. I know you're also the chair of the Knowledge Quarter or KQ. Can you tell us a little bit about what's going on there?



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**Simon Cane:** Yep. So the Knowledge Quarter is based in the King's Cross area of London. So if you know London, it's right next to St. Pancras. If you come in on the train from France and then we draw a mile radius around that, and it's just this incredibly rich mix of, you know, 23 cultural institutions.

It's, it's huge cause we have the British Library, the British Museum, but we also have, you know, small theatres and all these people are members of the KQ and the KQ is founded on the basis that all these organisations were coexisting but weren't really talking to each other.

So the KQ is really that part of that, that Venn diagram where you have economic assets, physical spaces, and networking assets. And really the KQ is the networking asset. What we do is create a space to enable conversations to happen between these knowledge generating organisations. Thinking again, from the perspective of how do we create positive impact in the communities around Camden and Islington, which is the two London boroughs that we cover.

And it's a super interesting place to be and we are now- the KQ started 2014, and we're just about to open our first public space at the end of next year. So I'm really excited about that.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** Well, what will that public space look like?

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**Simon Cane:** So we are partnering with an organisation called Impact Hub, who are a workspace. And what we want to do is create a public space where we can hold workshops. What limits us really is our imagination. So we're gonna have a space where people can drop in, where we can have workshops that's open to the community.

So all the communities, I should say, around the KQ. This area is phenomenal in terms of its GVA (gross value added) is nearly equivalent to that, the city of London.

And this already grew out of the redevelopment of the King's Cross area. And if anybody knows, knew what King's Cross was like before it was redeveloped, it really wasn't a place you went. Certainly not after six o'clock in the evening, unless you're up to no good really. But it was a place to rave. So some good stuff did happen there too. But it's, that's a 26 hectare site, which now has Google's HQ there, number of larger organisations, The Guardian are there. And this is an incredibly rich mix of organisations that have moved in and uh, our membership's grown actually. So we're nearer 70,000 staff.

And the principle of the KQ, so it's a membership organisation, it is paid for by subscription. We have a small core staff but it's for all sectors. So if you're involved with knowledge generation, knowledge dissemination, then you can be a member and all staff are members. So we've created professional networks and then we've done work such as the science innovation audit, which is really looking at what the development of the King's Cross area could look like.



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**Simon Cane:** And we're working with Camden. They're working on a spatial plan for the area called KQ 20 to 2050. So it's, they're really looking into the future and the principles of the KQ are being built into that. So they're asking to developers to think about, well, urban campuses and this idea that we need to create these mixed spaces.

So it, you know, residential sitting alongside knowledge generating organisations, but there needs to be coffee shops, there need to be theatre and other cultural activities. So again, this idea that city campuses is very much the future and that they need to be vibrant. And to do that, you need a, you need a range of activities happening in there. And so the KQ has been very successful in kind of engaging partners around those, those challenges.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** Mm, and so I like this idea or the concept of a city campus. How do you think about what happens on the borders of that campus and how these sort of new or, you know, recent developments uh, what's the relationship between that and the older parts of the city?

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**Simon Cane:** That's a really good question. We've created this border. It's fairly artificial. We've just said, you know, we've got this, this one mile radius, and that was more to do with, with what we felt we could manage in terms of scale.

And London is very densely packed as well. So you've got a lot of people packed in a small space with a huge variety. But I guess borders are always arbitrary and they're always problematic, right? But what there is clearly, is happening from the King's cross development is there's a bit of a ripple.

So you are seeing the developments pushing outside. And indeed what we're seeing is a corridor kind of opening up from King's Cross leading all the way down to East London, which guess what? To the Olympic Park. So we're seeing this corridor of opportunities opening up and this common corridor of innovation opening up. But again, at the heart of the KQ is this idea of inclusive growth and inclusive economy, inclusive innovation. So we are very concerned, again, to help organisations. How do we create opportunities? How do we feed back into the communities? And so we wanna help the organisations in the KQ who connect with communities in meaningful ways.

So for instance, we are looking at you know, can we create a carbon offset programme for the KQ. So this is really taking this idea of carbon offset, which kind of exists, you know, a much more meta macro level and saying, well, can we create a system of credits that can work at a community level?

And that's funded through GLA Future Neighbourhoods 2030. And that is a way of connecting people directly with the issue of climate change.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** Well, this is a really important way of reporting back or feeding back.



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**Stephanie Fortunato:** You know, the things that we can do as individuals to get us towards some of those larger policy goals. You know, you've talked about the 2030 moment and then the vision for 2050, but how would I then find out what the impact of all of that was? Is that a website or how are you sharing that back with the public?

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**Simon Cane:** Yep. So the website is the main space to do that. And of course, impact is always the most challenging thing to, to demonstrate, isn't it? So I think that the impact that we have is in the organisation, so a lot of the work isn't necessarily visible. Um, as a membership organisation, it's you know, we are accountable to the membership first and foremost, and it's a question of how do we ensure that we are showing the membership, the benefits that they're bringing from being in this thing and paying the money to be members of it.

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Simon, I know a little something about that. (laughs)

**Simon Cane:** (laughs) Indeed, indeed.

**Stephanie Fortunato:** And I didn't mean to ask you to, you know, answer all of the questions. I was just curious.

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**Simon Cane:** No, it's, it is an interesting challenge, isn't it? It's how do we evidence the impact that we're having? And you know, if I look, just to go back to the Olympic Park for a second, all of the partners, the five partners, have signed up to a set of strategic objectives, which are largely about people, place, economy. Um, without going to too much detail, there's about 70 indicators in there. And I think that the project, if we get this right and well, I think we are getting it right, within sort of the next 10 years, it will, there will be a fantastic set of longitudinal data that will be available for research to really start to understand the impact across those data sets, which are quite broad.

So is everything looking at employment statistics, you know, in terms of equality and diversity all the way through to land values and so on and so forth. So there will be a set of data there. Whether we could do something like that in the KQ is an interesting challenge. What we do do though, is pull some of that data together for various studies.

So, we'll, we act, we're a bit like a business investment district. We're a bit like an observatory. And then we're also a bit like an innovator accelerator. We're a bit of all of those things, plus being a good membership organisation. It's fundamentally quite a hybrid model because it's not owned by, it's owned by the membership.

It's not funded through the state or government or local authorities in any way. It's paid for by the membership. So it's driven in a different, a slightly different way.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** Which is kind of interesting to think about how you'll be able to measure those strategic objectives in the East Bank maybe in a different way, right? Cause you'll have had this plan going in, so you'll be able to measure change over time.



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**Simon Cane:** Well, there's quant isn't there? So we, you know, the quantitative ones are relatively easy, well, I say relatively easy, but they are relatively easy to gather and understand. And most people, like the governments, like the quantitative ones, cause they are, you know, they're harder, you know, I don't like the word, but these harder indicators, these economic indicators.

But we are also working to gather narrative. And, you know, the narratives for me, for instance, will be around how we have changed or influenced the lives of those young people who've been through our programmes, who then go on to develop careers and do things that they, you know, that we've opened up those opportunities.

That narrative for me is very important. That doesn't always get the same value in waiting because it's, you know, it's harder to objectify in some ways. It's more subjective, but equally important for us. And we get that it's really important about understanding that narrative. And our aim is to develop an approach that- we've done a number of impact reports actually to date which reflect this.

So we've already started that piece of work, but it is that qualitative narrative is important and those stories can be indicative that things are changing and that you are changing things. And interestingly the, the challenges that the boroughs face, you know, in East London are not dissimilar to the challenges in Camden and Islington, although they are slightly different.

But, you know, we still have, and in London we still have very rich, you know, businesses and community and rich individuals living alongside pockets of poverty. And huge numbers of immigrant communities who are trying to find their way.

And we have to, you know, it's recognising that and responding to that as a district. So that's the KQ is very much about understanding that these are these communities and they should have a, an equal voice in, in, in the area. And obviously the borough councils obviously buy into that as well, but there's, there are significant challenges here.

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**Stephanie Fortunato:** I mean, those disparities actually, I mean, that puts into greater focus the importance of bringing artists to bear in these conversations and finding ways to really illuminate the impact of what's going on in the boroughs, right? It's that arts and humanities based thinking that actually, for me, is the most interesting part of what's happening in these places.

And, and cause it is those stories that will remember, that's the history that, that will be told in some way. And that's the real legacy of these projects and efforts.

[00:31:26]

**Simon Cane:** Yeah I couldn't agree more. And we have, you know, we look at particularly that those theatres, we have a number of small theatres in the KQ and all of them have really strong community and youth engagement programmes. You know, it's just, it's phenomenal the work that they're doing. So they are engaging with them, reflecting as part of their core business.



[00:31:45]

**Simon Cane:** It's about how do they support and engage and empower those local communities through the power of their art, you know, through the power of performance. And it's really impressive stuff. And even, we recently did a life sciences breakfast, for instance. So we had some really big organisations around the table as well as some smaller ones.

And what was really interesting for me, I chaired this breakfast and what was really driving people was how they could engage with communities and how they could be, how do we create opportunities for young people and people from these districts to develop careers, to find jobs, and the arts are often a way into that. Again, coming back to this point of the brokery, how do you break down barriers and through performance and through art and through thinking about culture, we can start to address that.

Because it's about, for me, culture really is about understanding. And if we develop understanding, we develop trust. If we don't have understanding, we simply have fear. And that's the difference. You know, if we have fear, then that leads to segregation and so forth and exclusion. and culture for me is the vehicle by which we address those issues that we start to develop understanding and engagement, and then we remove, you know, we start to remove that fear.

And I think going back to the H is for Hostile project, it was simply trying to shine a light saying, you know, these people are human beings and we should be caring for them better than we are. And that's for me is the power the cultural piece and particularly of the arts in all its forms.

It acts as that lens through which we can develop understanding.

[00:33:16]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Yeah. I mean, I think seeing the humanity in another person, really. I mean, we can talk about inclusive growth and innovation and creativity, but it's that, right? We need culture to be able to have that experience, that shared experience there. I think it's really actually this would, is a nice moment to bring together the work that you are doing, the intentionality about creating platforms for youth to not only realise their own power, but to really lead us going forward and lead this cultural shift.

But also the intention of centring inclusive growth and all that we do. I think that's a really important principle that we really do have to keep in mind. And thank you so much for really illuminating all of the reasons why that is so important in the here and now to really consider in everyday work.

**Simon Cane:** Thank you, Stephanie. It's been a pleasure talking to you.

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Ah, such a pleasure. I've learned so much. Thank you, Simon!

**Simon Cane:** You're welcome.

[00:34:16]

MUSIC TRANSITION



[00:34:19]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** Listeners, if you want more, check out [www.thethreebells.net](http://www.thethreebells.net) to find all the external references and resources linked to this episode, and of course, to learn more about Simon's brilliant work. But first, let's talk about what's keeping me up at night. Since our fearless leader, Adrian Ellis, conceived of this new segment and Criena Gehrke gave it its name, both have delivered brilliantly.

So I suppose the thing keeping me up tonight is, well yes, in part procrastination and in part the challenge of writing something worthy of my co-hosts. And you, our listeners, of course, as I finally set out to write this editorial, it is Election Night Eve and I am wrestling with an underlying uneasiness about the state of our democracy. 2022 is a midterm election cycle in the US and there are still several worrisome races on the ballot.

By the time we release this episode, I hope we'll know the outcome of the elections in most races. However, I've learned not to take that for granted. Heading into election season, I worked hard to keep as much speculation about battleground elections at a distance. I like governance, politics less so, and the nagging thought keeping me from sleep is a real concern for democracy here and abroad.

This fear found perch in my mind a little while ago, and despite my limited news intake, it gains more traction with each headline, podcast and social media post I see. Basic freedoms I once took for granted are disappearing or endangered.

Public trust in institutions continues to decline. Populism is on the rise in the US and around the world, and alongside it, nationalism. What a moment for me to make the shift from working in local government to a global network! And yet, has there ever been a more important moment to widen our circles, acknowledge our interdependence, and seek effective responses to the challenges of our day collectively? To try to make sense of this all I turn, not to the 24 hour news cycle, but to the arts news instead. A place where history and the making and freedoms of all sorts are usually front and centre. While not the sole purpose, arts and culture are good platforms for bringing attention to communities, to issues, and to inspiring action that is needed to create change.

We heard Simon speak about this, including the recent spate of Just Stop Oil protests taking place at museums around the world in which activists are using masterpieces in service to climate justice. I've read a range of opinions and reactions, but a recent article by Katy Hessel in The Guardian resonates strongly with me. In it, she effectively contextualises these actions to draw attention and spark controversy within the histories of art, cultural institutions, movement building, and social change. Hessel's article is part of an excellent new biweekly series where she discusses art made by women that speak to today's news agenda.

And it is part of the work happening across the cultural sector to open up the ways communities access culture, rewrite expanded narratives and find new opportunities to bring people and cultures previously missing from the record to the fore. We focus on cities as the nexus of cultural activity on The Three Bells, but to paraphrase the great T Swift, makers gotta make, and creatives are impacting their local communities at some scale all over the world.



[00:37:45]

**Stephanie Fortunato:** The cultural sector needs political leadership at all levels of government, as well as momentum fuelled by activism to secure resources, investments, and opportunities for artists and creatives to thrive in their communities, to innovate and to make change. And communities need artists to activate what I have heard called our civic imagination.

When you work with community, with humans, you are working with an imperfect system. For meaningful change, you have to trust in a shared vision, in the creative process that has been forged in partnership and most of all in the people you have an affinity for and those that you don't. Just like in a democracy. I guess I'm still sorting it out.

At the end of the day, the personal is political. I wanted to leave you with a few final words of wisdom from Simon sent in a follow up email. He writes: It is all about making a difference for me, and it always has been. I came out of the post-punk era with its DIY ethos and the energy from that scene, and this attitude has stayed with me throughout my career.

It looks like we have some difficult years ahead here in the UK in terms of the economy, but experience has taught me that the cultural sector is a resilient one, and more often than not, some of the best ideas are born of adversity. Keep calm and listen to Iggy. That's good advice, but I think I'll wait for the morning to listen to Iggy. It'll be the perfect soundtrack for election results.

I am very grateful to Simon Cane for offering us his insights and his playlist.

[00:39:18]

THEME MUSIC

The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting for the Global Cultural Districts Network. You'll find an archive of episodes and supporting materials for the show at [www.thethreebells.net](http://www.thethreebells.net). Be sure to subscribe and rate us on your podcast listening platform of. My name is Stephanie Fortunato. Thank you so much for listening, and I'm looking forward to joining you again soon.

