S3:E5 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN CULTURAL DISTRICTS

Helen Kearney & Kat Pegler

in conversation with Stephanie Fortunato

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THEME MUSIC

[00:00:04]
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 cultural and urban life.

My name is Stephanie Fortunato, Director of Special Projects for GCDN, and I'm speaking to you from Rhode Island, the ancestral land of the Narragansett, the Pokanoket, the Nipmuc, and other Indigenous peoples. I pay my respects to those who have and continue to live here, and to all First Nations people on the many lands on which we're listening from today.

Today I am super excited to be talking with the authors of a recent report on sustainable development in cultural districts around the globe. The piece was commissioned by the City of London public realm team, a key partner in what was Culture Mile—is now Destination City—undertaken in collaboration with GCDN.

GCDN helped facilitate consultation with member districts, and the final report includes case studies of several GCDN members and details the impacts of climate change, how these cultural districts are responding in practice and operations and points to some ways we might utilise the design of public spaces in moving cities toward greater sustainability and resiliency.

We have two authors here: Helen Kearney, a project manager, writer and historian who specialises in design, architecture, and the development of cities. And Kat Pegler, a researcher and creative in the climate arts sector specialising in eco-artivism, and co-founder of Leo, an alternative reading platform for creatives with dyslexia.

Helen and Kat, welcome.

[00:01:50]
Helen Kearney: Hello.

[00:01:51]
Kat Pegler: Hi.

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[00:01:52]
Stephanie Fortunato: I am super excited to get into this really excellent and very practical report with the two of you, and there's a lot to get into our conversation, so I wanna jump into that. Um, Helen, what was your role in pulling this report together?

[00:02:09]
Helen Kearney: I was thinking about this actually and it's a fairly long story, but what happened was, I was a project manager working for the City of London at the time and I was working on a project to redesign a new cultural district in the city around Smithfield meat market. Um, and as part of that project, um, we had to put together a series of key, kind of strategic outcomes.

One of those outcomes was that we wanted the project to be an exemplar for sustainability in public realm design. And I thought: "Great! That sounds, that sounds really good." Of, of course we want to be, you know, the exemplar for sustainability.

And it was only sort of later, after we'd done this exercise that I was thinking about—I thought: "Gosh, I'm the project manager for this project. I'm not sure I know what being the exemplar of sustainability in public realm design is, it's like, what that means?

So, it was very early on in that project where I talked to my employees at the city and said: "Well, can we do some research actually, into what it is to really, sort of push the sustainability agenda when it comes to public realm design?"

And so the project really came out of that. It came from a very practical need for a public realm design project in a specific part of London. It then became something completely different, but it did come from that idea of saying, well, we, we need some really kind of practical things that we can implement here for this new district that's being designed in London.

So yeah, we, we decided to set up the research, talked to Tim Jones, who was the director of Culture Mile, and Greg at GCDN. And it looked like it was um, something that could become bigger and could become a bit, bit more wider and could have, sort of, impacts outside of just that project.

And hopefully it could have an impact potentially with, with some of the GCDN partners as well. But that was the original, that was the original start. Then when we talked to Tim Jones and we talked to Greg, we put together a kind of a series of research questions that really were looking at, kind of context and lots of different issues around, sort of governance.

Um, really understanding that any sort of public realm design had to happen within context, I guess. And we had to kind of understand what is the sort of governance structure within which all these changes are happening. And then it very gradually became a sort of research project.

I actually left the city um, stopped working for that project, but carried on the work doing the research report, which was a fantastic kind of opportunity, I suppose.

But yeah, that was the origin story. I dunno, Kat, if you have more to kind of [laughs] say about your involvement with that.

[00:04:28]
Kat Pegler: Yeah, so I guess I was coming from a slightly different background uh, looking specifically into like culture and art. And looking at the role of climate change within that.

And so, when the opportunity came up with the City of London, and to work with Helen, I just thought it was absolutely brilliant to kind of get more insight into how different cultural districts across the world were reacting to the climate crisis.

[00:04:48]
Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah. I mean, I have to say, I think it is one of the most practical, yet rigorous reports that I've read in a really long time. So, kudos to both of you for taking in a great deal of context, um, but making it something that I think most readers can put into action pretty easily.

I'm kind of curious about how that methodology came together, um, because I think it is the structure of the report that makes it so readable and so actionable. Could you talk a little bit about that?

[00:05:20]
Helen Kearney: So what happened was, we ended up having this sort of almost dual approach where there was this very practical set of outcomes that I needed for the project itself. But then the more we talked to other people about this, we understood the need to have a kind of strategic and governance related information as well that provided a sort of background.

Um, so we had these kind of two separate paths. And then, um, just by again a bit of a coincidence, at the time I was doing a Masters in International Planning and Sustainable Development.

And as part of that project, I ended up talking to one of my supervisors—a professor at the University of Westminster called Ripin Kalra, who was wonderful and agreed to come on as a sort of academic advisor to the research project. And with him, and with Greg at GCDN, we came up with a set of questions that we wanted to ask of each of the different partners. There were actually 10 case study areas in the end, so it was quite wide ranging in terms of the numbers, um, of districts that were involved.

But yeah, we, we sort of came up with this set of questions, but then ran it past Ripin at the University of Westminster as a sort of academic, I guess, critical friend in terms of: "Are we asking the right sorts of questions?"

And that was fascinating actually, because we had a set of questions that I think felt very practical to me in terms of um—a set of questions that set the scene with each particular case study area, and then a set of questions about what each case study area was doing in terms of public realm design, but also other initiatives around kind of cultural programming as well.

But what Ripin brought to the table was—he was saying, you know, you really need to think about climatic conditions in each cultural district because you're interviewing people from Australia, as well as people from Canada, people from the Netherlands. Like, they all have very different environmental risks that they're facing.

[00:07:11]
Helen Kearney: And so that brought a whole other set of questions into play—sort of rather, complacency we hadn't really considered.

But of course, that's where all this starts, right? You've got a cultural district that's in a specific geographic area that has its own climatic conditions and therefore has its own risks related to climate change and will be affected by climate change in its own sort of unique way.

It was really important to kind of establish what those particular risks and issues for those districts were, and also kind of talk to those districts about whether or not they were thinking along the lines of sort of risk and climate change adaptation and mitigation—just to set the scene even before we talked about programming and public space design and so on.

But I do credit that kind of conversation with Ripin for sort of shifting that trajectory as well.

I think it's, it's probably worth saying, just in terms of going back to the question about process as well. Um, what happened was, GCDN were very, very helpful with setting us up with interviews with very, very interesting people at each cultural district.

And our process involved a kind of hour long conversation with each of the districts, where we went through these questions and had a bit of an informal chat as well. And after that interview we then kind of wrote up all the findings and wrote the report and so on.

But I thought something that was like particularly interesting was that we did speak to different people with different roles in each organisation.

So, in some organisations we've spoke to people who had a more strategic view. In other organisations, we spoke to people who maybe had more of an engineering background and we're looking at design. In other institutions, we looked at people perhaps who were more involved with programming.

So, we got a kind of different sense of these types of issues around like, risk and climate change and environment, really depending on kind of what perspective we got from the different districts as well. I think that's kind of fair to say.

[00:08:55]
Kat Pegler: The risk aspect was super, super interesting in the process within the interviews, just because during that period of time of the research, there were so many risks that were actually being already affected with the cultural districts. And these were so wide ranging as well.

So you have, like the forest fires in Australia and the flooding in America and things like this. So yeah, it really set the scene.

[00:09:17]
Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah, when, when were you taking this research on? Remind me of the period here.

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[00:09:22]
Kat Pegler: It was 2019 to 2021, wasn't it Helen?

Helen Kearney: I don't think it was that far back. [laughs]

Kat Pegler: 2020? [laughs]

[00:09:31]
Helen Kearney: I've got it, we did the interviews in 2021 and wrote the report in 2022. I think when we started the interviews in 2021, we then had a little pause because there was that point where I left working at the city and I wasn't sure if the project was gonna continue.

But luckily the city decided to commission us as sort of private consultants to do the work, after I had left as an employee. So that was great actually, that they did that.

But it did mean there was a little pause of a few months whilst that was all sort of put in place. It felt like it took a long time in terms of actually doing all the research, doing all the interviews, putting all the report together.

But we kind of met to go over it all a couple of weeks ago and look at it, and I think it's still fairly current, so I don't know if that's a good thing or not. But I don't feel like the context has changed that much, um, in terms of climate change adaptation in these places.

[00:10:19]
Stephanie Fortunato: Right. Well, it's, I mean, it is kind of interesting to look back on that because so much has changed in the world between then and now, right? And so it's interesting that in terms of climate change, you're not seeing much difference in the conditions there.

I'm wondering; when you had those initial conversations—talking to people to get the sense of who was thinking about risks and vulnerabilities and how they were thinking about that, you know—what was it like coming into the study?

And, and if we could start to get into some of the findings there, what changed over the course of your discussions with each of these districts?

[00:10:54]
Helen Kearney: I mean, in terms of change I, I mean, I think when we did the interviews, it was obviously during lockdown and I think—it felt like everything was changing so quickly then. Especially we were looking at public realm as one of the kind of key themes in the report.

And I think at that point during lockdown, it felt like cultural districts were kind of waking up to their own public spaces and outdoor spaces in a way they hadn't before because they weren't allowed to programme indoors in a lot of places because of lockdown.

So, all of a sudden, all of the programming spaces were outdoors and it was like: "Quick, how can we get a temporary stage? How can we get temporary kind of event spaces?"

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[00:11:28]
Helen Kearney: And so, public realm and outdoor space really became to the fore in that particular period. And so that felt like a change, like I feel like before then, public space might have been a sort of secondary concern. But I, I actually think that since lockdown as well and since things have become back to sort of, you know, "normal" as much as it can be, I think that might have reverted a little bit as well.

I do wonder now if that sort of real emphasis on outdoor programming and public space has receded a little bit? I'll throw that out there as a question.

[00:11:57]
Stephanie Fortunato: No, I think that is a really good question. I do feel like it was cultural district superpowers that they had these public spaces and they knew how to, you know, create temporary festivals and events real quick. And so, during the pandemic, I think many cultural districts were able to activate their public spaces. So that must have been a very interesting time to have these conversations.

But you're right. I feel like a lot of the quick, responsive thinking that was happening in cities—sort of on the fly—some of that has gotten caught in conversations about regulation and access and whatnot, and so perhaps it's not as robust as we were seeing when you were actually undertaking the research.

I think it's really interesting though, that you spoke with people—different positions, different perspectives—on the public realm and that you were able to come up with these four key learnings. So, I see you've grouped the report into public realm and the environment planning and target setting, initiatives and practices and connecting with a wider society.

And I wonder, you know, from those four buckets, was there anything really surprising— a finding that was really surprising to you that you might make sure that we talk about?

[00:13:10]
Helen Kearney: What I would say is that those four are the kind of key learnings, but I think there was another, sort of overarching issue that we kept hitting pretty much in every interview that we did, which was that—we sort of discuss it as being like a transition from districts that are able to implement what we call like "quick wins", toward more like fundamental change, wholesale change in practice.

And that's what is effectively kind of required, given kind of climate emergency. I'd say one of the things that surprised us a little bit was that, pretty much all of the districts were still in that kind of "quick wins" place. And there didn't seem massive levels of evidence of being able to shift to that fundamental change um, position. And I think it felt like, over time as we did all these interviews that it was kind of really crystallising as a sort of key theme. And I think we maybe had assumed that more places would be kind of further on in that sort of journey.

Although on reflection, I think that's probably a sort of, you know, an issue that organisations across the world, not just cultural organisations, are sort of facing. It's like how we've done all these kind of nice things about sort of recycling and trying to reduce energy usage and so on. But like, actually what are the big steps that we need to make now? And do we have the sort of governance in place to allow us to do that? Do we have the finance that we need?

[00:14:23]
Helen Kearney: You know, there's a lot of these sort of bigger issues that I think, um, yeah, it started to sort of feel like that was a sort of a major thing that was going on with all of the districts really.

[00:14:33]
Kat Pegler: I would definitely say one of the interesting things that came out of it was this shared barrier about lack of knowledge, and that came up as a continuing theme. And I think it's only through things such as like the GCDN conference that's coming up, where we're talking about sustainability, that people are gonna be able to move forwards with that in particular.

Because it seemed like there was so many that were having these shared barriers that were symptoms of being within the arts sector. Like, lack of capacity or funding and things like this.

[00:15:00]
Stephanie Fortunato: If we were gonna give some advice to cultural districts about where to start, uh, what is it? Is it governance? Is it getting the finances and orders? How do you start to convert from looking at a series of "quick wins" to making a foundational shift?

[00:15:16]
Kat Pegler: Yeah, it is such a big approach that you have to consider and I think there's so many aspects to that. But first of all, definitely the three pillars of sustainability and it being economic, social, and environmental as the foundation is super, super important.

And also involving, uh, like a bottom up approach, and involving the local community I think is really important. And empowering staff to make those changes.

But yeah, that strategic approach is so, so hard to achieve. And I think it's through partnerships and actually sitting down and making this long plan, it's the only way that it's gonna properly work.

And also, again, having this communication on a wider level with other cultural districts, I think it's so, so important to overcome those barriers.

[00:16:00]
Stephanie Fortunato: And build that knowledge that you were speaking of before, right.

Kat Pegler: Exactly, yeah.

Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah, feels super important. Yeah, I thought the, the work that you did to really highlight the role that different staff members have in being able to implement strategies was really important. I really appreciated that perspective on how empowering staff and distributing ownership—and leadership really—across organisations make such a big difference.

[00:16:28]
Kat Pegler: Yeah, it's so true and it's so many different perspectives that come into that one organisation, so it's just so valuable, like incorporating everyone's opinions.

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[00:16:37]
Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah. I feel like Kat, your creative practice, actually, the way that you applied it to this research, there's an interesting intersection there that really compliments Helen, your research background really quite well.

[00:16:49]
Helen Kearney: Yeah, it did feel like that, didn't it?

Kat Pegler: Yeah, completely.

Helen Kearney: I would definitely agree with that. I think like, one of the sort of really nice things that was, um, to go back to this question about what surprised us.

I think the, uh, conversations that we had around programming was, ended up being quite a nice kind of surprise really in terms of this sense that the cultural districts were starting to really see themselves as part of a wider community with a sense of kind of civic purpose.

They had a role to kind of talk to people about this transition that's required in terms of people's own practices and climate change and to help people deal with that as well and to raise awareness. And the creativity and creative programming is a really important part of that process and actually something almost unique that these districts can provide for people and to kind of really add to the voice of that.

And I think that um, working with Kat on looking at those sorts of issues was great because obviously that's sort of more, her bread and butter. And then I felt like I was kind of bringing in more like the practical overall side of yeah but, like how would you do that? Like how do you, how do you programme this in public space? Um, and so on. So it was, it felt quite nice, didn't it? I think.

[00:17:56]
Kat Pegler: Yeah, it was so good. Um, yeah, I would just say on that the programming was so, so fascinating for me just because it really came out through the interviews that that's the strength of cultural districts that's made—it makes them so unique to any other organisation that they have the ability to tell stories, and so they can literally have this huge role to play in the climate crisis by like yeah, amazing artistic programming.

[00:18:20]
Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah. Do you have any favourite programming examples that came up in the research?

[00:18:25]
Helen Kearney: I think Montreal actually. Topically um, I think, uh, the Montreal example was really, really good because if you follow the UN Sustainable Development Goals, you've got these three pillars, which are social, environmental, and economic.

So, a lot of people when they approach this issue, kind of really focus in on the environmental side of it, and like, making changes that will help with carbon emissions, for example. Whereas the Montreal approach really felt like they were going on the social side as well.

[00:18:50]
Helen Kearney: And they were kind of looking at how do you programme a public space that has amazing planting for kind of wildlife habitats and really encouraging a real diversity of sort of, greenery and flora and fauna.

But also, how do you create a fantastic education programme around that and how do you bring all the local community in, in terms of their involvement with their education programme and with the planting scheme and the public realm design.

It was, it felt really sort of a holistic approach to the public spaces. And I know that in Montreal, when they're designing those public spaces, um, they really do have like a very diverse community and they're, I think, quite conscious of the fact that that type of like, culture led regeneration can sometimes push people out.

And they're so conscious of making sure that didn't happen and kind of bringing communities with them in that sort of journey. And so, it really felt like they were interested in the sort of social sustainability side of things as well.

[00:19:41]
Stephanie Fortunato: So building on that a little bit. One thing I think is really interesting about the report is the way that you quantified the issues as they come up across the districts.

I think that's something that's really smart that folks in the sustainability sector do really well—is to look to the numbers to measure progress over, over time and to track it. I wonder about that though, like, when you actually ran the numbers, was it what you expected from the conversation or is there a difference there that comes up?

[00:20:11]
Helen Kearney: To be honest, when we were approaching the project, I didn't expect really any sort of quantitative data. I was approaching this, or we were approaching this, very much from a sort of qualitative data gathering perspective. Expecting lots of, sort of anecdotal evidence—which we did get, and that was fantastic and super, super rich.

Um, when we put together sort of, uh, the element of the report, which feels a bit more like, quantitative data, that was um, a method that we used ourselves for analysing all of the interviews that we'd done.

And it came, so it came about almost organically that we were kind of noticing these key themes coming up in each interview and thought: "Actually that's, that's quite interesting."

And we were trying to find a way of kind of constructing a narrative around that. And so, did this sort of almost data analysis of the report, of the interviews that we'd done and came up with these different results, I suppose, and thought: "Oh wow!"

Because what that did, then, was it allowed us to understand, um, much more clearly, kind of what are the key issues that we should be looking at in this report and highlighting, rather than just, "Oh, that was an interesting interview. That person was really charismatic. You know, let's include that anecdote."

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[00:21:18]
Helen Kearney: Um, it gave us that other sort of side of things where we could say, actually this is something that's particularly important because a vast majority of the districts were talking about this as an issue.

So yeah, it was a way of us analysing the information that we had. And it was only through doing that, that we thought, oh, actually this in itself tells a sort of compelling story.

[00:21:33]
Stephanie Fortunato: And it kind of makes it more accessible and a little bit less scary on some level as well, right? Like that you're not alone in trying to navigate some of the decisions around this.

[00:21:42]
Kat Pegler: Hundred percent. Yeah. I think that was the interesting thing, is that there were these parallels drawn in literally opposite sides of the world. So the fact that, yeah, these cultural districts were experiencing the same barriers was super, super interesting.

[00:21:56]
Helen Kearney: That point about barriers actually is interesting, isn't it? Cause I think that as we were writing the report, we had everything kind of separated off into, oh, these are the key things that those institutions are doing. But we did have this like, separate list of all the key challenges.

And actually I think that's probably one of the most important parts of the research is uh, sort of laying out what those key challenges are. And the fact that we were able to sort of group them in the way that we did as well, shows that there are some sort of key themes, within those challenges that pretty much everybody was facing.

Um, so Kat's point about like, "Keep talking to each other, learn from each other." Actually, everybody is facing very similar challenges as well, so it would allow you to kind of say, if we're all experiencing this particular challenge, can we get together and talk about that specific thing? And then think about how we can rise to meet that challenge.

[00:22:42]
Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah, I think, I mean, that is it, right? Why we come together at all is to sort of gain perspective from other people, and there's so much in that. I, I wonder what questions still remain for you at this point about this work?

[00:22:58]
Kat Pegler: I guess the biggest question is: "How can people go from this low hanging fruit and the "quick wins", to the big strategic changes that are needed to really address the climate emergency soon?"

[00:23:09]
Helen Kearney: Well, one of the really interesting conversations that we had was with the district in Rotterdam. And we sort of approached the way that we wrote up their interview a little bit differently to the others because we felt like, of the ten districts that we interviewed, that was the one district that had gone that bit further on that journey.

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[00:23:28]
Helen Kearney: So their section in the report is more of a story of how they did that because it's probably the one district that the others can potentially learn a little bit more from. And I think that point about kind of learning from each other, I would point to that particular district, the Rotterdam district. 7 Square Endeavour, it's called?

And look at that section in particular because they'd really been working on this for quite a lot longer, quite a few, many more years than the other districts.

They'd put together a really strong group of local partners in their area, and they'd set out a very clear strategy, and in fact a different number of different strategies which included kind of strategic issues, governance, but also very practical things around, for example, water management.

And then were able to get the funding to follow and implement those strategies. And were on that journey in terms of they had started doing all the various, you know, building works and real sort of transformation of the public space, really kinda integrating the way that the buildings and the public spaces were designed.

So really that, that example was fantastic in terms of um, you could almost look to that and say can we learn anything from that particular example?

[00:24:32]
Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah, it seems to speak to the need to look at things with a systems lens and to think about the interdependence of decisions on one front and how you can help support other goals in other areas.

[00:24:45]
Helen Kearney: Yeah, absolutely. I think I mean, having worked in this field and in public service as well, I was almost sort of in awe with what they'd done because it just didn't seem realistic to me. I thought there's no way you can have this set of buildings and places that all come together in this seamless partnership and have this really clear strategy and then follow up on the strategy, you know? It's like, what is this madness? [laughs]

Stephanie Fortunato: [laughs] Super aspirational.

Helen Kearney: Yeah. Yeah. I mean I think that they're also perhaps slightly unique insofar as that they're obviously in the Netherlands and have perhaps more political support, and their sort of national context is maybe a bit more favourable than some of the other examples and some of the context that we've worked in.

But again, that's something to learn from, you know. One of the key kind of, learnings that we said in the report was connecting with wider society, and that was about how do cultural districts see themselves as an advocate for change you know, amongst kind of, governors of a country or an area or politicians or key kind of decision makers, and so on.

Like it's a—it's a kind of two-way relationship where the districts are obviously impacted by the decisions that their kind of local government um, or national government make, but there's a way that they can kind of change that story as well.

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[00:25:55]
MUSIC BREAK

[00:26:01]
Stephanie Fortunato: You looked at districts, really across the world in the US and Canada, England, what, Netherlands, Greece, Hong Kong, Australia. I'm just curious, are districts largely thinking about the UN's SDGs or did you find difference in what they were using as their measurements, based on whatever nation they were located in.

[00:26:24]
Helen Kearney: I didn't get a sense necessarily that they were thinking along those frameworks of the UN SDGs or—I mean, at the time we were approaching the COP26 Climate Conference, which was being held in the UK. And so we had a question in our list of interview questions around that.

And there wasn't a huge amount of engagement around that. But I do wonder if that's something that maybe—going back to that question about like what's changed over the last two or three years that we've been working on this report—I do wonder if, from when we started those interviews to now, if there is in general, more understanding of the SDGs, of the COP conferences, of IPCC reports.

Um, it feels to me like those sorts of issues are getting more news coverage now. Um, so I think there might be more like, general understanding of them.

But I wouldn't have said—again, apart from the Rotterdam example—I wouldn't have said that there was a massive connection between some international policy statements and the very practical targets that were being set at cultural district level.

I think the cultural districts, uh, were more interested in either local targets that are being set by their kind of municipality, or the kind of bodies that register and kind of certify different parts of sustainability agenda. So things like, LEED certification, for example, or BREEAM in this country. Which is basically when a cultural district is using its buildings as a way of kind of, understanding what's its sustainability target should be.

Whereas obviously in our report we're looking not just at that type of sustainability, but social and economic as well.

But yeah, I think those were the kind of key things that were being considered at the time.

[00:28:04]
Stephanie Fortunato: I have to say I'm, I'm a little sorry you didn't get a chance to implement some of these strategies in London. I'm curious, I'll have to check out to see what has happened with that cultural district.

[00:28:15]
Helen Kearney: Yeah, I mean the, the projects are still very much going on and, uh, one of the partners in the project was the Museum of London.

And one of the absolutely fundamental things that the Museum of London is doing is they are building their new museum inside a building that already exists. It's a historic market building that's kind of 150 years old that was on the site.

[00:28:38]
Helen Kearney: And it, there was a series of different plans for these market buildings and all of them sort of fell through and in the end, the museum took on the buildings. And they decided to keep the entire structure of these historic buildings and put the museum in those buildings. And that is pretty much one of the most sustainable acts that you can do as an institution.

If you take on a historic building, that is going to be more sustainable than knocking down an old building and building a new building in its place. And I think that that's something that's really, really important.

And one of the kind of key things that cultural districts can do in terms of moving from this, like "quick wins" to more fundamental change—maybe one of the policies that they can think about is no new building of buildings. You know, like just reuse all historic buildings. They've got their own embodied carbon within them in those buildings.

And so use that, you know, and you get that bonus then, of using this like amazing historic building, which the museum is now keeping so many different elements of that building that can kind of tell the story of what that building was before, which was a meat market, which obviously has its own amazing history and kind of, has had such an impact on the development of London itself.

So it, becomes almost a museum exhibit, the actual building that they're in. And I think that that's like fascinating and could be a sort of exemplar for sustainability.

[00:29:52]
Stephanie Fortunato: So from each of you, I would love to know what you're working on now, what you're thinking about next.

[00:29:59]
Kat Pegler: Yeah, so at the moment, I'm Managing Director of a charity, Cape Farewell, that specialises in art and climate change. But I'm also looking to expand and continue this research looking at climate and art and culture. So, yeah.

[00:30:16]
Stephanie Fortunato: Really fertile ground for all of that.

[00:30:18]
Helen Kearney: One of the things that we looked at when we were doing the report, that didn't make it into the report—Every time we kind of sat down and, debriefed after an interview or we kind of chatted about something in general, we were putting together a list of what we think is like, best practice for cultural districts, um, like key measures.

So some of them were very practical things like ensuring that all the districts measure carbon footprint really specifically, and some of them were much more creative and cultural and around programming and things like that.

But we had this sort of long list of different measures that the—it didn't make it into the report because the report was really explaining the research that we've done from the cultural districts and some measures that we were thinking of weren't coming from the cultural district. So it were just things that we were, realising ourselves, were really important in our conversations.

[00:31:04]
Helen Kearney:
But I think it would be great to kind of carry on this research by looking at that in more detail, because that would be almost the kind of part two of this. You know, you've got this set of information about what's been going on and what the key challenges are, but what's the next step?

And so I think that that's like, yeah, those sort of conversations were really fruitful and kind of interesting for the future.

[00:31:24]
Stephanie Fortunato: Well, I am so grateful to both of you for contributing this research to the field, and I really do encourage everyone listening to read the report and to figure out what they can do in the places where they're stewards to be able to really address the great challenge that we have before us with the climate crisis.

Helen, Kat, thank you both for being with me today.

Kat Pegler: Thanks so much for having us.

Helen Kearney: Thank you.

Stephanie Fortunato: It's great.

Kat Pegler: Yeah, it's been great.

[00:31:52]
MUSIC BREAK

[00:31:55]
Stephanie Fortunato: Well, we will have the report and supporting material on our show page at www.thethreebells.net, where you'll find past episodes of this podcast. Of course, if you would like what you've heard, please tell your friends, subscribe, give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice.

One of the themes that came across in the Sustainable Development Report is an impatience around the time it is taking. The time it is taking to implement changes in our practices and policies, and to realise the benefit, the desire to move further and faster on the journey towards a more sustainable existence through a fundamental shift in practices.

Every step forward we take is necessary to move the needle in the face of an overwhelming urgency to do something. We recognise this pressure to act echoed in a report issued by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change this past spring, an assessment of what we have learned about climate change, its widespread impacts and risks, as well as climate change mitigation and adaptation.

The New York Times headline last March read: "Climate Change Is Speeding Toward Catastrophe. The Next Decade Is Crucial." Also crucial, is our need to create conditions for a more equitable cultural sector. One in which creatives, especially those who have been historically marginalised, are able to thrive.

[00:33:15]
Stephanie Fortunato: A friend and mentor—an arts leader who has dedicated three-plus decades to supporting artists and creatives responsibly in communities, and to nurturing equity, diversity, access, and inclusion along the way—recently expressed frustration with the lack of resources available to support change at a pace in line with the operating realities of most arts and cultural organisations.

Our conversation quickly shifted from the specific constraints and opportunities of the structures within which she is working, towards the needs of the cultural sector to adapt. In the end, we had to acknowledge that these are not much different than for any of us living in a constantly changing world.

When I was thinking about it some more later, I realised that this conversation was a good example of how it can be challenging to narrowly focus on the decisions around advancing specific incremental changes when the charge is so big and important. Daily operational challenges can feel as cataclysmic as the big existential question.

Systems created to sustain continuous operations and make opportunities available to many—if not all—can be cumbersome, requiring tending at many different points, with gatekeepers and intersecting interests to be navigated along the way. This makes transformation feel aspirational in some cases, elusive in others, and in all a process that can take time to get right, in even the nimblest setting.

Far from linear, committing to a collective and creative endeavour can be messy, circular at times, even. As we heard from Helen and Kat, some of the challenges are in gaps of knowledge, and some in skills and capacity. On the former, data informed decision making is often the strongest foundation for advancing ideas.

Data is always a time capsule, though, on some level, and we are living in a time when data available to us feels slightly misaligned from the reality. Around the same time that the UN issued their report, the United States and UK released 2022 numbers about cultural production and cultural participation. These showed overall increases that were positive, and yet, included caveats about growth in the context of 2019 data, which reflected a pre-COVID-19 state.

We are all getting good at adapting our understanding amidst uncertainties, but one has to wonder how relevant is this data now available to us.

Already, we are at a different point in the post pandemic reality, and our lived experience seems to diverge from the record, yet shared understanding takes time and trust. It doesn't always feel like we have that, which is why so many of us look to learning, training, and upskilling as a pragmatic bridge to the future.

There are promising long-term practices that aid our capacity. New trends in "Systems Philanthropy", a collaborative cross-sector approach to addressing root causes of systemic social issues that draw on data. Strategic planning efforts are infused with more flexibility. "Scenario planning", "adaptive planning", that is less prescriptive and more able to be responsive and future-facing.

We can't let go of the big picture altogether. There are too many issues that will require collective action and the best thinking available to us. Every arts leader should have one great challenge on their whiteboard.

[00:36:42]
Stephanie Fortunato: One thing for them to think about that is beyond their concerns from the day-to-day, one thing to aspire to. If you take anything away from this podcast, that's what I encourage. A quick post-it note giving you one big idea that you wanna think about in the long term.

[00:36:59]
MUSIC BREAK

[00:37:00]
Stephanie Fortunato: The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting and the Global Cultural Districts Network. If you like what you heard today, do subscribe to our feed and rate our show on the podcast listening platform of choice.

My name is Stephanie Fortunato. Thank you for being with us today, and I look forward to joining you again soon.

[00:37:17]
THEME MUSIC