



# GCDN

**Global Cultural  
Districts Network**

An Initiative of AEA Consulting

## IN CONVERSATION WITH...

### Claire Spencer, CEO Arts Centre Melbourne

*'I see my role as facilitating artists to be their amazing best and bringing audiences in to connect with that work. I see myself as an enabler.'*



Claire started her work as CEO of Arts Centre Melbourne in 2014, after more than 10 years at Sydney Opera House. Before that, she was a chartered accountant in London. Melbourne Arts Centre includes 5 major performance spaces and is part of a cultural precinct that has more than 40 cultural organizations and institutions. Each year Arts Centre Melbourne hosts over 4,000 performances and public events and welcomes over 3 million people into the precinct.

#### **GCDN: What most surprised you about Arts Centre Melbourne, particularly in relation to Sydney?**

What I found most surprising was how deeply people connect to the arts centre here - people often have memories of it from childhood. Despite lacking the iconic architecture of Sydney, it moves people much more than... the Sydney Opera House. Melbourne's liveability is palpable - you can feel it in the streets. I'm connected to a lot more artists here. There's also a much bigger donor base of people - many of whom have supported since it opened. That comes with very particular expectations, but I love that! It's interesting to learn what people hold really dear.

*'We are able to perform a full range of performance art experiences. We are much more than just a performing arts centre.'*

## What are your current priorities for the Arts Centre?

*'The first year was about recovery and repair. The business had been through a really challenging time. We're now in a really good place, visitation figures have never been higher. My priority is now about physical rejuvenation and engaging with the wider precinct that we are part of.'*

After nearly 4 years, I am now thinking about the next 20-30 years. Infrastructure is a priority. The Arts Centre opened in 1984 and the orientation of the buildings wasn't designed to take in what has now become a larger cultural district. Melbourne has really changed since 1984 when it was based largely on European migration – that has dramatically changed. We want to engage with the community as it is now and we feel that the Brutalist architecture (that we love) can actually be a deterrent to new visitors. How do we become more open, transparent and approachable? There's a certain amount you can do with programming and customer service but fundamentally we need to think about infrastructure – we can see parallels with the Southbank in London. What can we do with our infrastructure to allow us to engage with our precinct more deeply. In terms of infrastructure and how we relate to artists, other cultural organisations and the wider community, our exciting Reimagining project, announced in June 2108 is a major part of our planning at the moment. This will help ensure Arts Centre Melbourne continues to be relevant to the community and is ready to welcome future generations. It is important that we get this right, and the complex planning and design phase is absorbing much of our attention at the moment.

## How will you make that happen?

*'Melbourne has developed a very sophisticated view of the whole ecology to embrace a creative industries conversation rather than just arts, understanding the relationship between small and large.'*

The public's relationship with arts and culture is complex, driven by many factors – most segmentation models cannot account for the finer details of why one person goes to a certain venue but not another or why they like one artist but not another. The key for me is taking advantage of the huge opportunity the arts has – this is great content that people are passionate about. Let people control their own data, let them define their own interests, let them share with us the obstacles they face that stop them attending, big or small, and their specific needs. Reinforce this with behavioural data collected through purchases or online browsing and you can create an environment where the regular attender feels valued and recognised, and one where the new or casual attender can feel welcome and be guided to what they need.

## **How do you understand and track your audiences? Do people crossover between venues and programmes?**

*'You get a feeling that the city has many tribes, there is a fusion of subcultures.'*

Melbourne has a really strong outdoors culture, and public free events such as free concerts - especially during the summer months - drag many people to the centre. Although this makes it more difficult to track audiences, it is interesting to observe the crossover between sports and arts in Melbourne. It is not uncommon for people to come from a football match to our theatre venue. We are able to track them by their footie scarves appearing in our cloakrooms. That's part of the culture of Melbourne. The precincts are in close proximity from the sports precinct to the arts - very much a part of the fabric of the city. It's interesting to contemplate how that's different in other cities. We even commissioned a full-length symphony for a football match!

## **What keeps you up at night?**

Ageing infrastructure. The centre opened in 1984 - a lot of buildings are at end of life. This is a deeply unsexy issue - but toilets failing keeps me up at night! Reimagining and maintaining assets to function as venue. In the meantime you invest every dollar you have to keep things going! The Reimagining project for the precinct is a major opportunity for Arts Centre Melbourne to really make a difference for future generations. There is some light at the end of the tunnel, but we are just at the beginning of the journey and there's a lot of work to do over the coming decade.

## **Where do you look outside of Melbourne for inspiration?**

Programmatically we are increasingly looking to Asia; there is a lot of exciting work and we have encouraged co-commissions between contemporary artists. In terms of asset renewal we look at the Lincoln Center, the complexity of their stakeholder relationship is similar to ours. I'm also a huge fan of Southbank Centre - I grew up in London - because of its changes to the institutions and how that impacted the whole area. And we love taking a good show from the Edinburgh Festival!

## **In terms of GCDN what does it mean for you? How can the network be more than a sum of its parts?**

*'My understanding of the network has really changed since Dubai. Meeting so many peers and being able to talk about common problems was a game changer.'*

I would emphasize the value that these relationships can bring when you're wrestling with a problem and being able to pick up the phone and asking your peers what they did is extraordinarily valuable. I'm interested in how we move those convenings around the world so that we can get to see how we experience other cultures.

It was very interesting to see some of the debates that came after the Dubai convening on the recent dialogue around social impact, as we do not tend to measure beyond the impact of individual institutions. This is a topic in which GCDN could do in depth research. Another important aspect of the network is the sharing of best practice, especially around capital redevelopment, which hopefully we will continue to accelerate into the future.

**If there was an exchange programme between GCDN members, is there any particular place where you would like to go?**

West Kowloon and getting under the hood of Southbank Centre. I'd probably say the same about the Barbican. I've been there as an audience member. Because we are at the bottom of the world we do go out and look a lot at other places!