



GCDN
**Global Cultural
Districts Network**
An Initiative of AEA Consulting

IN CONVERSATION WITH...

Michelle T. Boone, Chief Program and Civic Engagement Officer at Navy Pier, Chicago, USA

'My role is about developing programs that invite Chicagoans to be here, and help elevate creative work that is happening in the communities'



Guests enjoying the free outdoor film series, *Water Flicks*, on the Polk Bros Park Performance Lawns.

Michelle T. Boone joined Navy Pier in 2016 in the newly created role of Chief Program and Civic Engagement Officer. Boone, along with a team of five full-time employees in the division of Arts, Culture and Engagement, develops arts programming and builds partnerships with Chicago's arts, cultural, educational and community-based organizations. Prior, Michelle was Commissioner of the City of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, where she implemented policies and programs that support Chicago's cultural sector and creative industries. Previously, she was the Senior Program Officer for the Joyce Foundation in Chicago, Illinois.

Navy Pier has been undergoing a series of meaningful changes, becoming a Not-for-Profit and later appointing you as a Chief Program and Civic Engagement Officer. How do you envision the future of the pier? What are the main challenges and opportunities?

The most recent transformation of the Pier began in 2011. That was when the Pier moved from being a quasi-government entity to an independent non-profit and crafted a centennial vision with a new leadership structure that included the Chief Program Officer role, which is what I do. One of the calls of the centennial vision was to define and identify new strategies to make the Pier even more relevant to Chicagoans. One of the answers that came back was programming. I think the recent success of programming in public spaces, such as Millennium Park, the Chicago Riverwalk and the 606 (an elevated park site) in Chicago, served as a model for the Pier for engaging audiences with culture. At each of those spaces, Chicagoans of all sorts from all over the city co-mingle with tourists and visitors from around the world to share in a common experience of art and culture.

My role was really about developing programs that would not just invite Chicagoans to be here, but really help elevate a lot of the work that is happening out in the communities, where we also recognize that over 60 percent of the guests of the Pier are locals. So if you are a visitor to Chicago, and the only place you can go to is Navy Pier, we wanted it to be a really authentic Chicago experience. During the year, we partner with hundreds of performing artists and musicians and dozens of cultural organizations, to present a range of music, cinema, dance and fitness programs, and in the summer months, feature bi-weekly fireworks and more intimate experiences like a two-day festival of performing arts for young people. All free!

The challenges are also opportunities because typically—at least until recently—people don't think of Navy Pier as a place for cultural engagement, so it's an opportunity to re-introduce the Pier. There has been an amazing physical transformation (led by the landscape architect firm of James Corner) that opened up the outdoor spaces that better connects guests to the lakefront and new green spaces and parks onsite. And several outdoor performance stages and platforms were added that allows cultural programs to happen.

How about the programming during the winter months?

For more than 15 years, the Pier has presented an annual program, *Fifth Third Bank Winter WonderFest*, which is an indoor winter and holiday festival in December and January. But one of the more recent things that we've done - that I actually learned from attending my very first GCDN convening in Brooklyn - is the installation of interactive public art during the winter months. One of your members, Quartier des Spectacles (QDS), does really wonderful dynamic works. We've implemented two installations so far (*Impulse* and *Prismatica*), and we have another one planned for later this winter, with conversations for one in early 2019; the

response from our guests has been really very positive! The QDS partnership this winter will be a project called *Passage*, a set of rings that are illuminated and make sounds as you move through them. We have the *Centennial Wheel*, which operates year round, and we hope that the installation of this particular work will remind people that the Pier is open and very active in the winter months.

We also do indoor programming during the winter, for example, we started a new free programmatic series called *Global Connections* where we build programming around ethnic celebration and we launched a series for very young audiences called *Stroller Grooves*, a live music and performance program that we present in partnership with the Chicago Children's Museum (a partner organization onsite at the Pier).

You have previously mentioned one of your priorities is to change locals' perception of the Navy Pier as a mere tourist attraction. How does this reflect in the programming, and is the local community involved in the decision making process?

Part of it started with that and not just blindly saying: "we're going to do programming and they will come". Prior to my arrival, the Pier hired a consultant to do an 18-month engagement process that interviewed dozens of local arts leaders and artists, as well as reviewed national and international best practices in public programming. It resulted in a document called the *Arts and Discovery Framework*, which included a set of recommendations for the Pier in how to approach public programming. It was great for me to walk through the door and have that foundation in place with a lot of the groundwork of engaging the community and introducing ideas about partnerships with the Pier already laid.

I've also been learning more about what cultural districts mean through GCDN. It was after Dubai that I started to take a step back and question, "is Navy Pier a cultural district or are we more of a cultural hub within a broader district?" The Pier is a site in the Streeterville community of Chicago, and within that neighborhood, are a number of other cultural assets – the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, the historic Arts Club of Chicago, Loyola University Art Museum, the Thorne Auditorium of Northwestern University, along with music venues and movie theaters. Together, we all form a "cultural district" within the Streeterville community. The very first GCDN convening I went to was in Brooklyn and one of the things we did was an outing to Governors Island and I was really excited about seeing that because there is so much in common with Navy Pier! Both sites have this great long history with a previous identity before it morphed into a cultural space, and they both have also been perceived as being difficult to get to.

Programming at the Pier is open for everybody – it's actually the opening line of our mission statement – "welcoming all..." and we can find common grounds for everyone to be here through cultural experiences. What I love about programs like *Quinceañeras* (a traditional

Latin American celebration of a girl's 15th birthday) is that in many instances we are introducing families to Navy Pier by creating very special memories so that they all want to come back again and again.

One of the objectives laid out on the Centennial Vision was to enhance the Pier's nightlife activity. Chicago is a city renowned for reanimating public space through dance culture; you also have a background as a music promoter and have been the leading force behind exhibitions such as Move Your Body: Evolution of House. Do you see music and dance as a way of reclaiming public space and engaging different generations and demographics?

The Pier is the only place in the city where you can walk with open alcoholic beverages. During the summer we have five nights of live music entertainment in the *Miller Lite Beer Garden*, free and open to the public. Wednesdays and Saturdays, Memorial Day through Labor Day there's also the iconic *Aon Summer Fireworks* shows. We're in the process of constructing the Pier's first hotel, which will have a rooftop terrace. That will definitely attract young people looking for a nightlife experience. The rooftop terrace will in the coming months and the hotel will open in 2020.

At the Pier, we have the summer program *Wave Wall Wax* that features some of Chicago's top DJ's spinning music live on Saturday afternoons. Sometimes people will stop and do an impromptu dance party right in front of the DJ station. We like to incorporate dance whenever we can. For example, one of our partner organizations is the Puerto Rican Arts Alliance which presents an annual concert at the Pier, *La Noche Caribeña*. How can you have that music and think that people aren't going to move?!



Scene from *La Noche Caribeña*, guests dancing as the live band plays in Polk Bros Park Performance Lawn.

What are you doing to understand and track your audiences? Specifically, how do you go about tracking free public programming audiences, which are more disperse?

Yes, we are aware of the importance of measuring audiences. For now, it's very non-scientific and in its early stages of formation. This is the second year of the Pier doing year-round programming and we plan to engage a marketing consultant that would help us with metrics, to give us some baseline data of where we are now so we could track the growth. In the meantime, our Guest Experience team walks around the Pier with iPads and will ask guests a few questions to capture basic things like zip code, whether it's their first time at the Pier, if they knew a program was happening, what were their impressions, etc. And then for the other programs we distribute a five question paper survey collecting the same info to rate their level of enjoyment.

Findings from our report *Governance Models for Cultural Districts* suggest there is an increasing need to reach out to artists and the private sector when planning and managing cultural districts. Would you say this is the case for Navy Pier?

Navy Pier has an External Affairs team that focuses on resource development and one of the advantages of having a massive site that attracts so many people is that it is a very attractive asset for corporations looking to heighten their visibility while partnering with an organization whose mission and values align with their own. For example, we recently renovated our main entrance and food corridor (which is also a retail venue), now called the *Fifth Third Bank Family Pavilion*. When you enter, you are welcomed to a beautiful space, filled with restaurants, retail kiosks and shops. This new pavilion is possible through a philanthropic partnership with Fifth Third Bank. As our redevelopment continues, many of our spaces offer opportunities for naming partnerships. The public programs offer the same opportunity. Chicago has a rich history of philanthropy supporting arts and culture. Free cultural programs at the Pier are attractive to funders because they understand the Pier is for *everybody* and it is a safe place for people of different backgrounds to come together and enjoy a variety of diverse cultural experiences.

Are you working with other districts/hubs/neighborhoods in Chicago?

The Pier offers a tremendous range of cultural organizations and programs that showcase Chicago's diverse neighborhoods. With our programming we give the opportunity to people who would probably not be inclined to venture to the far south, west or north sides of the city, to branch out and explore. We provide those groups and artists access to Navy Pier and help expose their works and expand their reach to new audiences. I think it's a great way of shining a light on the broad diversity of the city by highlighting this range of cultural organizations that reside here.

What would you say that you learned from your GCDN peers during the convenings?

What I learned is that there are so many people doing so much incredible work. It's great inspiration and an invaluable opportunity to see examples of best practices. People are working on the different approaches that they take to engage audiences and activate communities through the arts, and it's just reassuring and reaffirming to know that you are not out there in isolation. Rather, you've got access to an incredible network of brilliance.

Also, I appreciate the opportunities for collaborations and partnerships, the shared intellectual connections... I mean, the people in GCDN are so smart. I'm always struck! I think it's great to have a resource like this, even if it's just for the questions that we can pose now and then through emails.

If you had to go on an exchange program to learn from another cultural district anywhere in the world, where would that be?

Wow, that's a really good one! I do remember the presentation a guy did in Brooklyn from Buenos Aires, where there was an old industrial site [La Boca]... I've never been to South America so I suppose these are the places that I'm interested in, parts of the world unknown to me. And those that bear resemblances with Navy Pier. Places that had an old identity and function for the city, and had years of neglect but through arts and culture have found a new way of bringing meaning to a community or to the space, and how the arts become a tool for community building. A place where people live and where they have opinions about what that space meant to them, and have some stake in it being brought back to life because it's an important part of the collective history. There's some emotional stake in the success of the venue because it's such a key part of the identity and history of the people.