



# GCDN

Global Cultural  
Districts Network

An Initiative of AEA Consulting

## IN CONVERSATION WITH...

**Stephanie Fortunato, Director, Department of Art, Culture + Tourism  
at City of Providence, USA**

*'I try to be thoughtful about my role as a gatekeeper, but it is challenging to be the voice of dynamic, creative, culturally distinct communities – some of which may not even see themselves as being parts of a cohesive group.'*



Stephanie Fortunato has been the Director of the Department of Art, Culture + Tourism at City of Providence since 2016. Working at the intersection of cultural planning and urban development, they collaborate with local communities to create policies and partnerships to strengthen neighborhoods and transform public spaces. In her tenure, Ms. Fortunato has helped the Department secure new resources to expand the staff and focus to include arts education, public art, and PVDfest, the city's signature destination arts festival.

Culture and the creative industries have played an important role in the history of Providence and are central to its continued development and growth. In 2009, the City launched a new branding campaign: "The Creative Capital" aligned with ACT's policy agenda of ensuring this creative capital brand remained authentic through creative city-making initiatives and arts-friendly policies.

**The city was once nicknamed the "Beehive of Industry"; it began rebranding itself as "Creative Capital" in 2009. How do you create a character for the city that will keep drawing people back? What do you think its next iteration will be?**

Calling ourselves "The Creative Capital" is more than a clever marketing campaign, it is a value statement about our city's identity. This brand is shaped by our resident artist communities, as well as an authentic expression of Providence's historically-inflected

local cultures. As a department within City government, we work hard to realize it as a promise for our residents as well as visitors. Serving the needs of both groups can be a balancing act, but we engage the tension most successfully when we create opportunities for broad participation in innovative cultural programming. PVDFest, our annual arts festival, is an opportunity to promote and support our city's creatives and an amazing offering for outsiders. In curating and producing this annual event, we have cultivated new resources for the artists and other creative practitioners, changed perceptions of our public spaces, and fostered opportunities for collaboration and exchange.

Providence is conveniently located in the heart of one of the most populous and economically powerful corridors in the United States. Long home to world-class educational institutions like Brown University and RISD, our airport now offers international flights and there are already hundreds of hotel rooms under construction. These tourist offerings will influence what comes next and provide us with new opportunities to position ourselves as a global destination for arts, creativity, and design.

**There seems to be a special emphasis on public programming related to Latin culture (e.g Mambo Pa Ti, Bachata, Latin American mayor night cycling with Mayor Jorge Elorza, Evangelical church event, etc.) What's the role of the festival in attracting more diverse audiences? (30 percent Hispanic population, which has grown more than 50% in the last two decades).**

One of Providence's top strengths is its cultural diversity. The diversity of our programming reflects our demographics and responds to changes in cultural participation as well. In our vision for the city, neighbors celebrate diverse cultural and artistic experiences, and all residents and visitors feel that a relationship to arts practice, making, and culture is an accessible part of their everyday lives. With PVDFest, we work hard to curate an intercultural and intergenerational festival that realizes this intent and invites audiences from all walks of life to find something that speaks to them personally and to come together for a collective experience downtown to discover something new.

**This year's PVDFest Ideas has just culminated. Its central theme was Cyborg Cities: Humans, Technology, and Urban Spaces. What is the most interesting thing you've learned about integrating new technologies into urban public spaces?**

Good design is critically important to our well-being and community life. Sarah Williams Goldhagen offered an inspiring discussion about how the built environment conveys social messages through design elements like color, surface details, and lighting – and the need for communities to better understand decisions made about these elements in public space. Other panelists spoke about the roles of new technologies in democratizing how and where we plan and program resilient, well-designed community spaces that are inclusive, human-centered, environmentally responsible, and engaging. One of the featured artists spoke about the speculative futures suggested by science fiction authors. I walked away thinking about the ways technology can help us model and make projections about the future, and yet, what will actually happen is still unknown. This is a great reminder that despite the incredible advances they have made in technology, humans have always possessed the greatest tool for solving their problems – imagination.



**How is programming during the rest of the year apart from the festival? During the GCDN gathering you mentioned you were working on creating neighborhood guides to foster cultural tourism through the city. You also mentioned the Public Art Master Plan. How are these things going?**

PVDFest is amazing but we have a pretty ambitious work plan throughout the year. We present public programming in neighborhood parks, present visual artists in galleries at City Hall, provide technical assistance and marketing support to the arts sector, and work with community partners on our creative placemaking portfolio. In April, we released our first comprehensive plan for public art. The plan calls for commissioning landmark public art projects, temporary public art, integrating public art into civic infrastructure and creating public residency opportunities through a new initiative, ACT Public Art, that we will begin to implement this year. We also worked on the neighborhood tourist guides with the Convention & Visitors Bureau. These guides speak to new ways people are experiencing our city – how folks travel and a desire to experience the city as a local in part by staying in Airbnbs instead of traditional hotels. In order to support the next generation of creative capital, we are also entering into the second year of an arts education partnership with the City's school district and the nationally renowned John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts at three middle schools and incubating a young maker initiative.

**You have a long trajectory working on catalyzing community engagement and prosperity. What are the challenges that you face as a facilitator/cultural leader?**

I am often in the position of speaking on behalf of creatives and translating across sectors. I am also a collaborator by nature and I love building teams that bring people together to create something new. So much of this work is grounded in building trust and relationships; and, no doubt, partnerships can be hard. There are often conflicting embedded agendas, funders working at cross-purposes, ideas in discord, and oversized egos at the table. Making time and space to attend to alignment is crucial – as is a willingness to adapt and revise a plan. While process-oriented work is the most important aspect of civic engagement, it is probably the least interesting thing to share with the public. Furthermore, it requires a good deal of trust to empower community leaders. I try to be thoughtful about my role as a gatekeeper, but it is challenging to be

the voice of dynamic, creative, culturally distinct communities – some of which may not even see themselves as being parts of a cohesive group.

**Being the first U.S city to implement tax incentives for artists to move there, what are the next steps in building public/private partnerships that other districts can learn from?**

The language about the tax incentives signaled that the public sector was committed to supporting the creative sector. Municipalities have an opportunity to create arts-friendly policies through the rules and regulations of compliance. In Providence we updated our zoning ordinance following a multiyear planning study that integrated land use, transit, and cultural planning. The result has been responsive to current conditions and supportive of use by artists and other creatives. Other cities can benefit similarly by taking collaborative, cross-departmental approaches to listening to and supporting creative workers and their businesses.

**With the Culture Pass having just been launched in NYC to enlarge community participation, what similar strategies are you currently developing in Providence?**

This June Providence launched a municipal ID program. The benefits offered by cultural organizations have been key to the success in other cities and likewise our office has encouraged the arts community to participate in PVDID. We will be updating our cultural plan next year and we see the planning process as an opportunity to engage our cultural institutions more deeply around the program so as to increase participation further.

**How do you foster collaboration among the different cultural institutions that make up your city? How does the district feed into other naturally occurring cultural pockets of the city (e.g South Providence)?**

Providence is a mid-sized city – small by the standards of many GCDN members – and we are facilitating a creative citymaking agenda across neighborhood boundaries here. Fortunately, we have an active artist community who helps us by stewarding conversations on related to the challenges of living and working in rapidly changing pockets of cultural activity. Furthermore, our cultural organizations are collaborative in their approach to leveraging resources and engaging the residents of their neighborhoods. Undoubtedly, we have learned a lot about building structural equity in our cultural districts through our creative placemaking work. No area of the city is a blank slate and bringing new resources and attention to the actors in “naturally occurring” cultural pockets can be fraught. Again, we are faced with the critical importance of relationship building as well as thorny issues of site control and property ownership. In Providence’s two emerging innovation districts we are working with the anchor cultural institutions to develop sustainable plans for the future. We hope to have tools to support their growth so that they and their affiliated local artists remain the primary beneficiaries of new investments made in their neighborhoods.

**What are the priorities for the district/emerging trends or developing issues for your city? What will be the link between culture and urban citizenship in the coming years?**

Mayor Elorza is working with colleges and universities here to advance an urban innovation strategy that capitalizes on fast-growth industries that naturally align with our core strengths, such as art and design, tech, food and health and wellness. The place-based component of that concept challenges us to think about how we embed culture in

planning initiatives so that we are working to create meaningful connections between the existing communities and assets while fostering new opportunities and ideas about who we are and who we want to be.

We are also at the very beginning of building an urban trail system that will better connect and integrate city neighborhoods – a physical pathway that will link institutions as well as people. Finally, we are working on a public art and placemaking strategy that embeds culture through this trail system.

**Are you currently doing anything to measure the social/economic impact of culture and audience participation?**

Currently, Deputy Director Lizzie Araujo is spearheading a pilot happiness study at Neighborhood Performing Arts Initiative programming this summer. We'll keep you posted about the results!

**What would you say that you learned from your GCDN peers during the Regional Convening in Providence last year?**

I love seeing Providence through the eyes of others – and what a lens the GCDN peers provide! It was great to get their insights on the places and spaces where we are working and where they observed potential. The shared assessment of the GCDN research study about security in urban spaces was particularly fascinating.

**Which places do you look to for inspiration? What would you like to learn from other districts?**

I love to travel – always makes me feel alive and I love to come back to Providence with a renewed perspective. I had the good fortune to study in Florence when I was in college and I definitely still look to the great cities of Europe for inspiration. Through the GCDN I've come to look to everything Montreal's QDPS does, public art in Times Square, and Barcelona's neighborhood regeneration work for inspiration. I love the High Line. I just got back from Indianapolis and the Cultural Trail is definitely making me think about how we travel throughout the city differently. There are too many places to explore and learn from to count!