



GCDN MEMBER COVID-19 SESSIONS – SERIES 2

(April 16-23, 2020)

SUMMARY & NOTES

Following the interest in the first round of GCDN video calls to discuss the impact of Covid-19, six further conversations were convened to explore three critical topics:

- *Programming during – and beyond – the pandemic*
- *Repositioning districts – new roles, new partnerships, new business models*
- *Scenario planning – preparing for a new normal*

Colleagues from 38 member organizations in 15 countries took part and each of the six discussions was deftly chaired by a different member: Stephanie Fortunato (Director ACT, City of Providence); Kate Meyrick & Michael Stott (Directors, Urbis); Lily Weiss (Executive Director, Dallas Arts District); Fiona Poletti (Director of External Engagement, Arts Centre Melbourne); and Angelita Teo (Director, Olympic Foundation for Culture & Heritage).

The discussions revealed an international community at different stages of dealing with the pandemic in different contexts; but with common agendas and much to learn from another. Some districts were still consumed with the difficulties of day to day, managing empty buildings, furloughing and laying off staff. New challenges were emerging from empty spaces and economic disruption as some reported dealing with increased crime, homelessness or enforcements around safe distancing. Many were beginning to think about reopening, trying to gauge audience appetites and the steps needed to make them want to return. All were now managing remote teams, audiences and communities and trying to find new ways to engage them.

As the artistic, financial and social consequences became more apparent, some fundamental questions recurred – what does it mean to be a district if the constituent artistic and cultural body is decimated? How do we foster cultural participation and trust in a safe and responsible fashion? How do districts return to core mission and carve out value for local communities – from elderly residents to creative businesses to key workers? How do we collate, mine and share data to understand and respond effectively? How do we ensure that there aren't further inequalities in those who get to make and experience culture? And how might we think long-term when there are so many immediate concerns?

Within these challenges, there remains the over-riding belief that art and culture is ever more important to help rebuild individual and collective health. There were many imaginative examples of resilience and repurposing; of finding opportunities to connect despite distance. We have listed some below as well as some of the recurring themes.



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Cultural Districts supporting civic wellbeing: advocacy & repositioning

- Working in conjunction with city emergency response teams to bring people back to public spaces safely
- Emphasis on more open spaces: discussion about how streets and urban space will change
- More focus on unseen members of the community following the pandemic
- More focus on technicians, set builders, back of the house staff as critically important members of the community.
- More focus on partnership, particularly on local
- Districts have been really focused on place, and now there is an interesting shift in focus toward people and communities.
- Need to get local communities to view cultural institutions as an everyday kind of resource.
- People have different attitudes toward risk, and younger audiences tend to feel more immortal so we might want to speak differently to different audiences
- Giving back to the community is a globally common theme for cultural districts.

‘The word ‘destination’ doesn’t feel appropriate right now. It may be more of a cultural community’

Sian Bird, Head of Partnerships & Strategic Projects, Culture Mile, London

‘We believe that culture has a big role to play in giving hope and joy to people and it acts as a bit of an antidepressant for the population.’

Lucie Renou, Chargée de Mission International, SAMOA Nantes

Some examples from our membership:

- New York City [will open 40 miles of streets](#) to pedestrians and bicyclists to allow for greater social distancing – including in Brooklyn, in partnership with the **Downtown Brooklyn Partnership**
- A hotel in the **Quartier des Spectacles** [has been turned into a shelter](#) and isolation center for the homeless in Montreal.
- **Navy Pier’s** Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, in partnership with the Red Cross and other theatres, [have created and donated masks](#) for distribution and host regular blood drives.
- The senior executives of the **West Kowloon Cultural District** have donated part of their salaries to set up a fund to help local artists.
- “[Percent for art](#)” (government program) dollars being applied for art projects for the first time in 40 years – **ACT, City of Providence**



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- [“Arts Well Being Collective”](#) giving advice on coping and being creative in current environment – **Arts Centre Melbourne**
- **LAC Lugano Arte e Cultura** have launched a branded survival kit which their audience can order as a gift (meals, books, gadgets) as well as a phone number which they can call to get explanations on the content of the kit.
- **Alserkal** [has launched ‘Pay it Forward’](#): a program through which members of the district can apply for up to 3 months of their rent to be fully waived – in return for which they give back, via barter or organizing new community services, to help in a state where there is no social welfare because UAE residents don’t pay taxes.
- To support retail in their community, the **Downtown Brooklyn Partnership** [started Brooklyn for Life!](#) – a GoFundMe campaign through which they buy meals for the Downtown Brooklyn hospital workers using only the restaurants in the neighbourhood

‘We hope to build better relationships with local residents as they see how culture can help give them things to do and feel part of the collective process.’

Tim Jones, Manager, Culture Mile, London

What’s on now? Programming in time of crisis

The rush to digital is a universal first step: exploring opportunities and challenges

- A common concern is how to monetize digital content.
 - Initial focus has been on keeping the artists working and visible. How to turn this into a viable model for the long-term?
 - Some sponsors of live events have agreed to repurpose their sponsorship funds and support virtual events – worth pursuing this as a possibility.
 - Emphasis on offering unique online experiences to differentiate from the plethora of content on offer. Free at first but might lead to monetization.
- Questions about who is analyzing online engagement - online platforms are becoming audience labs to assess new behaviors and understand how to build a new long-term ecosystem, providing they are sufficiently scrutinized
- Another issue for the longer term is how to find the right balance between digital and physical programming.

Some examples from our membership:

- New series of [“Big Night In”](#) orchestra performances done virtually from the musicians’ homes – **Arts Centre Melbourne**
- [Broadway Buskers](#) – bringing Broadway actors and composers to perform original music on the plazas and now online – **Times Square Alliance**
- [Serpentine Gallery Earth Day program](#) – **Exhibition Road Cultural Group**
- [Kids Corner](#) online activities – **Harbour Trust, Sydney**



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- [United We Stream](#) Greater Manchester – **Salford Cultural Partnership**
- New World Symphony canceled its season and [launched an online offer](#) which mixes archive content and weekly original offerings – **New World Symphony**
- [Using iconic Times Square screens](#) to draw attention to essential workers. – **Times Square Alliance**
- **Auckland Live** has been partnering with [Performing Arts Network of New Zealand](#) – a nationwide performing arts representative body offering weekly livestream webinars, enabling conversations that stream out to all the industry.

Coming soon: preparing for changing audiences

How to create safe and inviting environments to encourage a return?

- Smaller events and outdoor gatherings will be the new short-term norm.
- Cultural districts have the advantage of public spaces to program cultural offerings rather than wait for the audience to feel safe indoors again.
- Smaller markets rely on tourism and performances being able to move between cities. How will travel and tourism look like in the mid to long term?
- Going online has facilitated greater engagement of the diaspora audiences for organizations like Kingston Creative – how to keep this engagement alive in the long term?
- For those who have benefited from a digital audience boom: how to retain this audience once physical programming is viable again?
- Determine what a hybrid online/live model looks like. Opportunity to develop new audiences.
- Public spaces are very symbolic - should we curate re-entry or let it be organic?
- Some district organizations are surveying their artists and audiences about attitudes regarding return

'What does a hybrid model of online/live content look like? Programs that used to be local are now global with participants from all over the world.'

Beth Allen, Executive Director, Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance

Programming for the future

Beyond getting content online, organizations are thinking more deeply about connecting their digital strategy to broader questions about long-term purpose.

- Using this time as a reset opportunity instead of being reactive – slowing down and strategizing.



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- Redirecting the attention of venues away from traditional programming into emerging artists, education and local participation
- Questions about how challenging programming should be - should culture tackle the structural social problems that exacerbated the pandemic, or should we be providing solace and entertainment? Finding the balance is key.
- Importance of working with artists to articulate the experience we have lived through.
- Rather than offering large sums of commissioning money to 1-2 artists, **Arts Centre Melbourne; Times Square Alliance;** and several others are offering smaller amounts to more artists so that they can start digital works with a view to creating live interactive public output in 2021 and reflective pieces on Covid times.

'We are looking at changing the way we operate. This is the circuit breaker time that allows us to change – and develop the audience of the future.'

Liz Hawkins, Director of Programming, Development & Venue Sales, Adelaide Festival Centre

'We should acknowledge that for a lot of projects and districts, work needs to be done to develop the local audience to align it to where the district goes next.'

Tim Jones, Manager, Culture Mile

Scenario planning & challenges

Scenario planning always takes into account economic, social, environment and other forces that have impact on our sector. We try to forecast for the future for this crisis and future crises and also determine some common areas.

- Many are waiting for guidance from local government on how and when institutions can reopen and what types of restrictions will be required and who will bear the costs (masks, screening, etc.).
- Changes are happening faster, and bureaucracy has been reduced.
- Emphasis on short term: how to recover, how to re-open, how to re-engage with audiences, supporters and stakeholders.
- Focus on operating with no ticket revenue. Increased focus on sponsorship and philanthropy to replace entrance fees.
- Asking donors to commission new works to create interactive content for 2021. Also funding for new initiatives like residencies.
- Screening for Covid-19: should the cost be built into an institution's budget?
- Adapting to the "new normal" – costs and challenges of changing the operating style – seating plans, reduced capacity, etc.
- How long before the new status quo becomes clear. The ambiguity and uncertainty about what the future holds makes planning difficult.



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- How do we harness the power of creativity to take us through the different phases of recovery?
- There will be pressure on culture to play a part in restoring some sense of stability and forward-looking vision for where we all go next as a society.
- How to undo social scarring? It will affect different age groups differently.
- People have different attitudes toward risk, and younger folk tend to feel more immortal so we might want to speak differently to different audiences to find ways to bring people together and focus on the job and connectivity rather than just the fear aspect.
- The focus on the pandemic should not eclipse other globally common concerns for cultural districts such as terrorism, the impact of climate change, etc.

Examples:

- **Arts Centre Melbourne** have restructured their staff into working groups and created three streams of strategic thinking:
 - Respond: managing the Covid closure
 - Together Again: how we recover, how we re-open, how we re-engage with our audiences, supporters and stakeholders.
 - Reimagine and rebuild a long-term future: Our over-arching vision of how we want to emerge from this.
- Montreal's **Partenariat du Quartier des Spectacles** are following a response, recovery & renewal strategy built around four phases and with a focus on outdoor programming and installations:
 - Phase 1: people are at home, so they're doing video projections on building surfaces
 - Phase 2: making a public plaza installation about nature, creating soundscapes of nature sounds
 - Phase 3: more small gatherings, bringing back some of the art pieces, some games
 - Phase 4: bring in artists, festivals to plan events. Have the public participate in installations or in collective performances (online or live)
- **Lincoln Road BID** are thinking about health and wellness programming in Soundscape Park – a 1.5-acre site – with limited numbers and distance between the practitioners. The method of entry will be similar to boarding a plane with social distancing and checks.

'This has really broken down barriers and bureaucracy and people are taking decisions more quickly than they would usually. Hopefully we've learned a new way to be more efficient that can continue.'

Nicole Gordon, CEO, Better Bankside, London