



GCDN
Global Cultural
Districts Network
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THE PLATFORM

IN CONVERSATION WITH...

Andrea Dempster-Chung, Co-Founder and Executive Director, Kingston Creative – Kingston, Jamaica

'I really love what I do and the team around me loves what they are doing too, and that collective positive energy is what drives us forward'



Image courtesy of Kingston Creative.

Andrea Dempster-Chung is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Kingston Creative, a nonprofit organization seeking to develop a world-renowned Art District and Cultural Hub in the old city of Downtown Kingston, Jamaica.

Andrea is a Structural Engineer and previously held senior management roles in the Government of Jamaica and has served on the boards of Jamaica Social Investment Fund, The National Land Agency and the Public Health Committee. She recently managed the Arts Portfolio for the British Council in Jamaica, developing on an arts strategy and delivering key projects in film, literature and visual art to drive the creative economy in Jamaica.

She received her BS in Civil Engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology and MS in Structural Engineering from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She has studied Art and Finance at the Sotheby's Institute of Art and Finance at the Stanford School of Business.

Kingston Creative has had a successful three years since launching in February 2017. What are your greatest achievements so far – and do you have any regrets?

‘The greatest achievement has been building a strong community.’

We formed in February 2017, spent a year in planning and started our public-facing activities in March 2018. Since then, Kingston Creative has delivered a signature series of events over the last weekend of the month, including the Artwalk. It has also developed 50 street art murals, a coworking hub space for creatives and a shop for artisans. It has all unfolded way faster than we imagined.

We currently have about 100 volunteers and just being able to get so many people on board who believe that it is possible to make change and who are actually working passionately to achieve that – even in the face of a pandemic – that is huge.

We also have a team of “First 50” Founders and these are NGO, Corporate and Government entities who are committed to investing in culture and creativity. This approach means that we are not dependent on funding from any single source and it has also built a strong cadre of vocal advocates from private, public and third sector who believe in the vision of investing in Jamaican culture and creativity to achieve social and economic benefits and sustainable national development. So far, no regrets, as I don’t really do regret and disappointment, I prefer to take the lesson from the situation and strive to do better next time around.

Before Kingston Creative, you had a long career working on grassroots projects and community engagement. What do you consider the key for a successful community-based cultural endeavour? And what would you say are the pitfalls to avoid at all costs?

My career spans engineering, bookselling, project management, housing, telecoms, business development and of course arts and culture – and I have always been involved in some kind of community project. It was either leading a service club in Kingston, the Caribbean Association while at university in the States, or founding an NGO called Jamaicans United for Social Transformation (JUST) when I was 27. I think the keys to any successful community-based cultural endeavor are to create a clear and inspirational vision, to surround yourself with great people, ensure that they have a leadership role in delivering the vision, so that you create a tribe of leaders in their own right, not just followers. Then it’s the basics of communicating openly and honestly, operating with integrity and respect and making sure that we are all having fun.

‘We sometimes glorify the hustle and the struggle in community work and forget the need for play, celebration and rest.’

I really love what I do and the team around me loves what they are doing too and that collective positive energy is what drives us forward.



The pitfall to avoid at all costs is not listening to your team. We have a very flat structure and a consultative model with 7 pods (volunteer teams) that own different areas. I'm very accessible and so I get a lot of feedback daily, that informs how we move forward. The feedback isn't always positive, but not listening, not consulting your team on important decisions and not respecting and valuing them as equals and leaders in their own right would be a huge mistake.



Image courtesy of Kingston Creative.

Kingston Creative aims to 'create an art district and hub for creative entrepreneurs' over the next five to ten years. What does this development mean in practical terms and can you give an idea of your day-to-day activities both in the pre- and post-Covid-19 era?

'We wanted to have simple targets that people could touch and feel, so we committed at the outset to deliver those two outcomes.'

The mission is 'enabling creative people to succeed and create social and economic value' so it was important to establish tangible goals at the start so that we could measure that progress. The Art District means murals, public art, festivals, events and creative businesses operating in the space. The Creative Hub means both a physical space for creatives, but also a focus on the entrepreneurship side of things, delivering training and development that is needed across the sector.

In practical terms, the Creative Hub is now open and has creatives working from the space – socially distanced of course – and we have trained over 2000 participants in its first “Digital Creative” Bootcamp delivered online earlier this year. In the Art District, pre-COVID-19, we held monthly Networking Meetups, Artwalks, Artisanal Markets, tours of cultural communities and painted murals. Now, all of these activities except the murals are virtual, and while we can’t wait to get back to having these events in person, it really forced us to innovate. You can see the virtual tour here [www.kingstoncreative.org/virtual-tour] and all the Artwalks are now live on IGTV and on our YouTube channel. The Meetups are held on Zoom and broadcast live on Facebook. That means that we reach many more people from outside Kingston and all around the world, which is something that we intend to keep doing, even when we do return to in-person events.

Speaking of Covid-19, how has the pandemic impacted Kingston Creative and its community? What did the initial response look like, and how has it evolved over these past months? What threats and opportunities do you now foresee?

Covid-19 has had a devastating effect on the creative community in Jamaica, as we are a small economy with not a lot of State resources. We are also a well-known global destination and tourism and entertainment events are our lifeblood. Immediately all travel, weddings, live music venues, parties, even global reggae festivals like Carnival and Sumfest, just shut down. That has had a huge impact on not only the artists but also the rest of the creative community – the lighting and sound engineers, the stage managers, event planners, videographers, caterers, and so on. A lot of people have lost their work, and hardest hit were those ‘solotpreneurs’ who work gig to gig. Our Government issued a grant to support those affected, but we face an issue of lack of formalization and that grant was only for the registered businesses, which meant that a lot of creatives who operate informally fell outside of that safety net.



Image courtesy of Kingston Creative.

We had to respond very quickly. We issued a survey, then transitioned all events to virtual so that artists could still be employed and continue to earn. We then launched a 1000 Masks project, where local artisans (seamstresses and tailors) were given small grants to create masks that were then distributed free to their communities. This worked extremely well and we more than doubled the initial target. We then partnered with a bank to deliver three weeks

of digital training for creatives who all suddenly needed to understand the basics of e-commerce, digital marketing and social media and how they could apply it to their practice.

The final step was a partnership called CATAPULT with two NGO's, American Friends of Jamaica and Fresh Milk Barbados to bring \$320,000 USD of grants not just to Jamaicans but to over 1000 creatives in 34 islands in the Caribbean. CATAPULT is geared toward Caribbean creators making online content, which is something that will become the new normal, so in addition to providing relief grants, it is building capacity in these areas.

It's hard to predict what will happen, but going forward, culture endures. Jamaican culture in particular has a strong, recognizable brand and global appeal, so this bodes well for Jamaican creatives who can pivot their business. There will need to be collective planning however, to ensure that we take timely measures to protect the creators of the culture, many of whom exist on the margins and are adversely affected by the 'digital divide', as we seem to have several more challenging months ahead of us.

GCDN's 2020 research piece looks at the strategies that can be used to preserve the cultural identity of a neighbourhood and capture value, either pre-emptively, during, or after a cultural district has been established. Would you say that capturing value and safeguarding identity is a concern as you develop Downtown Kingston to be a national and global creative hub? If so, what tools/strategies do you use to tackle this issue in your day-to-day practice?

'Safeguarding a uniquely Jamaican identity, and the tangible and intangible heritage that exists in Kingston is a huge concern for us.'

We don't want to create a 'Disneyland' for tourist consumption, it has to be first and foremost an Art District created for a Jamaican audience. We want to maintain our own unique Jamaican identity, as that is of irreplaceable value – it is worth noting that the music, dance, language and culture is still being created in Downtown, so keeping the balance is essential. We have also seen the cycles of boom and bust that go with art district development elsewhere, the pricing out of local creatives (and residents) and the erasure of the original streetscape. It is sad, but an often-unintended consequence of a cultural district's development is gentrification – and we really want to avoid that.

We are working with a consultant to document the cultural assets, put safeguards in place to reduce displacement, protect our architecture and ensure that we achieve the balanced and inclusive development that we intend. As the area develops and people and businesses move in to Downtown, there needs to be alignment on the need to maintain the heritage overlay of the Georgian buildings even if interiors are renovated. We have to ensure that we maintain spaces for the cultural activities that now take place, whether it's a formal music show on a stage, or informal Nyabingi drumming on an open lot. Highlighting the inherent value of these cultural activities, creating spaces for dialogue with residents and advocating for inclusive development



is a key part of our role – and this engagement effort is led by our Community and Art District pods.



Image courtesy of Kingston Creative.

In January 2020, Kingston Creative launched ‘The Creative Hub’ to provide local creative entrepreneurs with the tools and support to take their business global. Can you tell us more about this project and its development? Do you already have success stories to share? And how do you think the fallout of the pandemic will impact this initiative going forward?

The project is designed to provide space and development opportunities for creatives. It offers workshops, a creative business accelerator programme, meeting rooms, offices, digital and podcasting studios as well as coworking space. It also offers access to other spaces that creatives need, such as a dance studio, animation studio and a theatre/auditorium, which are owned by other entities but through partnerships, can be rented by creatives, through the Hub. It's a way to leverage these little known, underutilised spaces that exist across Downtown.

With the advent of COVID, we have to accept the reality of less occupancy, more careful scheduling of events, increased costs for sanitisation and more virtual activities to ensure that social distancing requirements are met. We expect it to be a slower year than originally forecast, but there are some opportunities as people now need venues to create content in, to livestream

events from or record events in – and this space is ideal for that. Within days of opening, the Hub was the venue for MTV’s livestream of their #AloneTogether Jam session with Jamaican artist Sevana.



Image courtesy of Kingston Creative.

Kingston Creative recently became grantees of the European Union and Jamaica Social Investment Fund, enabling investment into five downtown Kingston communities. Can you tell us more about your plans for this grant? How do you plan to manage and develop these distinctive communities when it comes to community building and branding?

Through the European Union and Jamaica Social Investment Fund grant we were able to work with the community on developing their cultural product and to train 50 community youth as Cultural Hosts. The communities were Rae Town, Trench Town, Beat Street and Tivoli Gardens – places famous for sound systems, for dancehall, reggae, dub, rocksteady and several other genres of music and for being the home of Bob Marley and other music greats. We are very ‘light touch’ in our approach. We are well aware that these communities have been iconic and culturally rich for decades.

‘We do not attempt to manage, develop or make them into anything, but simply to amplify the community’s own efforts.’



We staged festivals in partnership with existing community cultural organisations and brought an audience in to focus attention to what the community was *already* doing – and also to spend



Image courtesy of Kingston Creative.

money in the community. Through dialogue we learned that some communities were trying to erect signage, some wanted to ramp up their tours business, some had planned a music festival but were having trouble getting it off the ground, others wanted to put more street art into their community... and we were able to support those efforts to brand

and earn. We also shared possibilities for how things could be done differently, for example with the virtual tour and online Artwalk that we conducted in Tivoli Gardens.

These communities already have so much cultural wealth – our role was really just to highlight the existing talent and heritage sites, and train young people in cultural entrepreneurship and planning and executing tours, which opened up the possibility of them working in the cultural space in the future within their own communities.

Where do you look for inspiration? Are there any examples around the world that you would like to learn more from?

We take inspiration from everywhere! Marrakech is interesting for its vibrancy, seeming disorder and integration of the residents into the model – it is certainly not sterile and orderly, but it is safe, and it works. Medellin is also an interesting model because they have had to face some similar issues with the high levels of organised crime, guns and violence that we face in Kingston. With Comuna 13 there is a brilliant example of how art created employment for unattached youth, grew revenue from tourists and brought peace. In Sicily we saw a model for an Artisan Collective that inspired the store that we recently opened in Downtown.

The high levels of state investment in Arts in London, the commitment to heritage preservation in Georgetown, Washington DC and the Wynwood model in Miami have all been inspirational in their own way but it is important to not try to impose that type of a Global North model onto Kingston as we do not have a similar culture or levels of state investment in the arts. Our goal is to allow it



to evolve organically and authentically with lots of input from the community. It will be a slower process, but we believe that approach will achieve the best outcome.

We would really like to learn more from our neighbours in Havana and Santo Domingo as although there is the barrier of language, they are in the Caribbean, have a lot of cultural similarities and would have lessons that are directly applicable to our environment. The more stories of cultural district development from the Global South that can be shared, the better.

Jamaica has had a long history with North America and Europe through colonization and subsequent generations of migration. How does the #BlackLivesMatter and current global movement against institutionalized racism and toward justice impact your activities in Kingston? And how are you addressing the issue within your community?

We have had a very long history, from colonization and slavery when Africans were brought to the Caribbean to the “reverse colonization” of Caribbean soldiers going to Britain to fight in WWII and then the Windrush generation moving to the UK and subsequent waves of migration to the US, Canada and elsewhere. Right now, there are as many Jamaicans living in the Diaspora as there are living in the island. So we are interconnected in so many ways. Most Jamaicans have family members living abroad who are facing the direct impacts of racism, and we worry for them. Locally, we do face similar challenges in our own context as the legacy of hundreds of years of racial oppression doesn’t just vanish in a couple of decades. While #BLM is a uniquely American manifestation, underlying it is a cry for racial equality and social justice which definitely resonates here in Jamaica and which our music has championed for decades, most directly during the apartheid struggles in South Africa.



Image courtesy of Kingston Creative.

Jamaica is a 92% Black country, with Black political leaders, teachers, doctors and police force, so the issues are more nuanced. This period has been an opportunity for us to look at the injustices and post-colonial legacies that exist here, like colourism and social inequality founded on race. We have been challenging racist stereotypes that exist in the television and film industry here and in the Diaspora, discussing the colonial monuments – and artists especially are having conversations around decolonising our minds (and our art world). It is a process... and frankly it has been a very 'heavy' period. Kingston Creative sees its role as first ensuring that we as an organisation are as inclusive as possible and then secondly to support and create platforms where artists can speak and express themselves through their art.

Kingston Creative joined GCDN in 2018, very early on in its existence. You've been very active within the network since you joined. What drew you to join the network and what do you hope to get from your membership going forward?

We were introduced to the GCDN through the British Council and joining the organisation was one of the best things that we could have done. The GCDN has helped us in a way to have a



Image courtesy of AEA Consulting.

global voice and a network to lean on. The warmth, expertise, knowledge and research that the GCDN team shares has been particularly useful in helping us to promote the benefits of establishing cultural districts locally. We have been using the data to make a solid case for investment, as there are no "Art Districts" in Jamaica to point to as examples. Going

forward we hope for more opportunities to share our journey with this global community and in turn to continue to learn from other creative communities.

Get in touch with the Kingston Creative team!

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