



GCDN

Global Cultural
Districts Network

An Initiative of AEA Consulting

ANNUAL CONVENING LUGANO 2022

29 MAY — 1 JUNE 2022
SUMMARY REPORT

FOREWORD

GCDN's 2022 convening in Lugano drew heavily on the collective wisdom of its membership reinforcing the strong ties of trust, friendship and collaboration that have contributed to the success of the network since it was established in 2013. After almost three years of virtual meetings, it was a delight to be able to see everyone in person again. We had a lot to discuss and to learn from each other and from expert counsel.

Michel Gagnon and Luigi Di Corato first invited GCDN to convene at LAC Lugano Arte e Cultura, in 2020. Following convenings in Dallas, Montreal, London, Brooklyn, Barcelona, Dubai, and Singapore, the idea was that meeting in Lugano would give the network an opportunity to explore the magnitude of impact a cultural district can have on its community, city, and even region, when operating on a relatively smaller scale.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic forced us to postpone the convening by two years, our commitment to visiting Lugano, and LAC's commitment to host the network never wavered. Rather than being put on ice, the project evolved through constant discussions and collaboration with Michel Gagnon and his team – including a half-day online event in 2021 which acted as a precursor to some of the conversations held in Lugano.

Ultimately, there could not have been a better choice than Lugano and LAC as hosts for a return to in-person convening. The city's rich mix of languages and cultures and its location at the heart of Europe provided the context for a highly participative programme of discussion, workshops, and networking. The stunning vistas of the lake and mountains and lovely weather of the Ticino region created a perfect setting to reconnect with old colleagues and establish relationships with new ones. Beyond aesthetics and atmosphere, Michel Gagnon and his team were instrumental in curating a space where global could meet local, to foster discussions that went beyond the rhetoric and tried to make an authentic contribution to addressing the most challenging issues of the day.

The convening highlighted just how universally shared the effects of the existential challenges of our time are. It showed that cultural and urban leaders need to leverage their collective heft to achieve impact and meaningful change. It demonstrated the value of collaboration and knowledge exchange in achieving that outcome. And it showed that we cannot shy away from having complicated, sometimes uncomfortable, conversations and put ourselves professionally at risk as leaders if we want to achieve progress.

Gregorio Lucena Scarpella
Director, GCDN

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank those who made the 2022 GCDN annual convening a successful event on many levels. Our gratitude goes to the City of Lugano and our co-hosts, LAC Lugano e Cultura, and in particular:

- **Michele Foletti**, Mayor, City of Lugano
- **Roberto Badaracco**, Vice-Mayor, City of Lugano & President of LAC
- **Luigi Di Corato**, Director of Cultural Affairs, City of Lugano
- **Michel Gagnon**, General Director, LAC
- **Marco Sorgesa**, Special Projects Manager, LAC
- **Claudia Rossi**, Event Manager, LAC
- **Valentina Delfante**, Management Support, LAC

We also thank our speakers and guests for enriching our conversations with their perspective and expertise. And, of course, we are extremely grateful to all the GCDN members who attended the convening – as well as those who could not be there – for their invaluable contributions, inspiration and trust. — **THANK YOU!**



ABOUT THIS REPORT

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WELCOME FROM THE CITY OF LUGANO LAC AND GCDN



The eighth convening of the Global Cultural Districts Network – and the first after nearly three years apart after Singapore in late summer 2019 – kicked off with a welcome from Michel Gagnon, General Manager of the host LAC Lugano Arte e Cultura; Roberto Badaracco, Vice-Mayor of Lugano and Chairman of LAC; Michele Foletti, Mayor of Lugano; and Adrian Ellis, GCDN Chair.

The introduction provided a window into the development of LAC and its successes since opening in 2015 – highlighting the major investment made to declare a region of roughly 70,000 inhabitants as a significant cultural place for the country. Lugano is by some way the smallest city to host a GCDN convening, which has visited major global hubs such as London, Singapore, Dubai, and Barcelona in the past. However, this different scale is one that may, in many ways, make what the group learned over the two days of the event more instructive.



LAC Lugano Arte e Cultura was inaugurated in 2015. From the start, General Director Michel Gagnon, his team, and their partners at the City of Lugano implemented a strategy which put social impact front and center. By being a producer as well as presenter, by committing to multidisciplinary collaboration within the institution and with external partners, and by infusing an aspect of cultural mediation in all of its activities, LAC Lugano Arte e Cultura became the embodiment of a successful cultural anchor for the city of Lugano and the broader region of Ticino. LAC is also an example of a fruitful partnership between a cultural institution and its local government, and its success as an anchor allows the City of Lugano to be ambitious in its goal to become an undisputed cultural destination for Italian-speaking Switzerland and beyond.

A success on many levels, then, and one that was not always a foregone conclusion. The creation of the center itself was a challenge, threatened by pushback and controversies. These obstacles were only overcome by unwavering commitment and collaboration between the LAC leadership and local government.



Cultural investment is not just limited to global art hubs, and projects like LAC in Lugano are just as common (if not more so), than those in New York, Los Angeles, or Shanghai. How Lugano and LAC turned such a major public investment – heavily debated at the time – into a source of identity and pride for all the people of the area, expanding opportunities for artistic creation, and becoming a development engine for the future of the city is something the group had opportunities to witness first-hand while gathered alongside this Swiss lake in the foothills of the Alps. Convening in a time when cultural organizations like those gathered were still facing the remains of the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic and the emerging paths forward that sees cultural organizations wrestling with issues of social and racial justice, new forms of audience engagement and technology, the climate crisis

MORNING SESSION: THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW...



Speakers

- **Sarah Dance**, Chair, Creative Estuary
- **Rachel Moore**, President & CEO, The Music Center
- **Andy Schulz**, Vice President for the Arts, University of Arizona – *moderator*

The opening panel set us on a path to explore how the world has changed in the three years since the Network last met in person – and, not stopping there: how organizations can respond, harness, and maybe even drive continued change.

The last three years have seen enhanced calls for arts and cultural organizations to respond with morally grounded actions – an imperative to equity and inclusion and serving communities more fully. While challenged by the finite resources that cultural organizations – usually organized as not-for-profits and without business models that generate economic surplus – there is still an opportunity to lean into a mandate of inclusion. How to accomplish this? It requires focus, and a strong filter on what actions are going to be valuable.

Embracing inclusion within resource constraints has required change:

- Moving from production or presentation to the idea of co-creation — an altered mindset that moves from “art for” audiences to “art with” or “art by” those people
- Building up a shared civic identity through the work of these cultural organizations — embracing the anchor institution agenda and looking to be a true shared space for all. This has seen arts spaces become locations and support for voting or for vaccination campaigns
- Demonstrating greater partnership and respect with Indigenous or other legacy / historic communities, and also working to be at the center of livable communities for the future
- Understanding that mental health is critical and that there is valuable exploration in creative acts that might help remedy the challenges brought by isolation and poverty. With the names at the root of the opioid crisis inscribed into some of our arts buildings, can a shared set of (creative) values — inclusion, fair pay, respect for a circular economy — allow for a path out?



With art and creativity realigned in service of fixing issues many were exposed during the time of Covid-19 — whether caused by Covid directly or pushed more directly into our sight-lines — the sector is called to rise to the challenge of addressing these opportunities. This means testing ‘what is possible’ — even with limited resources, arts organizations of many sizes can be platforms for big, shared ideas. This requires working across administrative disciplines with the spirit of an artist — watching and learning how magic can sometimes be made out of almost nothing. And where cultural organizations can’t adapt to that mindset, an answer might be to actually go find the artists themselves to deploy in service of new ideas, commissioning them to come up with things that we might not have otherwise devised.

So there are opportunities emerging from a crisis — but a crisis should not be required to see the opportunity to build greater inclusion in arts and culture. There are ongoing structures and processes that might edge us forward toward new futures on a regular basis:

- More active engagement in this work from organizational governance — both in conversations with leadership, and in external discussions that lead to critical feedback from stakeholders if you're listening. This starts with developing a better feedback cycle. It will eventually lead to a need to transform board membership and leadership, to ensure connection to your communities within your structure.
- Developing a greater understanding of how business models need to change — and continue to change. Post-Covid, we have seen that not all income is alike. Some earned income opportunities are coming back faster than others: Popular programming among younger generations can be as popular as ever; other projects might see more intermittent attendance. Building a funding base to support this work cannot be a one-time shot, aligned to the government in power or existing political spectrum. It needs to be carefully thought through to appeal to many potential constituents, using the lenses of both economic and social impact.
- Re-evaluating 'everyday practices' — the seemingly mundane activities like hiring or energy and water usage are opportunities to be strategic. Exploring how to de-bias hiring, providing greater training and support for emerging leaders, and putting in commitments and systems to manage our broader environmental impacts.



- Committing to transparency and reporting to hold ourselves accountable where progress is slow — and learning from successes where progress is. Thinking about how initial steps in a project’s research phase can be put together more closely with a project’s end evaluation phase – developing pilot projects or action research where you can watch initial returns and reflect. And doing that much more quickly than before – creating more agile organizations that are thinking about feedback loops, not about 5 or 10 year cycles. Where more flashy digital projects may grab lots of attention — and may be interesting! — much of the change in technology use means that we can measure things in real time and turn that into information we can use in managing these projects
- Articulating a ‘value proposition’ around arts and culture – how do we make people’s lives better? Beauty, connection, mental health, building up a social fabric. How does that become as much a part of the brand and identity as cutting edge artistry? Talk differently and present our organizations in a different light... What does welcome look like, from your institutional voice, your website, your building entry, your logo, your fundraising material? Can we be more “multi-lingual” in these things to reach more people?



Doing all this requires a final commitment: to developing “institutional stamina.” It is long work, and many steps start small. But that small step often leads to long-term value and an organization, and sector, aligned to better serve its communities into the future.

BREAKOUT SESSION: NETWORKS FOR ARTS, CULTURE, HEALTH AND WELLBEING

DAY
1

Speakers

- **Rosie Dow**, Programme Manager (Arts and Health), Nesta
- **Patrizia Nalbach**, Artist – Museum's Cultural Mediator – Music Therapist, LAC Lugano Arte e Cultura
- **Pier Luigi Sacco**, Professore Ordinario, Università degli Studi 'Gabriele d'Annunzio' di Chieti
- **Rarita Zbranca**, Cluj Cultural Centre, Programme Director
- **Elly Andriopoulou**, Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, Managing Director – moderator

Our recent collective and individual experience of living through a global pandemic has brought to the fore the preoccupation with health and emotional wellbeing of people who cultural organizations and districts are designed to serve. It has also highlighted the role arts and cultural activities – and those who produce and facilitate them – can play in improving the health and wellbeing of our communities and artists.

In this breakout session, experts from Switzerland, Italy, Romania, and the United Kingdom with experience implementing and assessing the impact of arts and cultural activities on health and wellbeing shared practical examples and approaches to employing creative practice as an instrument to improve health and wellbeing.





Rapidly expanding interest in policy intervention seeks evidence as to why exactly arts practice is effective in improving mental and physical health and alleviating a number of health conditions. Studies conducted in different parts of the world have so far demonstrated the impact of cultural practice and participation on stress management (in tracking the cortisol and adrenaline levels related to cultural experiences, for example). Importantly, many cultural activities involve interaction with others which in itself has a positive effect on mental and physical health and provides a demonstrated sense of belonging. Research and practical experience also show that practicing a variety of art forms, be it movement and dance, music, or visual arts and crafts, improves cognitive function, stimulates brain activity, and leads to greater physical activity and health benefits as well.

For cultural leaders, it is important to communicate these health benefits of cultural participation to the general public and policymakers. With a growing body of research behind it, it is becoming possible to substantiate these claims with the empirical evidence and explore further the mechanisms of arts and cultural activity intervention.

To expand the health and wellbeing impacts of cultural experience that take place in cultural districts and hubs of cultural activity, it has been suggested to invest in building relationships with partners from healthcare and social care sectors. Healthcare professionals are often well aware of the benefits of arts and cultural engagement and it is important to have an open and ongoing dialogue with healthcare sector leaders and service providers. Cultural districts and organizations should think carefully of the local context in developing a strategy for widening access to people with different needs, providing flexible spaces at cultural venues to accommodate a range of needs, and should take measures to ensure the wellbeing of staff and artists. Similarly, it is beneficial to engage artists and designers in the design of healthcare, social-care, and community spaces so these encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration and experimentation and provide respite and comfort to the public using them.

BREAKOUT SESSION: NEW GLOBAL GEOGRAPHIES OF CULTURAL FLAGSHIPS

DAY
1

Speakers

- **David Gogishvili**, Senior Researcher, University of Lausanne
- **Martin Müller**, Professor, University of Lausanne
- **Daniel Payne**, Managing Principal, AEA Consulting – *moderator*

Culture is widely understood to play a role in the generation and exchange of economic value and soft power around the world. So-called “global cultural capitalism” manifests in various ways – the ubiquity of global brands and cultural signifiers, the growth of the creative industries and knowledge workers, the emergence of culture-led strategies for urban regeneration, increased competitiveness for cultural soft power, etc.

The increased development of major cultural infrastructure projects – from the Guggenheim in Bilbao to the Louvre in Abu Dhabi – is often cited as a sort of proxy to demonstrate the growth in global cultural capitalism. At the University of Lausanne, Martin Muller and David Gogishvili have initiated a research project to test this hypothesis and understand the character of the development of “cultural flagships”. More specifically, they are seeking to understand how many cultural flagships exist, where they exist, what their function is, who is building them, and how much they cost.

For the purposes of this study, their definition of “cultural flagships” is limited to projects that fulfill the following criteria:

- Function: museums, libraries, museums, multifunctional art venues, and performance venues
- Timescale: projects inaugurated between 1990 and 2019
- Scale: either a minimum floor area of 20,000 m²; minimum cost of US (2019) \$100 million; or minimum capacity of 1,500 (for performance venues)

So far, the research has identified 411 cultural flagships that meet their criteria globally, representing a combined cost of US (2019) \$73 billion. This is far more than they had initially expected and appears to offer some validation to their hypothesis that global cultural capitalism not only exists as a major social and economic force but is growing rapidly. Highlights of their preliminary findings include:

- The volume and value of cultural flagship development is growing rapidly – the volume of new projects has increased consistently since 1990 – from 21 projects completed in 1990-4 period to 144 projects in 2015-19 – and growth of investment is outpacing GDP.

- Geographically, there has been a shift eastward from established Western cultural centres – Asia has led development of cultural flagships globally since 2000 comprising 64% of total floor areas.
- China has the highest number of new cultural flagships developed since 1990 (128) – other leading developers of cultural flagships are predominantly in the Global North including USA (68), France (15), Japan (15), Spain (14) and UK (12).
- Flagships are clustered within key cultural cities – Shanghai has the highest number of flagships (13), followed by Shenzhen (9) and Beijing (5).
- The scale and character of cultural flagships varies based on their location – for example, the average size of projects in the Global North is two or three times smaller than those in the Global South.
- Most flagships have been designed by established architectural practices, predominately located in the Global North – the most frequently engaged architects since 1990 include GMP Architects, Zaha Hadid Architects, Arata Isozaki & Associates, China Architecture Design Group, Herzog and de Meuron, and Renzo Piano Building Workshop.

Looking to the future, it's likely that China and the US will continue to lead in the development of major cultural infrastructure projects, while the Middle East – and the Gulf in particular – will grow in significance as key projects like Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi continue to progress. It begs the question, can we expect this level of sustained growth to continue? While COVID-19 has caused a number of project delays, it's unlikely to have a lasting impact. As Martin Muller put it, cities want to be appealing, not just rich. Whether cultural capital is a commodity that can be acquired is for us as cultural consumers to decide.



BREAKOUT SESSION: RETHINKING OUR CITIES... AND NEW TOOLS FOR ACTION

DAY
1

Speakers:

- **Ramon Marrades**, Placemaking Europe, Director
- **Regina Myer**, Downtown Brooklyn Partnership, President
- **Rozina Spinnoy**, BIDs Belgium, Founder / Director
- **Tim Jones**, Culture Mile Manager, City of London Corporation – *moderator*



Placemaking initiatives often take place in the same public spaces where communities came together when public health restrictions meant physical distance. The panel of experts who came together at the annual GCDN convening to discuss strategies for rethinking downtowns in a post-pandemic environment were already working outdoors, in-between buildings dedicated to culture and commerce, across sectors and organizational cultures at the onset of the pandemic. They are skilled in bottom-up organizing, iterating, adapting and evolving in partnership with others and in challenging conditions. In other words, these leaders are uniquely qualified to help downtowns evolve.



The panelists' collective wisdom echoes throughout the AfterCovid.City Charter. Placemaking Europe published this set of guidelines with the goal of securing commitments from city leaders across the continent to implement the recommendations — so far five have signed on. The 18-point Charter is an ambitious call to apply the pandemic era lessons to create more innovative, social, agile, cultural, green, and connected spaces.

On-the-ground experiences from cultural districts and BIDs in London, Brooklyn and Brussels affirmed not just the value of these aspirations, but the feasibility in moving the agenda as well. Panelists shared stories of civic and cultural leaders co-creating and implementing plans with communities — some that had been in the works for years, and in others securing new support to develop, test, and quickly implement responsive solutions. All celebrated new private/public/civic partnerships.

Cities grappling with what to do with their downtown cultural district would be wise to engage local artists and cultural communities in public programming, redesigning the public realm for all community members, and redefining connectivity between surrounding neighborhoods. Novel approaches informed by co-learning, experimentation, shared ownership, and active civic engagement have built trust among stakeholders and champions for public space. New governance structures are also emerging. While the relationship with local authorities can be uneasy, governments have increasingly become facilitators of community-driven action; in saying yes, agencies demonstrate that bureaucracy can be an enabling tool in supporting systemic change and equity.

Reckoning with catastrophe has revived a spirit of civic purpose in public spaces. But one panelist wondered if we can catalyze collaborations and innovations to rethink downtowns without trauma. Another panelist reminded us that there is no one size fits all tool for liberation – the work is constant and ongoing. It may take time to develop the right accountability measures to meet the topsy-turvy moment. No longer neatly divided into categories of home and work, assumptions about patterns of land use and users are being tested across geographies. Home offices hum with productivity throughout bedroom communities, while fewer workers commute downtown each day to fill the glass and steel office towers.

Downtown as we knew it – financial and cultural centers – has yet to fully return from its function in service to community. It may yet as new residents and users find previously inaccessible footholds in the spaces vacated by residents disillusioned by city life during the pandemic, but for today its purpose is a bit muddled. New strategies are required to fill the gap. Placemaking – with its emphasis on interim and iterative solutions – creates short-term activities which can lead to long-term possibilities.

BREAKOUT SESSION: WHAT'S NEXT FOR PUBLIC ART?

Speakers

- **Eloi Beauchamp**, CEO, Iregular
- **Jason Bruges**, Founder, Jason Bruges Studio
- **Josée Guérette**, Development & Touring Manager — Interactive Installations, Quartier des Spectacles
- **Michael Woodsmall**, WHY – *moderator*



Public artists and organizations are thinking about best practices to carry them into the future successfully. In this breakout session, panelists were first posed the question of how their organizations fared financially during the global pandemic. As commissions, grants, and touring exhibitions were some of the ways discussed, the conversation swiftly shifted towards other key takeaways realized throughout the pandemic, and how these organizations plan to incorporate their lessons learned into future projects.

Top of mind amongst the three panelists participating in this session was the importance of employing folks located in the cities their public art projects are headed. By outsourcing components of projects, and using local contractors or AV technicians to assist in the installation of a project, communities are further supported and engaged. This action also minimizes the amount of individual travel to and from the installation site and cuts down on shipping costs, in turn reducing an organization's carbon footprint and taking arts organizations beyond their initial objective, further reinforcing their role within a community.

In addition to utilizing local talent, organizations also look towards engaging pre-existing structures as a source of inspiration. Panelists felt that working with an established structure as a foundation for potential projects holds more value than installing something entirely new. Doing this often brings vibrancy and new life to an otherwise overlooked area, and allows organizations the opportunity to maintain the heritage of a city while simultaneously adding to it and reintroducing community members to view something familiar to them in a new way.

When it comes to constructing projects, longevity is imperative to the future success of arts organizations/installations. As climate rapidly changes, panelists discussed the need for projects to be robust, and successfully operate within their environment. Performing exhaustive research and testing various concepts to ensure the durability and success of a project is a regular practice within these organizations.

Visiting or non-resident public artists and organizations can further captivate communities by collaborating with local artists. One panelist spoke of a local dance company that performed a recital in tandem with their installation. Organizing performances or exhibitions that incorporate public art promotes a hands-on exchange/connection with the community, strengthening their relationship with the work.

Ultimately, there are many benefits that come from public art, especially when organizations go beyond simply installing a project. Panelists expressed passion for seeking out ways to further engage communities, and continue to spark conversations, strengthen connections, and encourage creativity. Public art inspires folks to move throughout their community, invigorates areas that would otherwise be overlooked, and continues to play a key role in the vibrancy and wellbeing of a community.

AFTERNOON SESSION: CLIMATE CRISIS & CULTURAL DISTRICTS: THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

DAY
1

Speakers

- **Bettina Leidl**, Director, MuseumsQuartier Errichtungs-und und Betriebsgesellschaft mbH
- **Anne-Marie Melster**, Co-Founder & Executive Director, ARTPORT_making waves
- **Paul Toyne**, Sustainability Leader, Grimshaw
- **Christos Carras**, Executive Director, Onassis Cultural Centre – *moderator*



The climate crisis is increasingly concerning, piercing every sector, and pushing its way to the top of global agendas. While the conversation has mainly taken place in political spaces, cultural districts can play a pivotal role in transforming society and leading by example. Discussions on the first day of the GCDN annual convening in Lugano focused on different ways that cultural districts can implement better and more effective policies and practices that align with regional and international frameworks while also paving the way to systemic, long-term changes.

Regional and international organizations have created frameworks of priorities and goals to guide institutions towards a more sustainable future, and to start tackling climate change. Through the European Green Deal, the European Union has created a set of parameters that aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, decouple economic growth from resource use, and to not leave anyone behind in the process. On a bigger scale, the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) serve as an international blueprint for peace and prosperity, ranging from eliminating poverty and hunger to achieving gender equality and delivering quality education, all while keeping climate action at the forefront. Historically the cultural sector has lagged behind other areas of the economy in adopting these frameworks. However, the urgency of the climate crisis presents an opportunity for cultural institutions to offer creative ways to align around these goals. For example, communities throughout the continent have engaged designers and interdisciplinary artists and culture bearers through the New European Bauhaus initiative. They have also been increasingly leveraging grants, loans, and other funding instruments aimed at the sector. While there is consensus that the sector should play a role in sustainability, it hasn't sunk in that it should be systematically integrated into any conversation on planning, strategy, or operations. Currently, there are fundamental gaps in technical knowledge, human and financial resources, reporting transparency, and a lack of general understanding of how to even begin to approach the climate crisis within the cultural sector. As the speakers pointed out, solutions may lie in more multi-disciplinary approaches, partnerships, and verifiable processes that will ensure accountability and transparency.





Aside from checking off boxes, cultural districts and organizations should seriously examine their own carbon footprints and environmental practices. As new projects for cultural districts, museums, and other institutions emerge, the sector has an opportunity to drive sustainable development in cities. Whether it is through adaptive reuse of buildings, carbon-neutral designs, or flexible, multi-functional spaces, cultural districts can create new operating ecosystems for the creative sector that not only embody framework goals like SDGs, but also exemplify ecological transformation.

Some other key fields of action mentioned in the session were: developing environmentally related concepts and content; implementing resource-saving exhibition operations; and utilizing energy-reduced infrastructure. Identifying and prioritizing easily achievable goals can often be a more effective approach than starting with the bigger issues.

So, it begs the question, can culture show us the way to an ecological future? The short answer is yes, and the learnings and projects the speakers brought forth showed that there is progress, and that cultural districts and institutions are actively thinking about the climate crisis and the role of the sector. Nevertheless, there is more work to be done. The conversation needs to go beyond climate action tools for specific sectors toward deploying systems-thinking. Cultural institutions should create spaces that enable wider participation, extending to partners within the district or adjacent neighbors to see how these frameworks and tools can be used holistically; undoubtedly, sustainability, social advancement, and economic development are all interconnected. This is how culture can play a transformative role—embedding creativity into processes and sustainable practices, paving the way towards a better society.





MORNING KEYNOTE: LEADING IN A CHANGED WORLD – EMERGING CULTURAL DISTRICTS AND A WAY FORWARD

DAY
2

Speakers

- **Charlotte Ashamu**, Creative Economy Specialist, Yale University Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage
- **Adrian Ellis**, Chair, Global Cultural Districts Network (GCDN) – *moderator*

Tuesday morning opened with an exploration of cultural organizations and leaders across the African continent, focusing on examples from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and Morocco. The discussion reiterated the necessity to not speak of Africa in broad strokes but to recognize the diversity of the continent, and its many countries – Nigeria itself being home to hundreds of distinct cultural groups and languages.



The region's creative economies continue to grow – marked by an increase in major cultural infrastructure projects and founding of new cultural organizations that are modeling different ways to serve their constituents, grounded in a strong sense of their history and cultural heritage. These organizations provide not only an insight into cultural development in their respective countries but also highlight the need to rethink and expand definitions that are dominated by Eurocentric approaches and examples.

These new models are emerging from homegrown leadership and help to diversify the body of knowledge about global cultural districts. Much of the growth is driven by two main sources: the African diaspora (such as the late Bisi Silva, who founded Ghana's first photographic archive and library), and private sources of philanthropy, to address the shortfall of government funding for cultural projects. These projects, led by civically minded private citizens, are redefining what a cultural space looks like – take the John K. Randle Center, for example, located in Lagos, Nigeria. Designed by SI.SA Architects, lead architect Seun Oduwole has transformed the site of a public swimming pool built by Nigerian businessman John Randle in 1928, into a 100,000-square-foot mixed-use cultural center dedicated to Yoruba culture and heritage. It draws on the history of the site itself as one of the first public pools accessible to Lagosians, in response to the British colonial administration's refusal to build a public swimming facility. The Center will not only include an outdoor public garden, retail units, but will also restore the original swimming pool, and host multisensory exhibits on Yoruba history and culture.

Another example highlighted was the work of Wanjiru Koinange and Angela Wachuka in Kenya, whose social enterprise Book Bunk restores and operates iconic public libraries across Nairobi, in public-private partnerships with the local government. Looking at some of Book Bunk's active facilities give a sense of the amplifying potential of these civic-cultural anchors: the East Lands Library in Nairobi was transformed into a community hub seeing 300 visitors every week, community rentals, providing expanded employment opportunities and a home for the annual Nairobi Literature Festival. Public facilities are being rebuilt and enhanced as community and cultural anchors, acting as hubs of artistic activity while providing core community services.

What makes these models distinctive is their approach to understanding their constituents – an often-cited example is Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden (MACAAL) in Marrakech, Morocco, and their approach to audience development. The museum began inviting the city's taxi drivers every Friday, to share a meal of couscous and explore the galleries. What makes this approach even more striking is that MACAAL is situated slightly outside the city center, and most visitors to the museum use private transport – such as taxicabs – to access the museum. MACAAL began building connections with an under-engaged group, who then brought their families, friends, and customers, organically increasing the museum's audience base.

While the examples cited above highlight projects that have been led by Africans, the discussion also noted the difficult and sensitive dynamics around the large amount of cultural infrastructure funding by external governments, namely China, but also Germany, and other Western countries with former colonies in the continent. While there is evidently no singular strategy for navigating international spheres of influence and often, attempts to manage and diminish aspects of colonial history, the rich diversity of homegrown projects alone highlights the need to continue to amplify domestic-led projects and perspectives, to balance more top-down infrastructure development.

One way to do this is to support the continent's future leaders – Africa has the world's youngest population, with more than 60% under the age of 30, and some of the highest unemployment rates in the world. Despite such large volumes of infrastructural development, bottom-up and co-created talent development programs are in short supply, with many of the continent's young creative professionals and leaders being pushed to seek training overseas that centers the White, European and American experience, and does not effectively match their training needs. New infrastructure needs to be effectively matched by the appropriate talent pipeline development that also speaks to the traditions of cultural management and leadership in the continent. With this, domestic talent can fully operationalize and lead cultural institutions, and perhaps begin to reduce the necessity of external funding, which may often come with conditions that hamper autonomous governance.

So, what do these organizations tell us? In part, the discussion made clear that these "new models" are not just insights to be extracted but demonstrate their validity for inclusion in global conversations and definitions. Their approaches to cultural development involve larger conceptions of audience, culture, and the dissolving of hard boundaries between culture and civil society. The potential for forging new and symbiotic connections not only between these organizations and Western ones, but also those to regions such as the Caribbean, highlight the need to open a two-way conversation that recognizes the history of cultural leadership in the continent, and supports further growth through mutually beneficial partnerships.

BREAKOUT SESSION: BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

Speakers

- **Andrew Best**, Partner, Buro Happold
- **Kate Meyrick**, Director, Urbis
- **Kulapat Yantrasast**, Creative Director, WHY
- **Sharon Ament**, Director, Museum of London – *moderator*



This morning breakout session regarding the future of cultural infrastructure projects spent a significant amount of time reflecting on the past. The panelists, all of whom are invested in current and future construction projects in North America, Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere, were steadfast in a commitment to honor and reflect the past as they go through the conception, design, and construction of new building projects. This commitment is both admirable and just, but also unsurprising given other emerging social trends over the past few years.



On its face, progress in any area can only stem from what came before. We learn from our mistakes, we iterate, we adapt. The marked difference today is the speed at which this progress occurs. For example, a constant refrain during the early-stages of the Covid-19 pandemic was the desire for a “return to normalcy”. What many business and social leaders soon learned was that many people did not want to merely return to their pre-pandemic norms. While, they did wish to gather in groups and engage with one another without the hindrance of masks or the ever-changing restrictions regarding capacity levels, many sought to cast off negative social norms that had calcified in the bedrock of our daily lives. Most notable of these was the entrenched systemic racism throughout western society, as clearly evidenced by the growth of the Black Lives Matter and other social justice movements. Workplace norms including where we work, when we work, and who does the work, were also thrust off and do not seem to be returning even with the best efforts of some major corporate leaders attempting to enforce a return to work policy. These changes happened at such a quick pace that even long-time supporters of such movements were surprised at how quickly they gained traction among multiple populations.

If these fast-paced social changes are one indicator that more than ever people are willing to invest in a future that is a direct response to the past, another indicator is the willingness for people today to accept their culpability for the actions of those that came before them. Politicians have done this with overdue apologies regarding atrocities against Indigenous peoples, and universities have done this with tuition and admission offerings for the descendants of slaves who built and labored on their campuses. Arts organizations have also done this, especially those that used eminent domain to force out communities to build inward facing arts centers some 50 to 60 years ago. They are going beyond the subsidized tickets and discounted rental rates that so many believe are “community engagement” efforts and building low-income housing for descendants of those who were displaced many years ago. Such organizations are making decisions today that are deeply influenced by the people of their past.

So, what does this mean for future cultural building projects? If culture is (broadly speaking) a reflection of society, and by association cultural facilities are a manifestation of our community's cultural ecosystem, then how we dream, design, build, and operate cultural infrastructure should similarly be cast in a new light. If it is possible for existing facilities and organizations to take their lead from those that came before them, it should be an imperative that new building projects incorporate the lived experiences and the histories of the ground they occupy. Those experiences can come from multiple perspectives, as evidenced when the East Palo Alto Youth Arts & Music Center engaged children and young adults in the design process, asking them what their needs and aspirations were to better build a facility that serves them.

Architects, planners, and executives have a responsibility to blend the future needs of an organization with the realities of the past. They must also do so in an authentic and meaningful way. One that can both honor the past while providing vision for the future. These by no means are mutually exclusive. The Museum of London, for example, is currently renovating a historic market in West Smithfield to use as its new base of operations and main set of galleries. The organization is taking a historic facility – one that once engaged with thousands of people on a daily basis, as markets do – to reuse as a building to not only tell the city's past but provide engagement opportunities for Londoners of today and tomorrow. The building's interior will continue to pay homage to the facility's former use by leaving certain elements exposed and placing appropriate signage where necessary to mark specific areas rather than put up a series of white-walls that would effectively camouflage any evidence of the past.

New facilities bear the weight of the foundations they rest upon including both their physical infrastructure and the lived experiences of their former inhabitants. As one panelist put it during the session, "Culture is not precious, it's prototype." If cultural executives, boards of directors, and building project managers allow themselves to be aware of the present and considerate of the past, then our new buildings will be one prototype built upon the last.



BREAKOUT SESSION: CULTURAL DISTRICTS AND THE TECHNOLOGIES OF THE FUTURE

DAY
2

Speakers

- **Julie Corver**, Co-fondatrice, ARTPOINT
- **Anna Pfeiffer**, Conception and Content / Project Management, iart
- **Codin Popescu**, Co-founder & CEO, Artvive
- **Nathalie Pichard**, Executive Director, ArtTech Foundation – *moderator*
- **Gregorio Lucena Scarpella**, Director, Global Cultural Districts Network (GCDN) – *moderator*



For the first GCDN convening since the start of the pandemic in 2020, there was a lot of potential ground for this session to cover. Two years of intermittent lockdowns have brought questions about digital cultural consumption to the fore. Nathalie Pichard of ArtTech Foundation and Gregorio Scarpella of GCDN, convened a panel of digital specialists to discuss whether cultural districts can harness the technologies of the future to create new models, experiences, and opportunities.



A few clear themes emerged from the session:

INTERDISCIPLINARY WORKING

The discussion here followed two strands. The first described building multidisciplinary teams to create something new. Panelists described projects that bring technologists, designers, data analysts and creatives together to make something innovative using processes more commonly associated with product or software development – iterative development, frequent testing, the use of early-stage prototypes to test and so on.

The second strand considered drawing on success from game design. Examples here included the use of a games engine to underpin the technology for a virtual gallery experience, or adding game-like elements such as quests to encourage exploration and enhance the visitor experience. The emphasis was on providing more playful experiences connected to art, but the panelists were careful to steer away from applying game design to digital art; “we don’t want to change the concept of the artist, we want to see the art as the artist wants it”. Here the importance of audience insight was emphasized, and it was noted that taste, rather than age or any other demographic, signified interest. The sense was that the application of game design to cultural experiences will develop but it is not the only type of digital experience that should be on offer.

HUMAN CONNECTION AND SHARED EXPERIENCES

Facilitating human connection was a strong theme throughout the session. The panel described the purpose of digital experiences as ways of encouraging visitors to move through cultural spaces, providing engaging storytelling and creating atmospheric experiences that evoke an emotional response. Shared experience has always been vital, and any art encounter is as much about gathering with friends and sharing an experience as it is about engaging with the work. This is one benefit of working with AR (augmented

reality) over VR (virtual reality), as AR enables more interaction with the space and the people around you, where most VR experiences are single-player and deliberately remove people from their immediate environment.

What wasn't discussed was a notion of digital community engagement – creating digital spaces where people can interact in parallel or analogous to a cultural space. This is one of the tenets of Web3 as well as being a longstanding feature of social media spaces and as such is perhaps both too emergent and too established to be included in this session. Similarly, there wasn't any reflection on whether digital technologies could be used to reinforce or support a sense of community. The pandemic has led to a massive amount of content and programming being delivered online and it would be interesting to explore whether this will lead to more hybrid modes of community engagement and connection for cultural spaces and districts.

ACCESS TO ART

Access to digital art in public spaces was a third strong theme, whether via AR enhanced street art in Tel Aviv or a subscription service for digital art. The latter prioritised delivering art to screens in public spaces like hotel lobbies, shopping centres and airports, but this doesn't preclude private subscribers. This wasn't discussed, but there is an interesting parallel here with cultural consumption models exemplified by the likes of Spotify and Netflix, where consumers pay a monthly subscription to access creative assets free at the point of use. This is a different model to owning art and sits somewhere between the burgeoning market for digital art NFTs and a shift towards leasing as an alternative to ownership.

The question of the relevance or impact of technologies of the future to cultural districts is extremely broad so it's understandable that the panel chose to focus on a few discrete areas and leave others on the table. The session predominantly focused on technology and visual arts, leaving big topics like performance largely unaddressed. The subject of sustainability, both of innovation practices in cultural organizations (i.e., skills, budgets, etc.) and the environmental impact of increased use of technology, was also left for another time.

There were intriguing glimpses of artists using technology such as AR as a material, but mercifully little discussion about NFTs, Web3 and the metaverse. This could have led to an exploration of whether new technologies present artists and cultural producers with new opportunities for making work, connecting with their audiences, and generating income. It will be interesting to see how these three companies, and others like them, respond to emerging trends in these areas.

BREAKOUT SESSION: FROM A TO DISTRICT

Speakers

- **Ore Disu**, Director of The Pavilion, Edo Museum of West African Art
- **Phillip Ihenacho**, Chairman of the Board, Legacy Restoration Trust
- **Sherif El-Itriby**, Principal, AEA Consulting – *moderator*



A new creative district is in development in Benin City, Nigeria – conceived as an intimate campus for creativity, commerce, and learning set within the ancient walls of the Benin Kingdom. While still in the early stages of its development, the district is expected to feature a variety of facilities to preserve, promote, and showcase digital, performance and visual culture and heritage inspired by the rich local history, and a range of supporting infrastructure including public spaces, artistic workshops, retail concepts, and accommodation. The ambition is to create a new creative hub for the region and transform Benin City into a vibrant cultural destination for both national and international visitors.

The district will be anchored by the planned Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA), a new museum designed by Sir David Adjaye and intended to be a cultural and civic focal point for the people of Benin City and Edo State. The museum will celebrate both traditional

and contemporary cultural life of the region and its collection is expected to include the so-called “Benin Bronzes”, as well as other historic and contemporary art and artifacts. The museum was born out of discussions between the Royal Palace of the Oba of Benin, the Edo State Government, and the National Commission for Museums and Monuments of Nigeria – all of whom are represented on the board of the independent charitable trust created to run it, Legacy Restoration Trust. As a vehicle to facilitate restitution on a grand scale, EMOWAA is the first of its kind but its purpose to steward local cultural heritage, foster the creative industries, and catalyze urban renewal are much broader.

Prior to the development of EMOWAA, the first phase of the district’s development will be the Pavilion, an archaeology, research, and conservation center and an engine room for engagement during the project’s development. The Pavilion will initially be the center for a major archaeological survey and excavation program on the site being conducted to build a deeper understanding of the history of the Benin Kingdom and ensure appropriate preservation of the archaeological remains that may be found around the site. Archaeological findings may be housed in the future museum and used as a means of connecting it to the surrounding landscape by restoring and incorporating surviving remains. The project will be delivered in cooperation with local communities and include delivery of a range of workshops, talks and other events that contextualize the archaeological excavations and the project as a whole. Construction is expected to begin in August 2022 and be completed in 2023.

As the vision for the rest of the district continues to crystallize, many questions still remain: What is the optimum development mix? What is the associated timeline and which assets should be prioritized? How can the district integrate and ensure relevance among local residents and communities? How can the public spaces in between the buildings be appropriately animated? Are there partnerships that should be cultivated? What assets, activities, or tools could help to promote financial sustainability? What is the optimum governance and operating model? What are the appropriate metrics for success?



These are all fundamental questions that will influence the district's development, and they are also questions that most of the GCDN membership have contended with at one time or another (and likely continue to grapple with on an ongoing basis). So, in this collaborative workshop, GCDN members and guests were called upon to offer a range of practical advice based on their own experience but relevant to the Benin City context. These included:

- Bring local people into the development process: it's critical to talk to local residents, workers, and students to understand their needs and to bring them into the development process to share ownership of the project.
- Begin to engage and develop audiences as soon as possible: start to capture and build audiences at all ages, but with a particular emphasis on young people as your future audiences, ambassadors, and even staff. As is often the case in areas where attendance to institutionalized cultural facilities is less common, that may be a need early on to promote the understanding and importance of the project.
- Test and refine programming concepts: there is an opportunity in these early stages to test programming ideas which will help both the district to refine its offering and the audience to understand the concept.
- Diversify activities to promote financial sustainability: artistic and cultural activities can be married with wide-ranging (and often complementary) commercial endeavors including retail, restaurants, nightlife, co-working and offices, venue hire, residential, hotels, etc. to promote financial sustainability.
- Explore opportunities for regional and global outreach: while it is clear that the main beneficiaries of the project will be the local population in Edo state, there is no reason why the project should not also attract visitors from the rest of Nigeria, West Africa, and the world. Moreover, there is an opportunity to engage audiences in their home countries through satellite activations and programming.

We wait eagerly to hear more about the project as it unfolds and hope that the network will continue to provide a useful source of lived experience and practical advice.

BREAKOUT SESSION: REDEFINING SAFETY AND ACCESSIBILITY FOR PUBLIC SPACES

DAY
2

Speakers

- **Ilana Altman**, Co-Executive Director, The Bentway Conservancy
- **Luisa Bravo**, Founder and President, City Space Architecture
- **Elettra Bordonaro**, Director, Light Follows Behaviour
- **Stephanie Fortunato**, Director, Special Projects, Global Cultural Districts Network (GCDN) – *moderator*



While we need to admit that public safety at large might be beyond control of those running cultural districts and spaces, this breakout session on redefining safety and accessibility for public spaces offered a number of examples – namely from Canada, Italy, and the United Kingdom – of how safety and access can be improved through design and programmatic interventions.

The nature of public spaces discussed is rather diverse – from a highway underpass turned public art space, to a suburban parklet, to walkways in large housing estates. The measures and approaches to making these spaces more accessible, safe, and welcoming have a number of key commonalities.

Firstly, it is critically important to genuinely engage with the end users of these spaces through an authentic and comprehensive community consultation. This holds a key to understanding the community needs and aspirations for how spaces can best serve the people who use them while also creating a sense of ownership and belonging among the wider community.

Secondly, it is important to understand the definitions of safety and access and what these mean for different groups of people. These definitions might be contradictory at times and it is through design and public programming that a social contract can be reached where different groups can be accommodated and included.

The sense of ownership of a place, and hence being able to feel safe in it, comes not only by means of public engagement in the consultation to inform the design and programmatic agenda for the public spaces, but with active ongoing engagement of the community groups in management of the space. This may include introducing a general 'code of conduct' for the space that encourages respectful behavior without alienating any of the potential users of the space or creating a cultural and public art programme that is driven by local communities.

'Redefining' the way we think about our shared spaces therefore is rooted in a collaborative and inclusive approach to design, programming, and management of public spaces, and an ongoing public engagement in the way these spaces function. On a cultural district level, it also involves close collaboration with local authorities and a number of public sector agencies to ensure a shared understanding of what the safety and access of such spaces mean for the public who use them and what support can be provided on a local government level.

AFTERNOON SESSION: MORAL DILEMMAS AND THE CHALLENGES OF CULTURAL LEADERSHIP TODAY

DAY
2

Speakers

- **Adrian Ellis**, Chair, Global Cultural Districts Network (GCDN)
- **Sumantra Ghose**, Artistic Programming Director, The Royal Commission for AIUla
- **Linda C. Harrison**, Director and CEO, Newark Museum of Art
- **Andrea Dempster Chung**, CoFounder & Managing Director, Kingston Creative
— *moderator*

It is not hyperbolic to suggest that these past few years have been the most challenging and fraught for the professional lives of most cultural leaders. From closures to layoffs, health scares to climate emergencies, and social unrest to the great resignation, the leaders of our flagship arts institutions have faced and overcome one challenge after the next. These challenges were bigger and broader than the text-book case studies of strategic arts leadership (e.g., overcoming founder syndrome, expanding audience bases, etc.) and thus required individuals in power to meaningfully address issues that prior to the pandemic could, for all intents and purposes, be ignored by arts institutions.





The final session of the Lugano convening attempted to wrestle with this topic, teasing out how different arts organizations tackled some of these larger issues and addressing what responsibility cultural leaders have to both their sector and society at large. Responsibility is the key word here, indicating that these leaders have an obligation to act in the face of transgressions, and that if they were to passively standby they would be partially responsible for whatever negative outcomes transpire. They would be guilty for failing to act, and if not held liable in the legal system would certainly be held to account in the court of public opinion. These increased obligations are critical to effective leadership in times of crisis, and more so now than ever. Moral dilemmas to some are, as one attendee put it, examples of “injustices [or even] white supremacy” to others. Another noted they can indeed be “matters of life and death”.

So, how do, and how should, arts leaders think about and respond to issues of grave importance and social relevance?

THE REACTIVE RESPONSE

The baseline level response is one of the reactions. An event, or series of them, occurs and organizations consider a response that it deems appropriate and impactful. Museums, for example, are agreeing to return historically looted art and artifacts to their home nations as calls for restitution grow around the globe. Other organizations are removing the names of high-profile donors from their facilities when those individuals and their actions are called into question. These actions are significant, however, they are now regarded as the low-hanging fruit of response – perhaps the blanket social media statements of solidarity are the fruit already laying on the ground – given their relative ease in execution and minimal impact on the business model.

THE PROACTIVE RESPONSE

Some organizations are using this moment to reconsider their options and proactively make operating decisions that will have a positive impact outside of their own walls. Arts Center Melbourne, for example, identified the mental health crisis in Australia unfolding with the pandemic and founded The Arts Wellbeing Collective to “support positive mental health for people working in the performing arts”. The Royal Commission for AlUla, which oversees the development of Saudi Arabia’s first UNESCO world heritage site, is also thinking ahead in terms of the impact it will have on the environment and its surrounding community. It is making decisions today in terms of tourist routes, capacity projections, and adjacent amenities that are not meant to maximize visitation, but rather to provide a resource to both the local and global communities that can be sustainably maintained for generations to come.

THE RADICAL RESPONSE

It may be inevitable that organizations (for profit and nonprofit) responding in either proactive or reactive ways to these issues will receive pushback from some stakeholders. A common refrain from some is that cultural organizations engaging in social justice or other activities are misaligned with the purposes of those companies, and that by doing so they are undergoing the ever scary “mission drift.” Some leaders are taking this pushback as a call-to-action and going so far as to change their missions to the point where these activities are clearly mission-aligned. The Newark Museum of Art, for example, is more than 100 years old and one of the flagship visual arts organizations in New Jersey. Recognizing that homelessness had increased in its area (a social issue impacting everyone in the community), the organization is currently developing affordable housing to directly address the situation. They are also working closely with elected officials and community leaders to foster community well-being throughout the city. Not only did they begin engaging in these activities, but they changed the mission statement of the organization to ensure that no one will question whether these activities are in service of the mission.

Cultural leaders have, and will continue to, take a more proactive approach to macro issues that organizations could attempt to ignore. More than ever these leaders will need the support of their boards, staff, and community stakeholders as organizations that have long talked-the-talk of being a community anchor begin to walk-the-walk.

CLOSING REMARKS

The convening was closed with a review of what the collected group saw as successes and opportunities for improvement in future GCDN gatherings. The group also reflected on shared through lines witnessed across many of the conversations – around measurement and social impact; opportunities to share more collective information both in advance of future convenings and following the discussions that take place; creating a sort of “GCDN clearing house” of data to help to move away from the abstract into concrete outcomes, etc.

Similarly, while GCDN has previously developed an exploration of the social impact of cultural districts in 2019 (with a minor follow up in 2022), building up that work to link it specifically to host cities (or others) through case studies or “urban intensives” leading up to the formal sessions might provide additional opportunities to enhance learnings beyond the two days of future gatherings and grow stronger connections between the members of the Network.

After a series of thanks, the announcement of the 2023 GCDN convening was made: the group learned the next iteration would be hosted by the Quartier des Spectacles in Montreal, Canada – a place where over the last two-plus decades, the deployment of creative placemaking strategies have enhanced the economic development of a former red-light district and built up a unique place to experience arts and festivals within an international city of culture.

The dates for the next convening are May 22-26, 2023. We look forward to seeing you in Montreal next year!







ABOUT



ABOUT GCDN

The Global Cultural Districts Network (GCDN) is an independent, international association committed to improving the quality of urban life through the contribution of the arts, culture and creative industries.

The network fosters collaboration and knowledge-sharing among those responsible for creative and cultural districts, quarters and clusters in widely diverse contexts, providing rich and rewarding opportunities for cross fertilization and exchange.

The forum engages leaders and opinion formers in culture and in urban development through convenings, research, multimedia content, and collaborations – in order to inform global, local and sectoral agendas.

GCDN is an initiative of AEA Consulting.

For more information visit gcdn.net



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Since 1991, we have successfully delivered more than 1,200 assignments in 42 countries, helping clients around the world plan and realize vital and sustainable cultural projects.

With offices in New York and London, AEA offers a talented, multidisciplinary team of professionals with proven practical experience who deliver personalized solutions to organizations in the arts, cultural, creative and public sectors. We thrive on new challenges and approach problem-solving with curiosity, creativity and integrity.

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