

Inspiring positive change:

Transforming our cultural organisations with care, curiosity and courage to contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable world

The problem: research focus

With climate disasters, social unrest, growing inequalities and a global pandemic, our community is demanding courageous thinking to deal with the existential threats of our time. People want to engage with purpose-driven organisations and employees want to work for them. This is particularly the case in the traditionally purpose-driven arts and cultural industry.

But time and time again, we see organisations still treating inclusion and environmental sustainability as projects or initiatives, because we don't have the answers to be able to solve the really big, systemic changes that we need to make. What does it mean to truly embed social and environmental sustainability in the way we work?

I believe that we cannot change our climate crisis and our inequities by using the same systems that created those problems in the first place. To continue to serve our community effectively, we need to creatively reimagine the way we do business.

With this focus, my research asked three questions:

- How do organisations embed social and environmental sustainability operationally;
- How do they inspire and empower their staff, audiences and communities to take action; and
- How do they measure and demonstrate their impact.

Diversity of thought: learning from a wide variety of leaders

To answer my questions, over six weeks in May – June 2024, I met with almost 80 experts from 40 organisations in five cities across Europe.

I chose to visit countries that were in the top 20 of the 2023 Sustainable Development Report so were leaders in sustainable development (Australia that year came in at #40), but also ensured that these cities had diverse social and cultural histories: Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris, Madrid and London. I met with sustainability, inclusion, marketing, communications, programming, audience development, community engagement, policy experts and more from the creative industries, governments and corporate businesses.

My research was intentionally broad to gather a full spectrum of knowledge and fresh perspectives on this topic that impacts everyone in the organisation, and from this significant diversity of thought identify practical opportunities for the arts industry in Australia (and I believe – across the world).

Shared challenges

In every city, I met with inspiring experts leading their organisations in creating positive change. I will explore the leadership trends in the next section, however it is important to also note the challenges that were most regularly raised:

- Limited resourcing and continuing to recover from COVID means that organisations are focused on immediate economic survival with limited capacity to take the time to consider and work on creative solutions to the ‘wicked’ big issues that impact our industry long-term.
- Fear of greenwashing limiting the communication that the organisation does, particularly in being a vulnerable/authentic and sharing with their stakeholders the issues they don’t have answers to yet, but are working on.
- Because there is very limited long-term best practice due to the quickly evolving space, organisations need to be more innovative and willing to take (calculated) risk.
- Maintaining the wellbeing of changemakers is vitally important as many practitioners are burnt out.
- Although anecdotally and instinctively we know that the positive impact the creative industries have on society is significant, there is limited work undertaken in demonstrating the flow-on impact in a deeply meaningful way, as this requires both time and funding.

Leadership trends

Many enriching conversations were had. The purpose of the insights here is to provide practical ideas for organisations – at different levels of technical sustainability and inclusion maturity and with different levels of resources – to be able to implement actions in a way that best works for them. There are the five practical trends that came through for the organisations that are leading the way.

Placemaking and community building

European cities each have unique characteristics. They know “who they are” and this comes through in the way they reimagine spaces and create a sense of belonging across communities that are specific to their city. For example:

- In Madrid there are food halls in every suburb that are unique to that suburb, acting as a place for locals to gather. This also plays an important role in the city’s cultural tourism.
- In Bristol, the city is facing a high level of empty buildings on high streets, which is also the case in the CBDs across Australia. Sparks Bristol is a collaboration between NGOs with funding support from local government is an innovative “department store with a difference”, a combination of artist space, sustainable and ethical retailers, education areas and reuse. It has transformed an empty building on a major thoroughfare into a hub for

sustainability and creativity that is beautifully gritty and grassroots, just as Bristol is.

- In Berlin, the doors to the Berliner Philharmonie are open every Wednesday lunchtime for a free concert, making classical music more accessible to the whole community.
- In London, five leading cultural institutions have set up home in the new creative and cultural hub East Bank, bringing a new energy to Stratford and collaborating with the local community for a thriving arts scene.

As people search for more and more for local communities, being able to transform our spaces to be more open and accessible to the whole community in a way that is authentic to our venues' personality is core to our future.

Storytelling

In Paris, I met one executive who told me that getting the job done wasn't enough. The value of this work had to be communicated, too, for people to learn to implement change themselves. For the cultural sector, that's a huge opportunity, since the business of art so often involves storytelling, experimentation and innovation.

It is taken as a given that leadership organisations embed sustainability themes on their stages and in their presentations. What sets them even further apart is how they embed sustainability storytelling in part of every touch point that their customer has with the organisation. For example:

- A Parisian science centre called Universcience recently installed an information board that revealed with powerful clarity the environmental cost of staging an exhibition. I did not come across any other organisation which did this.
- In London, the Royal Opera House has installed signposts across the building full of interesting facts about the space – the impact of plants, the way certain materials were used in the retail store and so on.
- In Madrid, the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museo Nacional uses its online platform to discuss complex social and environmental themes about artworks that might not be obvious to casual observers. This widens the accessibility of their offerings and engages the community to more deeply engage with complex, nuanced exhibitions, including their most recent exhibition on Colonialism.

Taken together, these initiatives bring to life the organisations' values and encourage us to reflect on the impact we have on the world around us.

Governance

The organisations that have done the most to embed social and environmental sustainability into their operations ensure that accountability sits with all decision-makers, not just environmental managers or inclusion managers. The leaders of these organisations are changing systems, governance and processes so social and environmental issues always factor in decision-making.

Organisations are moving beyond only having staff community groups, which are deeply valuable for culture and community building, but are limited as they're not decision making bodies. Instead the leading organisations have:

- Steering committees where decision makers come together to make decisions in that spot.
- Board members that are that have inclusion or sustainability as part of their responsibility, so they meet with the subject matter experts before the meeting to talk about the whole spectrum of things that will be discussed in that meeting.
- Once organisations are very mature in embedding the work operationally as part of all teams' responsibilities, the most sophisticated organisations are developing dedicated impact teams that are responsible for looking long-term into the future, considering trends and best practices and bringing these back to embed into their organisations and continuing to evolve how they operate sustainably.

Knowledge-sharing

To truly incorporate sustainability and inclusion into our work, we need to learn new skills. But these must also become business as usual – not secondary tasks to be completed in addition to core responsibilities. There is significant amount of knowledge within organisations, and in order for us to collectively accelerate our positive impact, knowledge-sharing is crucial. This is being done in a wide range of ways. For example:

- In Amsterdam, the Rijksmuseum has published *Accessibility Without Limits*, a book that details the organisation's experiences, ideas and reflections.
- The Louvre has established a new department that offers support to cultural institutions around the world to implement transformation projects. In this, they have unlocked a new business stream that I didn't see anywhere else.
- The luxury goods leader Kering makes its environmental profit and loss model available for free to businesses looking to measure sustainability commitments.
- Also in fashion, Copenhagen Fashion Week has shared their sustainability framework with Berlin Fashion Week to appropriate into their own context, so that there are consistencies across their requirements and to share resources.

Collective action

It's impossible to overstate the importance of governments, membership organisations and funding bodies in bringing organisations together to share resources and work towards common goals. For example:

- In London, 22 members of the Exhibition Road Cultural Group, a partnership of science and arts organisations, created South Ken ZEN+, to collaborate on a collective Environmental Action Plan and reporting framework.

- Arts Council England have teamed up with Julie's Bicycle to support organisations uplift their sustainability efforts.
- Governments and membership organisations across countries are looking at how they can collect data in consistent and meaningful ways.

This is a significant opportunity in Australia as both the State and Commonwealth Governments are focused on cohesive industry approaches, including through the newly created Creative Communities Council in NSW.

Re-thinking the future of work

I believe that we're all creative. We might not all be artists or painters, but we all have an innate sense of creativity in everything we do. So at the end of each meeting, I asked everyone what their daily practices are that helps them ground themselves and opens them up to this kind of creativity and deep connection in their work. People's faces sparked up and this one question opened up discussions that were so much deeper, honest and robust.

Our most difficult challenge – the one that many interviewees agreed we need to focus on but aren't - is to reimagine the systems that created inequalities and climate crisis in the first place.

In Madrid, the philosophy at the Real Teatro de Retiro, a theatre dedicated to children, was especially inspiring. The theatre only came into existence a year ago, so its leaders felt free to write their own rules, and they chose to embed sustainable, inclusive ways of operating from the start. There's no reason why this can't be done in older, more established organisations too. If we want to create meaningful change, we need to find new ways of doing business.

To do so, we need to identify new tools and new ways of working. And we need to cultivate curiosity – to slow down and experiment with fresh ideas. We need to remember the big picture, to balance short-term focus with the imagination required to make a long-term difference.

This is the next piece of research that this scholarship trip has inspired for me, to focus on how we can create organisational and leadership change through creativity.

Outputs

My objective was to share practical insights across our industry to support my colleagues with their efforts. To deliver on this, a wide range of engagement activities were delivered:

- **Event:** Participated in an Opera House strategic event, *the Emerging Arts Leaders Panel: Can culture help build a better world?*, as part of Global Goals Week in September. The video is available to watch on-demand on Vimeo (starts at 29mins):

https://vimeo.com/event/4537505/669cd7c279?utm_source=linkedin&utm_me

[dium=organic&utm_campaign=lloyd-martin-travelling-scholarship-linkedin-video-livestream&utm_content=content](https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7241325184526254082-RfN1?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop)

- **Social media:** The Opera House promoted the event to be shared with industry colleagues across Australia and the world on LinkedIn. On my personal LinkedIn profile I posted blogs throughout the trip with wide ranging ideas, and promoted the event and scholarship.
 - **SOH posts here:**
 - Global Goals Week event post:
https://www.linkedin.com/posts/sydney-opera-house_to-mark-this-years-united-nations-global-activity-7241325184526254082-RfN1?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop
 - Wrap up post and photos
https://www.linkedin.com/posts/sydney-opera-house_last-month-we-celebrated-un-global-goals-activity-7249644835790323712-cFil?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop
 - **My posts here:** <https://www.linkedin.com/in/anna-yanatchkova/>
- **Media:** I published an opinion piece on Arts Hub, Australia's leading arts and cultural website. Available here:
<https://www.artshub.com.au/news/article/how-culture-can-build-a-better-world-2749280/>
- **Website:** I developed a website to share my research and future related work
<https://www.annayanatchkova.com/>

Thank you

This scholarship gave me a once in a lifetime opportunity to meet inspiring leaders, have many unique experiences immersed in different cultures, gathering valuable practical insights, as well as learn about myself as a professional and personally. It has given me the confidence to take my work to the next level to more deeply explore the role of creativity in organisational change.

I am deeply thankful to the Lloyd and Alexandra Martin Family Foundation for this deeply meaningful opportunity, to Wendy Martin for her caring support and mentorship, and to Eddie Bernasconi in the Sydney Opera House Philanthropy team for his support in administering the scholarship.

To the many wonderful experts I connected with on this trip, thank you for your generosity in sharing your experiences and welcoming me into your organisations. You have inspired me to continue to work towards creating positive change. I look forward to welcoming you to Sydney one day.