



EP 4: Towards Transformational Cultural Leadership

Diane Ragsdale in Conversation with Stephanie Fortunato

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Stephanie Fortunato: Hello, and welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of a series brought to you by the Global Cultural Districts Network – in which we explore what’s happening around the world on those busy, and sometimes congested intersections of cultural and urban life. We acknowledge the traditional owners and First Nations people across all the lands and countries who are joining us today and pay our respects to elders past, present, and emerging. First Nations people are original storytellers, artists, and custodians of culture.

I’m Stephanie Fortunato, Director of the Department of Art, Culture + Tourism for the U.S. City of Providence, Rhode Island, which we proudly call the creative capital. Today though, I am connecting with creative practitioners from around the world to see if we can make some sense of how our cultural ecology is changing and why, especially within cities, where more and more of us live, work and experience arts and culture.

Today, I am joined by Diane Ragsdale. Diane is a prolific writer, lecturer and advisor on a range of topics related to arts, culture and creativity. She is the Director and Co-Lead faculty of the Cultural Leadership Program at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity. And she’s worked in academia, philanthropy, theatres, and festivals.

Diane works with adults in a variety of places of learning and stages of their careers. And she herself is a doctoral student in the Netherlands where she now lives full-time. Her studies focused on the evolving relationship between non-profit and commercial theatres in America over time. Diane’s work on aesthetic values in a change cultural context is a theme that is woven through many of her pursuits and one area where we hope she will share insights and help us draw connections today. Welcome Diane, and thank you for being here.

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Diane Ragsdale: Thank you, Stephanie. It’s really a great pleasure to be here and be in conversation with you.

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Stephanie Fortunato: So great. And it’s been quite a year, that we’ve been reflecting on in this podcast. You know, cultural institutions have navigated their purpose and place in the face of public health restrictions, which have radically disrupted and or suspended operations. Internally, many are engaged in a very necessary examination of their institutional relevance, measuring principles, policies, and practices through a racial and social justice lens.



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Stephanie Fortunato: Communities are struggling to articulate a new paradigm of support to sustain the arts and institutions at the heart of the arts and cultural sector. And I know these are topics that you have thought about for many, many years, and I'm looking forward to delving into them.

So let's get right to it. You are clearly involved in a lifelong relationship with theatre. What do you miss most about going to the theatre these days?

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Diane Ragsdale: I don't even know if it's even just specifically theatre. It's probably any live cultural event. I was on the phone yesterday talking with a producer of a piece that's going to open at the Park Avenue Armory. It's called *Social!* – it's a socially-distanced dance club. It's got – David Byrne is part of it and it's really cool. And I was drooling on the phone thinking, Oh my gosh, I would give anything to be able to go to that right now and just be in a room with other bodies and hear music and dance and just, I think, feel that embodied sense of community, right? Like that's – that's probably what I miss the most.

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Stephanie Fortunato: That just sounds so nourishing to even think about and what a fantastic event on the horizon there for those who do get to experience that.

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Diane Ragsdale: As I understand it, the tickets sold out in a – you know, a hot minute. And that's really speaks to – a great hunger, I think, by many people to re-engage in a live way in cultural spaces.

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Stephanie Fortunato: You know, and I, and I'm wondering from your perspective, having studied the theatre form, and, and being a theatre practitioner yourself for many years: How do you expect that the live performance will be transformed by COVID for the theatre professionals, for audiences, for funders?

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Diane Ragsdale: Yeah, well, you know, I mean, it's interesting. You know, Australia of course, is one of the first parts of the globe to be able to fully reopen. And I think they've got Broadway shows and that now beginning to play, strong audiences, but they have very, very low COVID rates and they're taking really extraordinary measures.

So I think one thing that's clear is: Every place is going to be different, right? It's going to be hard to generalise and, you know, I think the regulations of all of this is going to be tricky. So that's one thing.

Another, I would say is there seems to be a growing consensus that the future is going to be hybrid. I was working with a group of international presenters over the past several months who focus on international touring, and who've been trying to think about the present and future of cultural exchange.

And we did a survey of around 200 artists and one of the questions that we asked was relative to before COVID, do you feel more or less enthused about developing, producing, distributing work digitally?



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Diane Ragsdale: And it was evenly divided, and the 50% that were more enthused really talked about feeling as though they had discovered an entirely new art form that they were enthused by an increased intimacy with audiences or new ways of relating to audiences that they loved, that they could collaborate globally, that they could reach audiences globally. And even those who were not as enthused about digital – and some of those were about, you know, just a nostalgia and I think quite rightly for liveliness as well as not having yet seen that much work digitally that was super exciting.

Even those who were less enthused, would also make comments about expecting that no matter what however, digital was here to stay, even if combined with live.

So I think one of the things, you know, we also have to think about is how will that fit together and what is that going to look like? And, producers and presenters alike are giving – and artists, are giving that a lot of thought right now.

And then in terms of, what kind of theatre experience or performance experience might be expected? One could imagine, I think, large outdoor spectacles and festivals being able to go forward sooner than other kinds of events or events in very, very large spaces.

Intimate house concerts? I keep wondering if, you know, people will first feel most comfortable just with a handful of people. And if so, if that will be a next stage, maybe neighbourhood level performances. I also wonder if audiences are going to be expecting things that are more social or participatory or aesthetically immersive after being at home all of this time. And how being able to get a front row seat on Zoom for something is going to affect people that before, might've been buying like a \$25 cheap seat. Like, will anyone really want to sit really far from the stage and pay money? If they think that eventually there'll be a digital version that they might be able to access for the same price or less.

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Stephanie Fortunato: You know, it's funny. We are in the very early stages of planning our annual arts festival. And you have hit on so many of the concerns and, and sort of ideas that we have been exploring through that process.

And I think, you know, this idea about hybridity and needing to provide not just a high quality digital experience, but really thinking about the relationship with audiences and how that will shift is going to really, in some ways have an influence on the programming itself and the content that comes out of it.

You also mentioned Australia. One of our co-hosts actually told us she had gone to a premiere about two weeks ago and we were both jealous. Um, (laughs) and, not just envious of that experience. There actually was a series of COVID related lockdowns that happened as a result of that moment.

Diane Ragsdale: Oh yeah.

Stephanie Fortunato: So we saw in that moment, the kind of risk and reward from her perspective.

Diane Ragsdale: Yeah, totally.



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Stephanie Fortunato: But obviously one difference in how communities are experiencing this, has been how the leaders have responded to this crisis. And she was talking about how the Queensland Government was quick to shut everything down – you know, once there had been a close contact at the theatre, which is interesting.

But I'm interested in thinking about, about leadership and about the characteristics that leaders of cultural institutions need in this moments of crisis and beyond, you know, what advice would you give to the, the director of a cultural institution?

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Diane Ragsdale: That's a great question. And you know, just listening to your relating the – the experience in Australia, I think this is also something just on a really technical front, which organisations even have the capacity to get themselves to the point where they can safely bring people into their spaces, have the appropriate HVAC systems et cetera, and which governments are actually going to take responsibility for trying to keep people safe.

A lot of this will also affect the extent to which people will feel comfortable returning to these spaces. So, it's going to be tricky, right? Because if we end up with experiences where a whole theatre full of people get sick – which at the moment with people getting vaccinated, we hope won't be the case, but it could set us backwards a bit.

But to your question about leadership and what's kind of needed from leaders at the moment. The top of that list is the kind of characteristics of what we might call relational leadership. I think of it as sort of imagining the future of the relationships you have with artists, with community members, with – you know, internal, external stakeholders beyond the short term.

It's about also inclusion and ethical behaviours and a focus on processes. And so, at the moment we have to care more about, you know, the economic viability of opening these spaces, right. We really do need to look out for the long-term welfare of people and the sector itself. Other characteristics I think, a kind of agile mindset is something that's really needed at the moment, which is a lot about being able to create and respond in response to uncertain environments, right?

You work in often small teams. You adapt as you go along. It's sort of the opposite of bureaucracy in many ways. And you form networks for collaboration. One of the things I've been really enthused about speaking about Australia is, you know, across many parts of the world now, we're beginning to see some new and interesting collaborations – whether that's mergers, whether that's just recognising that everyone's resources have been hit hard and so we need to collaborate to get out of this crisis and to strengthen the sector and move forward in a way all together.

And I also think that more and more leaders need distributed or participatory leadership. And that's because we're dealing with a COVID crisis, which affects whole communities, but we also have some other crises going on at the moment. You know, we're still also in the midst of social justice movements and recognition of the need for recognition of historic inequities in many arts and culture sectors.



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Diane Ragsdale: And you know, in the U.S. we also have seen, you know, Me Too movements and, and Black Lives Matter and Canada, where I work a lot, there's increasing focus on responding to the context of truth and reconciliation. And all of these are about really distributing power and new forms of leadership and governance that are flatter, where stakeholders are engaged in decision-making.

And uh, the fact is that there's a lot at stake and coming out of COVID I don't think we're going to see the imaginative, beautiful decisions and outcomes that we want if it's just a very small group of people, you know, kind of hold up, trying to figure out a way forward. I think we really need to have open and inclusive processes and really deep listening to the community, to those inside the institution, to artists. That's really important.

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Stephanie Fortunato: I know that you have actually been thinking about the role of artists and community and, and cultural institutions and their place within our larger society for a long time. I read something that you once said, 'To transcend the pandemic purpose must transcend the box', which is just a beautiful turn of phrase there. But I just wanted to spend a moment actually picking up on what you were just saying to, to think about, you know, really what needs to be done to cultivate a more purposeful and forward thinking mentality and arts managers and cultural workers that helped to get beyond the, the sort of day-to-day firefighting and operational challenges.

And sometimes that, that desire to return to a pre-COVID sense of normality. I have a colleague who keeps talking about 'the new better', and I'm going to bring that to every conversation because for me, you know, that's where I want us to head. So yeah, what do you – what are you thinking about?

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Diane Ragsdale: I love that. The new better. One of the questions that I have used quite a bit over the years is: How can we be better? You know, how can we do better? How can we be better? And now is certainly a time to embrace the disruption that we are in and the possibility for that to be a mechanism for shifting the dominant logic of many of our institutions, right?

So if we want to shift from being transactional to more relational, from hierarchical to more distributed, from entrenched in historic practices and processes to being better able to adjust and adapt, you know, this disruption itself, I think is a – is a gift. One of the working notions around dominant logics is that if your system gets disrupted sufficiently, that it will actually enable a kind of unlearning to happen because your historic processes and practices just stop working.

You're – you know, and we've seen institutions, the core of many cultural institutions essentially hollowed out. They couldn't do the very thing they were built to do. And in that space, there's a choice you can make. You know, you can quickly try to just create, generate as much content as possible and get it in front of people as a way of trying to give a substitute for what you were historically. And I think that's – you know, it's not that there's no value in that, but I think there's limited value in that. This past several months, I worked with a group of organisations in California with a colleague of mine, Karen and Daniels, and we took these organisations through a process of thinking about: What would it mean if you were to centre the values of community engagement?



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Diane Ragsdale: You know, what does it mean to take those values around deep listening to the community, and working in a very specific way, in a reciprocal way with community caring about a number of things, right, about bringing people into the institution. And you put that at the centre, particularly in this moment when, when the things that were at the centre are no longer there.

So I feel that a key to moving forward has to be an invitation to more deeply pay attention to those institutions exist to serve – and that can be both artists and community members. And to bring those perspectives into the institution, so they can really inform where we go from here. And I think the best institutions are doing that right now.

They're really – they're like octopi or – (laughs) I don't really know what the plural of octopus is. They've got their tentacles just out, out, out and are asking themselves, what does the community need right now? What do artists that we care about need right now? What are we equipped to do given our assets? How can we continue to create value, and letting go of whether that looks exactly like what creating value looked like a year ago?

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Stephanie Fortunato: That is really where the most interesting work is being done in the sector right now. And I, and I think, there are some institutions locally, I'm so impressed with the ways in which they are turning inside out. And really thinking about not just the community – our community, which they have served, you know, over the years but how they served their community. How they serve the people who make up those, those institutions in real ways, and really coming to some meaningful understanding of what it means to be part of a community and to co-create, you know, the – whatever comes next. I think that's actually a really exciting thing to, to follow here.

I wonder, you know, you said you were working with some groups on some of this, but have you come across any good case studies on how the arts are driving social transformations in communities? You know, really thinking about justice and equity and, making changes in their communities in ways that impress you?

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Diane Ragsdale: I think there are a number of institutions that are aiming for that and doing great work. And many of them are not necessarily the giant institutions, you know, but certainly I would say that the Yerba Buena Centre for the Arts which has recently, I think, in collaboration with others –

Stephanie Fortunato: I'm such a fan.

Diane Ragsdale: I think engaging in this you know, kind of a version of a universal basic income for artists exploration, as I understand it, but I feel that they're continually challenging ideas around what a cultural institution exists to do and where it's going.

There are also just lots and lots of organisations that are at the moment, you know, in the theatre – let's go back to theatre.



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Diane Ragsdale: You may have heard about this: We See You, White American Theatre, which is a movement that's happened over the last year. That's been challenging, you know, large regional theatres and others to deeply examine their histories of racism, oppression, and to address those.

And I see a number of institutions really trying to step up and acknowledge these histories and do better. And so it's, it's a really exciting time. I think for, for the sector. And beyond that, I would just say that I feel like there are just more and more collectives of individuals and, and almost small movements that are happening, right. Just groups, networks of people who are leading the charge here.

And so I don't even know if we should be expecting the biggest institutions to be the ones to lead us forward here, but, perhaps just be looking out for these networks of really extraordinary individuals who are going to try to push and lead and inspire the kinds of changes that we need.

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Stephanie Fortunato: This is the real 'power to the people' moments, and I think there's so much optimism and hope in that. And I'll say, you know, this podcast, we are exploring the relationship of culture and cities, but what's interesting to me is the ways in which the cultural sector is engaging in wider conversations of the civic realm, around truth telling and reconciliation and there's a municipal reparations initiative that is, is under way and conversations about, you know, universal basic income are relevant to not just artists, but every community member here in Providence.

So it's been interesting to see arts and cultural institutions, but more so, artists and culture bearers and the cultural workers participate in those community wide conversations about our city and our history and where we are today and you know, where we want to go. That is really, it's really exciting to see that kind of distributed leadership across the community in new ways.

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Diane Ragsdale: I don't know if this is exactly akin to what you're referencing, but down in Austin, the Fusebox Festival run by Ron Berry. I think it's just done extraordinary work over the last decade really, in asking itself, you know, what is the purpose of a festival and how can we put ourselves really in service of helping this community imagine its future and bring that better future into being. And they've done this in so many ways and in partnership with, you know, the health sector, the transportation sector, housing, and, and have been at the table.

And it started, if I remember correctly, with the fact that they wanted to address artists' housing and then looked around and went well, housing isn't just an issue for artists. So let's see if we can fix this for a lot of people. And it grew from there.

And included things like the festival turning itself over to a kind of design charrette process where people in the community could come out and experience and imagine prototypes of how the future might look there and be include – have their voices included in that process. And you know, medical services, health services that haven't been available in the past being brought into the area and it just goes on and on and on from there.



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Diane Ragsdale: And so the arts can be incredibly powerful in communities in this way and be a partner. And without – I think in any way, diminishing their value as, you know, aesthetic institutions, right? It's, they're still arts organisations, but they are arts organisations with their arms opened up and, and hands held with everyone else in their community.

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Stephanie Fortunato: The thing that I was thinking about when you mentioned Austin was they have tied some of their COVID music economy recovery funding to having the practitioners actually do an undoing racism training. So they're really trying to get at, I think some of the beginnings of unravelling the systemic oppressions that are present and the white supremacy culture that is present, you know, in that industry itself, which I thought was a really interesting strategy for, you know, distributing responsibility for addressing bias in, in the music industry.

Diane Ragsdale: That's fantastic.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah. Yeah, it was, I was really impressed with that. Which I guess does kind of lead to one of the other things that I wanted to ask you about in terms of creative practitioners because your work brings you in contact with all sorts of individuals who are working in different parts of the, the arts community and beyond, you know, artists, executive leaders, artistic directors and the like. And so I'm wondering, you know, in your conversations, what do people want to learn and unlearn right now?

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Diane Ragsdale: Yeah, that's a great question. Uh, what do people want to learn? So I recently facilitated a workshop with a group of leaders of cultural institutions and in advance of that, I interviewed all of them and asked them a range of questions, including, you know, what are your challenges? What are the things you really feel you need at the moment in terms of development?

And there were a few things that really rose to the top of the list. One was how to deal with my own mental health and the mental health of my staff. I think managers and leaders are feeling out of their depths to a great extent in, in this arena. Leaders and managers may just not have the experience, and certainly there are new things that we're having to deal with now that we haven't had to deal with in the past. Another area that comes up quite a bit is, how to be both collaborative, you know, in terms of leadership style or distribute power, but also exercise vision and direct when need be and that tension.

And we see that a lot in the growing movement around self-organising, you know, teams and, and systems and leaderless organisation so to speak, which is that while everyone can appreciate the value of collaboration and shared leadership and distributed power, there come moments when those systems often do seem to need something like vision and, and direction, and it's hard to know how to get there.

And I listen to the podcast *Leadermorphosis* quite a bit, which is all about these kinds of organisations. And it's interesting to me how often even the guests on that podcast, which are exemplars of this struggle with this tension.



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Diane Ragsdale: I tried to shift this year at the Banff Centre from a kind of director and co-leader model to a real ensemble with the faculty. And to bring everyone into the conversations from the ground up around values, goals, curriculum design and all of that. And I think it's really rewarding and we're getting some great outputs and outcomes from this time spent together. But it takes a lot of time and there do come moments when one realises like, okay, someone's going to have to, nudge something forward here. And I guess that's me.

Stephanie Fortunato: (laughs)

Diane Ragsdale: And how do I do that without in a sense betraying this now ensemble effect that I've tried to bring into being, right. So I feel that actually in my own job all the time.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah. And I feel that so much with community work as well. Like it is actually my job to facilitate a community driven vision. But there are points when decisions do need to be made, and as much as I want to work through the process and make sure there's consensus as we move together, that's a tension that I feel, right.

The, the sort of political, social, economic pressures of being in a position where you have to produce something at the end of the day, and then giving time and space for the creative processes to unfold in ways that are right and fit the context of, of the place and the moments, right. So anyway, that – that's just something, I guess, we're all working on every single day. (laughs)

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Diane Ragsdale: Yeah. And it – and you mentioned time, you know, I think that this is the other thing in the past year, I have heard many people talk about. The relief of getting off of what felt like the creation or production treadmill, the sort of constant, constant, you know, making, making, making, no time for reflection.

And I also think this is something that leaders are trying to manage, which is: How do we continue to foster a culture of care? How do we not revert to brutal conditions? Which, I've heard many people talk about in the non-profit arts and other areas as well.

Cultural competence, I think, is something that many leaders are really struggling to develop. The ability to take decisions in the midst of uncertainty and not get paralysed, to not feel defeated by lack of confidence or lack of information, you know?

So there's that tension between, you know, when is it okay to slow down and say, we're not going to take any fast decisions because this decision needs more reflection. And when do we actually need to jump forward and how do we do these things in a way that's transparent, where we stay in communication with people. Communications is another area where I've had leaders say they want some help, you know, how to communicate effectively, how to inspire, how to be truthful, how to be transparent and effective and reliable.

But also, you know, when you don't know what's going to happen and you don't really have answers, how do you do that effectively?



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Diane Ragsdale: So, yeah, there's a lot. It's a really challenging time for leaders and, and building a network and having whether it's five, 10, 12 other individuals that you can connect with on a regular basis, and share ideas and get advice. Having a mentor I think can be really, really valuable right now.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Oh, I think those peer-to-peer networks. Yeah, and the mentorship uh, both given and received have been so beneficial over the past year. Because it's not just, you know, my institution and my organisation that's needing to adapt and pivot, it's me.

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Diane Ragsdale: I was just at uh, University of Wisconsin–Madison. I was a guest discussing in a class in entrepreneurship yesterday and asked the students, you know, what kind of goal, or what values or goals that you had before COVID have changed over the last year. And you know, more than a few basically said, yeah, I faced life and death, you know, all around me, it's really changed what's important in my life. And I do think a lot of people's values have changed and this will no doubt also affect how and if people return to their old patterns and habits around cultural engagement.

Like I think for many people, their values and goals will have shifted during this time. And for some that might mean, you know, a race to get to their local cultural institution. And for others, it might mean a drop-off.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Same with travel, right?

Diane Ragsdale: Yeah.

Stephanie Fortunato: I think that's another, another aspect of our lives that will be transformed going forward.

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Diane Ragsdale: You know, it's interesting. So I moved to the Netherlands the first time in 2010 and I didn't move to Amsterdam. I live in a rural, suburban village near Utrecht and the first several years that I was here, I actually was on planes all the time. You know, it's a charming place, but I was really happy for any opportunity to get back to New York or anywhere else in the world and be seeing cultural events and connecting with folks that way. And one thing that's interesting to me is that I've now been holed up here, you know, under lockdown much of the time and I've become strangely comfortable. You know, I feel my own desire to be jumping on planes and out and about, and going to conferences and events and that has declined.

And I think – I don't think that's just about getting older, you know, I think it's, it feels safer right now. And I'm connected to nature here, which is important to me as well. I don't think I'm alone in this. A lot of people have escaped cities.

And not just because of COVID, but also because of the climate crisis right?

Stephanie Fortunato: Right.



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Diane Ragsdale: Another interesting thing in that survey of the artists I was struck by was the number of them who indicated that they plan to adapt their future touring and producing practices in light of the climate crisis. And so they're envisioning not touring as far from home as they have in the past.

And some are saying – it's not a majority, but you have some saying, I'm not going to get on planes again. And their primary concern is the climate. This is also, I think, another factor combined with COVID that's going to change.

And I do wonder how long this effect will be, and if it will even be kind of permanent for some folks, like just lack of desire to perhaps be back in the thick of it, or maybe it will, you know, come back when we all do really feel safer, maybe that's another year from now. You know, this is another thing going back to international, cultural exchange. When you think about trying to restart that kind of exchange work on a global level, and the differences between countries and states in terms of COVID rates, regulations, restrictions, not to mention, you know, what's happened with visas and backlogs. That's an area that seems like it's going to be really challenging to get back up on its feet. So you see entire parts of the cultural sector that really could take, I think, quite a long time to be back up and running, even though we are hopeful that some may get going in the next, you know, few months or so.

I also, not too long ago, was talking with a group of orchestra leaders and asked at the end of the conversation, if people would tell me about a beautiful decision that they felt that they had made in the last year. And one of the respondents who ran a youth orchestra raised her hand and said, I'm learning to love the beauty and plan G. You know, it's like a, it's not A, B, C, D, E, F –

Stephanie Fortunato: (laughs)

Diane Ragsdale: But like, where's the beauty and plan G.

And I think there's something really extraordinary about that, about allowing ourselves to just – that's part of resilience as well. You know, it's not bouncing back to the state you were in, but it's kind of following the light. It's allowing yourself to grow and evolve and adapt towards, you know, where you see life, where you see possibility, where something could still be made and brought together.

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Stephanie Fortunato: That's the direction we want to be heading in, where creative processes, and sort of active engagement with decision-making and the implications of it are shared across organisations because there are real stakes at play right?

Diane Ragsdale: Yes.

Stephanie Fortunato: Um, and that's, I think that's really exciting to see where that goes. Um, and I guess gets to sort of my final question for you, which is a little bit about strategy and how we help to make some of this stick. I wondered if you would expand upon the relationship you've described between aesthetics, economics and ethics, and think about that in the context of a city's cultural development.



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Diane Ragsdale: You know, I've written a bit about this relationship between economics, aesthetics and ethics, and the way that I conceive of them as being interdependent in business models, or logics of organisations, or institutions or fields. And you know, one of the – my, I guess, questions for the field has been, are economics in the driver's seat and are aesthetics and ethics kind of riding along? And is this in part because boards of directors are not only more comfortable weighing in on let's say the budget of an institution, but they have formal committees and finance committees and audit committees.

They have the opportunity to veto a budget, ask for changes to be made, et cetera. And we'll spend really a significant amount of their time considering this aspect of an organisation and relatively little asking deep, big questions around the ethics and the aesthetics of an organisation, its values.

And these are three forms of, you know, value and valuation. And one of the analogies I like to give to explain what I mean, in terms of how these three kinds of value might affect your decisions and your planning, your strategies, is to go back to a Me Too example, which is with Louis C.K., the comedian who was, you know, accused of sexual misconduct and admitted that those allegations were true and was 'cancelled' – to use the word that is often used now.

But I think, you know, kind of stopped working for a while and then began to restart his career. And I was talking with a group of presenters and one raised a hand and asked the room, you know, I've heard Louis C.K.'s getting ready to go out on tour again. And his agents called to ask if we would be interested and I'm just curious, like when do people think it's going to be okay to present Louis C.K. again?

And a few people weighed in and then someone said, well, doesn't that depend on the values of your institution? I said, yeah, it does. And I said, in there's sort of three levels of that. On the economic level, it might be, is there an audience ready to see him? Can we afford to present him if audiences are weak? Or if we lose sponsors? From an aesthetic standpoint, can he still deliver an excellent, relevant show? Will it increase our artistic reputation to present him? Or at least not harm it? And from an ethical standpoint, given his admission to accusations of sexual misconduct, is presenting him the right thing to do?

Could it harm some in our community if we get behind him in this moment? And does this matter to us? And so in any given decision process, you know, if we're trying to make better decisions at the level of organisations or cities, I think one question is, do we have guard rails on all three of these, or is economics holding sway? And so if you ask about cultural districts, I'm old enough that I went to see, you know, Richard Florida in my twenties, you know, or thirties even, give a talk and you know, there's this been this notion for quite a long time, even preceding Florida, you know, that cultural districts can be great for the economy.

Certainly, we understand that they can make an area beautiful. But is there a danger that they will segregate our community, you know, or is there a way to build a cultural district so that it can bring people together across difference on equal terms? I think other questions that I might be thinking about at that city level is: What does equitable recovery of the cultural sector look like? You know, do we need to encourage some organisations to close responsibly?



[00:37:55]

Diane Ragsdale: Should we be encouraging mergers and collaborations? Is there a more sustainable, equitable, economically viable, aesthetically diverse mix of cultural enterprises and institutions that we want to aim for if we want to be better? And particularly if we are able to be self-reflective and recognise that perhaps our cultural district does sort of, have a white dominant culture and we are in a community that no longer reflects that, or maybe never did, and that we need to make changes so that it feels like it's everybody's cultural district, right.

And so, you know, I think these questions get asked on a case by case basis, every community is different. But I believe trying to dig deeper, to look at those ethical questions, to exercise what I would call moral imagination. As leaders of cities and leaders of organisations – I think particularly as we reopen and rebuild, we really need to be hearing from everyone and understanding the impact of decisions made now on as many people as possible.

And also how those problems, how the problems look from many different perspectives, what solutions look like from many different perspectives and building that in a kind of grounded way, I think will lead to really important, necessary, and beautiful transformation, right. Rather than a kind of a Withering Winterland where we've just, you know, see blight where, oh, with a lot of things missing or kind of survival of the fittest with, you know, maybe some institutions surviving because they're more well-endowed than others.

[00:39:35]

Stephanie Fortunato: Oh, Diane. I could not think of a better place for us to leave this conversation than with the advice that you just gave and that question – how can we exercise our moral imagination, being the, the driving force for which we evaluate all of our decisions. Thank you so much for sharing your insights and observations and inquiries with us. It has been truly a pleasure to speak with you.

[00:40:03]

Diane Ragsdale: Stephanie, the pleasure was all mine. I really enjoyed being in conversation with you.

[00:40:07]

Stephanie Fortunato: Listeners, if you want more, check out Diane's blog on ArtsJournal, which looks at what the arts do and why, but first stick around for a conversation between myself and Adrian Ellis, Founder of the GCDN, as we explore the key takeaways and actionable ideas from this conversation.

[00:40:23]

MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:40:27]

Stephanie Fortunato: Welcome Adrian.

[00:40:29]

Adrian Ellis: Thank you. Great to talk to you, as ever.



[00:40:32]

Stephanie Fortunato: So I had a delightful conversation with Diane Ragsdale. What a great opportunity to really hear from her, the work that she's been doing and I just wonder you've known her a long time, is that the Diane that you know?

[00:40:47]

Adrian Ellis: Yes, I think that was vintage Diane. I have known her since she was at Mellon. We were introduced by Russell Willis Taylor, and I remember talking to her then and thinking, for somebody working in a foundation who tend to be quite conservative in their thinking and quite – to be blunt about it, timid in their thinking often, particularly at the middle level in organisations, she was a brave and expansive thinker.

And when she left uh, Mellon she started the blog Jumper. She did a series of pieces about the state of mostly the performing arts, but about the cultural sector that were really incisive and they were pretty devastating critiques of, of a generation of leadership in the cultural sector in general and in theatre in particular.

And I think that she sort of established her position very quickly as a thought leader and as a critical friend to the sector. And I think that both those words 'critical' and 'friend', describe her position. And I think that she believes highly – not only in the moral potential of the arts, that not only can the arts be a force for social change, but that they have that obligation.

And I, that came through, I think, very loud and clear in the interview that she believes very strongly, both in the potential and the responsibility of cultural organisations and the cultural sector to be a force for social justice. And although that is, I think, today almost sort of de rigueur, she has consistently held that position and consistently held the actions of the sector up against that standard.

[00:42:36]

Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah, I thought it was so interesting that the way that she looks at the sector, you know, her theories about how it works. And I think what you're saying is right about the sort of critical eye that she gives uh, she didn't give cultural institutions a pass and she expects quite a great deal from, from cultural institutions, from their leaders. Especially in this moment.

But I was really struck by the way in which she allowed for real human beings to have feelings and to express themselves both at work and in their communities. So even though Diane has this real high bar for the aspirations of the sector and the possibilities of the arts, she's working with so many different people at different stages in their careers and in different mediums. And so I think through that work, she understands that practice is an evolution and that there's a relationship between, you know, the place and the time in which an artist is working and that relationship to cultural institution may or may not be an important driving force.

[00:43:48]

Adrian Ellis: Yeah, she very much has one foot in the world of ideas and the other foot in the world of practice. I think there's a name for that, is that praxis? I can't remember. One informs the other very richly and I think that gives her – certainly her writing and her, her synthesis of her ideas great force because they, they relate very directly to practical experience as well as to her um, uh, her consideration of, of theory if you like.



[00:44:15]

Stephanie Fortunato: The other theme that I thought was uh, that she explored in, in a couple of different questions was this idea of relational leadership and what it takes to really cultivate institutions, which there is an idea that everyone is empowered and required to contribute to making social change.

And I thought that was an interesting thread throughout. Um, she asked one question, which I loved: How can we exercise our moral imagination? Um, and it seemed to ground a lot of the way that she thinks about the sector and how it works. Did that strike you as well?

[00:44:53]

Adrian Ellis: Yes, very much. I thought she had a very nice triumvirate of considerations that should inform decision-making, which were the economic, the aesthetic, and the moral. And I think she made a good point about how boards often in default tend towards the first of those.

And that's partly because they've got fiduciary responsibilities I think. But she did make the point that both aesthetic decisions and the moral dimension may get dampened down by those economical financial considerations. And that's partly to do with the sort of professional formation boards. It's partly to do with their responsibilities, but I think her point is, it would be good if those other two legs of the triumvirate had the same sort of formal standing in decision-making that the financial does.

So that was one thing that I thought was interesting. And then her comments on distributed, a distributed leadership I also thought were really interesting and you know, quite rightly humorous too, because clearly, her underlying point is that the complexity of the situations with which most leaders are dealing mean that a heroic shorthand approach to decision-making of the sort of, you know, the lone leader, the sort of romantic figure on the foggy mountain top making decisions and coming down and imposing them, is a very dysfunctional model. And I think that most people embrace that these days.

But that as you move towards highly participative decision-making, you do ultimately have to make decisions and you cannot seed or hand across all authority to distributed in the organisation because then you move into a position of sort of, an incapacity to move forward because everybody in the organisation has an effect veto power.

And I thought that, her comments on – it's actually very difficult to get that balance right. Which is ultimately to be highly participative in informing decisions, but also ultimately making a decision. It's not easy to do, and it's particularly not easy for leaders to do in this environment.

And I would say, that many of – certainly my generation of leaders, also have not had either training or, or the right sort of experience, rich experience in how to operate those systems. So we have uh, quite a sort of acute crisis of leadership in our sector as a whole generation of leaders tried to struggle with exactly that balance between the participative and the need to ultimately execute.



[00:47:31]

Stephanie Fortunato: You know, as we are rewriting the rules – certainly for the creative sector, as we are thinking about new forms of leadership that will move cultural institutions forward and will help the arts really become a force for social transformation. I wonder if, if as an – a takeaway from this conversation with Diane, we can say that leaders of institutions really need to spend some time looking at other models of leadership? Not only because – you’re right, it is impossible for a single individual to be responsible for guiding any one thing forward, especially something as dynamic as an institution or even the culture of a city more broadly. But I, I wonder if, we also need to allow for a spirit of experimentation that allows for leaders to fail, but to be supported by other parts of the institution. So that there’s a generative process there in which we’re learning from those failures.

But actually we’re developing the skills that are necessary to really move forward in a cohesive way, and to move toward the goal of social transformation more largely.

[00:48:49]

Adrian Ellis: I think you’ve raised a really interesting question, which is about institutional tolerance for failure. And it’s certainly the case that intelligent failure is integral to progress. If you ever want to move something forward and improve it, you’ve got to be able to experiment.

And although you may want to mitigate risk where you can, experimentation necessarily involves the possibility of failure. And that’s true of leadership and experimenting with styles of leadership and experimenting with participative decision-making. The problem with the world of the not-for-profit cultural organisation – and not-for-profits generally, is that they can be brutal in their treatment of failure. And there is an asymmetry in risk reward. When you do try something and you fail, the repercussions for you as a leader can often be quite severe.

If you do nothing, they’re less severe. And therefore the asymmetry is, you’re often much more brutally punished for failure than you are rewarded for success. And therefore over time, you’re often quite conservative in your decision-making. And you’re often looking to your peers to check whether to move, move forward so that, you know, just take the accessioning and museums at the moment.

If you experiment them, then you’re moving out of line of the standard mores of the sector. And you, you get yourself in a controversial position quite quickly. Whereas the only way in which we can really sort of progress things is by experimenting a little. So, so I think that somehow, we would like to have a culture in which experimentation, learning from that experimentation, learning from successes, learning from failures, being open about them is integral to the ethos and values of the organisation of the sector. But I don’t think we’re there.

I think we’re quite a long way away from that. And in some ways, we’re moving further away from that because there is a definite sort of spirit of judgment about – so that if you do experiment and your experiment is not an immediately successful one, by whatever criteria the viewer has – and they’re often partial criteria, you can end up in hot water as a leader very quickly.



[00:51:04]

Stephanie Fortunato: So Adrian, to go back to something that you said earlier about this sort of tripod of economics and aesthetics and morality, that Diane's work really highlights.

I wonder if we could think about some of the new forms that are coming to bear because of COVID, because the digital has created the opportunity for hybrid programming. Um, and I wonder how the aesthetics might be the driver instead of the economics in these new forms, and how the relationship between how these forms are not only created and shared, but how audiences receive them and how artists are allowed to engage and participate with them on the moral and ethical level. You know, how that might create a real opportunity to study and unpack how, how leaders of cultural institutions might use these experiments and new art forms to reinvent what happens next with their institutions.

[00:52:10]

Adrian Ellis: I think the dilemma that we're dancing around, is that this is clearly a period which invites experimentation and which requires experimentation. And which provides an opportunity in a context for experimentation about art forms, about relationships with audiences, about relevance.

About internal organisation, about patterns of governance, about leadership. Pretty well, you know, every part has been put under stress and we can sort of see ways in which experimentation would lead to new models, new ways of doing things. At the same time, you do need resources in order to be able to experiment. If all your income is absorbed in your fixed costs and your core operations, then how do you find either the physical resources, the financial resources, the mental disk space to be experimenting.

And I think the dilemma for institutions is that they're presented with the opportunity, but they haven't really been able to accumulate the resources to exploit that opportunity. You know, just take digitisation. You know, so there are all sorts of opportunities in digitisation. But they're – or digital distribution, but they're expensive as hell.

And nobody has got a line item to accommodate them. So my fear is that the institutions – particularly those institutions that don't have resources, they're going to find it very difficult to take advantage of the opportunities for experimentation and reinvention. On the other hand, there's probably a generation of both individuals and organisations with lower fixed costs, organisations that are more agile, organisations that are not fully absorbing their resources in just being, that can take advantage of those. And I think there are the ones that are likely to, as it were, blossom.

And I don't just mean grow in some, you know, budgetary sense, but to seize the moment, *carpe diem*. So we're likely to get a lot of sort of unexpected winners and losers, or non-obvious winners and losers when we look at the landscape five years from now, because those organisations that, that have got the organisational agility and resources to, to seize the moment are clearly going to come out ahead.

[00:54:28]

Stephanie Fortunato: I think just one other thing, Adrian, that kind of struck me in my conversation with Diane, was the underlying desire to really cultivate a culture of caring across institutions and across communities.



[00:54:44]

Stephanie Fortunato:

And I think that is the source of Diane's optimism about the potential for the arts to be a real force for social change and for artists to be engaged with communities and be the leaders of what comes next. So I found that really inspiring, and I just didn't know if that struck you as well.

[00:55:05]

Adrian Ellis: Absolutely. That her worldview is both infused with empathy, and infused with an understanding of the um, the value of empathy and humanity.

[00:55:18]

Stephanie Fortunato: Adrian, such a pleasure to unpack this interview with Diane. Thank you so much for joining me for this conversation.

[00:55:27]

Adrian Ellis: Thank you. It was a pleasure to talk to you, and it's always a pleasure to listen to Diane.

[00:55:31]

Stephanie Fortunato: Absolutely. And I'm very grateful to Diane Ragsdale for sharing her time with us, and for the inspiring words that she gave so that we can all look to the next phase with a bit more of optimism and really hold ourselves to some of the principled ideas that she shared.

The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting and is supported by The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network. The podcast and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net. And if you haven't already done so, please subscribe to our feed on your podcast listening platform of choice.

My name is Stephanie Fortunato. Thank you so much for being with us today. And I look forward to talk to you again.

[00:56:20]

THEME MUSIC

