

Morning Panel Reflections

Strategy in Action: What Outdoor Arts Needs Next

At this year's *Strategy in Action* morning panel, chaired by Amanda Parker, four cultural leaders tackled a deceptively simple question: **where can outdoor arts take leadership now?**

Across provocation, debate and a very engaged audience, a shared picture emerged — one of a sector rich in purpose, but operating within shifting political, civic and emotional terrains. What follows is a snapshot of the themes that cut across the conversation.

Outdoor Arts as Place-Shaping: Regeneration, Pride and Power - Adriana Marques

Peabody Trust, Assistant Director of Cultural Programming and Strategy

Adriana opened by drawing a clear line between outdoor arts and the narratives that shape neighbourhoods. In Thamesmead, she explained, large-scale commissions weren't decorative extras – they were tools for **re-authoring identity** in places undergoing rapid change.

Her framing was refreshingly direct: cultural democracy isn't a consultation exercise. It's a shift in power, with residents influencing not just content, but direction. Outdoor arts, in this model, becomes **narrative infrastructure**, capable of strengthening local pride and reclaiming underused spaces. And when cultural roles sit *inside* regeneration bodies rather than outside them, the arts gain real leverage in shaping policy.

Ambition, Confidence and Thinking at Scale - Joe Mackintosh

Out There Arts, Chief Executive / Artistic Director

Joe focused on the need for sector confidence. For him, artistic integrity is the north star; strategy should support bold making, not funnel it toward trends.

He pushed back on the idea that touring and place-based practice exist in tension, arguing instead for a sector that can hold both. And with devolution reshaping regional governance, he urged outdoor arts to think landscape-wide — to imagine city region- stories and civic programmes that match the ambition of national theatre models.

The message: **be bold, be visible, and have confidence that the sector has what it takes to influence.**

Translating Impact: Speaking the Language of Civic Systems - Chenine Bhatena

Formerly Brighton & Hove City Council, Director of Culture and Environment; now Royal Borough of Greenwich, Head of Culture

Chenine brought the reality check. Local authorities, she reminded the room, are driven by measurable outcomes like wellbeing, life chances, public realm, economic participation. Outdoor arts *does* create impact, but unless that impact is articulated in civic language, it risks remaining invisible in policy terms.

A key barrier seems to be **Vocabulary**.

Artists and policymakers often describe the same outcomes differently. Developing shared language, and shared evidence frameworks, is where long-term influence begins.

Her examples of embedding creatives inside council departments showed what happens when creative thinking sits at the decision-making table. Outdoor arts becomes not a visitor, but a participant.

Radical Joy Meets Sector-Wide Care - Parmjit Sagoo

Inspirate, Executive Producer

Parmjit brought the conversation back to people, and to the emotional and political realities of working in contested public space. Outdoor arts, she said, is an “empowering and shared space,” an act of “resistance, visibility and joy” at a time when division is rife.

But joy alone isn't enough.

Her challenge to the sector was sharp: **How do we maintain that energy while strengthening safeguarding for artists and teams?**

Outdoor arts often sits where issues of race, migration, inequality and identity collide. Artists, particularly those from Global Majority backgrounds, aren't just holding space; they're personally implicated in it. Parmjit described the quiet labour of grounding oneself privately before stepping into public-facing work. That burden, she argued, must not remain individual.

Safeguarding, in her view, is not a bureaucratic afterthought. It's **structural cultural infrastructure**, the condition that makes radical joy possible.

From Provocation to Practice

As the panel moved from provocation into discussion, some consensus began to take shape, not as abstract principles, but as practical levers that could strengthen the sector's ability to lead. What emerged was a sense that outdoor arts already has the creative and civic appetite for leadership; what's needed now is structural clarity.

1. Make the ephemeral legible and durable

The panel acknowledged that outdoor arts will never be a building based- artform, nor should it be. Its strength is its immediacy, its ability to gather people in the moment. But the sector cannot afford for its impact to evaporate as quickly as its events conclude. The challenge is translation: **how do we turn fleeting encounters into evidence that sits comfortably within civic systems?**

This means building effective processes for capturing outcomes, not just numbers or footfall, but changes in wellbeing, belonging, social connection, pride and use of public space. It also means developing shared vocabulary so that what artists see as emotional resonance or community energy becomes legible within the language of regeneration, public health or local economic participation. The work doesn't need to change, but the way we document and communicate it must.

2. Think in assets, not just in events

A striking thread in the discussion was the recognition that outdoor arts suffers from **invisible infrastructure**. While traditional cultural organisations have buildings that anchor their stability, the outdoor sector often relies on borrowed spaces, temporary facilities, and fragile revenue funding.

The panel argued for a mindset shift: **assets matter**, even (and especially) for an artform rooted in public space. This isn't about becoming building-led. It's about strategic stability. Land to build on; storage to protect work; rehearsal and fabrication spaces; housing for artists; and income-generating assets that create long-term resilience.

Viewed this way, capital investment becomes not a distraction from artistic purpose, but a way to safeguard it. The more secure the ground beneath the sector, the more ambitious the work can be.

3. Navigate public space through relationships, not risk-aversion

A recurring point from both panellists and audience was that public space is inherently political. It reflects anxieties, identities, and power dynamics, which means outdoor arts is always navigating more than artistic questions.

What the discussion made clear is that political navigation is not the same as political neutrality. It's a **relational practice** built on listening, trust and ongoing dialogue with communities, local authorities, housing associations and civic partners.

When cultural teams are embedded within institutions, as Adriana and Chenine both illustrated, outdoor arts gains protection, insight and influence. It becomes part of the decision-making ecosystem, better able to anticipate sensitivities and negotiate tension.

The solution isn't avoiding politics but working skilfully within it.

4. Treat devolution as a moment for leadership

New mayoral authorities and changing regional power structures could represent an opportunity. Outdoor arts is uniquely good at animating shared spaces, telling large-scale stories, and reaching across geography. These are precisely the capabilities regional authorities need as they attempt to build civic identity, foster cohesion and communicate at scale.

The panel was clear: the sector cannot wait to be invited.

It must organise, articulate its value and step confidently into regional conversations.

With the right coalitions and leadership, outdoor arts could shape regional narratives in ways that match, or surpass, what building-based institutions can do.

Where This Leaves Us

The panel revealed a sector ready to lead — but keenly aware of the conditions that enable leadership to flourish. Outdoor arts is powerful: it shapes place, challenges narratives, creates belonging and holds public space in ways few artforms can.

The task now is structural:

shared language, shared evidence, shared care, and shared ambition.

If this morning made anything clear, it's that the sector already has the ideas. What it needs next is the scaffolding.