

Afternoon Panel Reflections

Reimagining Participation, Power and Place

The Wednesday Afternoon Session, chaired by **Antoinette Nestor**, Portfolio Holder for Culture, Economy and Skills at Cambridge City Council, unfolded as a wide-ranging exploration of how culture, public space and community decision-making might evolve in a moment marked by social division and institutional strain. What emerged - was a portrait of a sector deeply aware of its civic responsibilities, and actively reshaping the ways it listens, collaborates and imagines.

Mapping Deep Data for Civic Change — Flora Samuel

Professor of Architecture, University of Cambridge; Coleader-, Public Map Platform

The first provocation came from **Flora**, who introduced the Public Map initiative, a bold attempt to reimagine how civic decision-making is informed and how communities participate- in shaping their environments.

Her work positions cultural data as essential infrastructure. Instead of relying solely on traditional datasets, Public Map integrates environmental, social, economic and cultural layers to create a more holistic, people centred- understanding of place. At its core is the belief that lived experience and cultural expression hold critical insights that must be visible within planning processes.

Flora emphasised that outdoor arts plays a vital role here, not as embellishment, but as methodology. Creative engagement allows residents to express emotions, histories, tensions and aspirations that conventional consultations routinely miss. Her team's mapping work across Anglesey demonstrated how children, young people and community mappers can generate powerful, nuanced information about wellbeing, belonging, climate anxiety and place attachment.

Her ambition is clear: to shape a planning ecosystem in which cultural insight isn't an afterthought but a foundational building block.

Culture as Catalyst for Empathy — LaToyah McAllister--Jones

Founding Partner & Lead Facilitator, Citizens for Culture; Deputy Chair, Bristol Old Vic; Former Director, St Paul's Carnival

The second provocation, delivered by **LaToyah**, shifted the lens from data to democracy. Drawing on her background in social justice, community organising and cultural leadership, she argued that culture offers a vital route into dialogue at a time when public debate is defined by distrust and polarisation.

Her recent work with citizens' assemblies in the West of England Combined Authority showed how carefully structured participation can bring together residents of different ages, backgrounds and beliefs to learn, deliberate and arrive at shared decisions. Culture, she suggested, is uniquely powerful here because it begins from shared human experience rather than entrenched ideological positions.

LaToyah also spoke candidly about the emotional landscape cultural practitioners inhabit, one marked by uncertainty, frustration and fatigue. Instead of becoming stuck in these feelings, she proposed that culture can help transform them into constructive action and empathy. For her, assemblies are not about persuasion but about finding the common ground that still exists beneath division.

Her challenge to the room was simple but profound: to build the capacity to stay present when conversations become uncomfortable, and to see discomfort as part of the work.

Listening as Strategy — Aretha George

Chair, 18 Hours; Head of Culture, London Borough of Hounslow

The third provocation came from **Aretha**, who located the conversation firmly within the realities of place-based cultural work. Drawing examples from **Watermans** in Hounslow and **18 Hours** in East Sussex, she illustrated how deep, patient listening forms the backbone of any meaningful cultural strategy.

In Hounslow, a borough shaped by demographic churn, multilingual communities and intense urban infrastructure, programming must bridge differences in language and background. Outdoor arts here leans towards physical and visual forms that speak across barriers, creating moments of collective experience in complex public spaces.

In East Sussex, Aretha highlighted how targeted research and community partnerships help organisations understand local priorities, shifting festivals and events toward formats that reflect the aspirations and identities of residents.

Her core message was clear: strategy is not a document but a practice. It emerges from ongoing conversations, trust-building and the willingness to see communities as co-authors of cultural direction, not passive recipients.

Walking as a Framework for Connection — Ali Pretty

Artistic Director, Kinetika; Coleader-, Beach of Dreams

The final provocation, led by **Ali**, returned the room to the poetic and embodied dimensions of cultural work. Through her decades of walking, making and community-led creativity with Kinetika, she has developed a distinctive model for reshaping people's relationships with their landscapes and each other.

In the Thames Estuary, this approach has crystallised into the **T100 Walking, Talking & Making Festival**, where annual walks gather stories, memories and personal insights that are then translated into silk artworks and community experiences. More recently, **Beach of Dreams** expanded this model across the UK, inviting hundreds of participants to adopt miles of coastline, imagine future generations and co-create a national narrative rooted in care and connection.

Ali's work demonstrates that major cultural impact often emerges not from spectacle, but from slow processes: repeated gatherings, shared journeys, and the weaving together of individual insights into collective identity. For many, the experience produces a rare moment of unity and hope in a fractured national landscape.

Navigating Discomfort, Power and Long Term- Change

In the moderated discussion that followed, Antoinette guided the panellists through a series of themes that knit the provocations together.

Discomfort emerged as a recurring point, whether in confronting contested public spaces, navigating political tensions, or engaging with communities whose experiences challenge institutional assumptions. For Flora, LaToyah, Aretha and Ali alike, discomfort is not a threat but a signal that meaningful work might be happening.

Corporate influence was also explored with nuance. While partnerships can bring resources, they can also divert focus from community needs. The consensus was that clarity of mission and authenticity must remain the bedrock of any collaboration.

Funding structures came under scrutiny, with several panellists arguing that the short-termism of current cultural funding undermines long-term, relationship-based work, and that structural change is needed if the sector is to fulfil its civic potential.

Throughout, the conversation reinforced a shared understanding: that cultural leadership today requires patience, relational practice and a commitment to the realities of place.

A Closing Reflection

The Wednesday Afternoon Session revealed a sector that is imaginative, self-aware and deeply invested in civic transformation. The provocations offered different entry points, deep data, deliberative democracy, listening, long-term creative practice, yet all pointed to the same underlying belief: culture is not peripheral. It is civic intelligence, emotional infrastructure, and a catalyst for a more connected future.

If the session made anything clear, it is this: cultural leadership today is not only about creativity. It is about cultivating the conditions in which communities can recognise their own agency and reshape the places they call home.