

## **Panel Discussion Follow-Up Responses – LaToyah McAllister-Jones**

Citizens For Culture

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### **Question**

**So what do we do when it gets uncomfortable in the room?**

Honestly, discomfort is usually where the real work is. When things feel uncomfortable, it's often because something honest about power, experience or lived reality has surfaced. This is about leaning in a challenging yourself about where the discomfort is coming from-it is often a data/learning point. I want to be clear I am not talking about feeling unsafe. That is different. I am talking about being uncomfortable.

In citizen assemblies we don't try to smooth that over; we design for it. We create structures that allow disagreement, reflection and listening so people can stay present with difference. At St Paul's Carnival, holding tension between community expectations and institutional pressures was part of the work, not something to eliminate

**Response — LaToyah McAllister-Jones**

### **Question**

**How do we empower the aspirations, the taste of our communities in culturally deprived and economically deprived areas?**

**Response — LaToyah McAllister-Jones**

I think this starts with shifting from consultation to shared decision-making. Communities don't lack aspiration; they often lack power within the systems shaping cultural provision.

Through Citizens for Culture we created deliberative spaces where citizens shaped priorities themselves rather than responding to pre-set ideas. Carnival has always worked from a similar place; we provide the platform and the community fill it. A genuine partnership.

When people genuinely shape decisions, their aspirations become visible very quickly.

### **Question**

**How can Outdoor Arts push against the growing influence of corporate power over our communities (in gentrification, etc)?**

**Response — LaToyah McAllister-Jones**

Outdoor arts have huge potential because they sit in public space but that also comes with responsibility.

For me it's about who holds power and who benefits. Work should be co-designed with local

communities, reflect place and build long-term belonging rather than just creating visibility that accelerates displacement.

Culture can either reinforce gentrification or strengthen community ownership; it depends where the power sits. Outdoor Arts, can broker those conversations and bring those stakeholders together for honest dialogue. Framing and holding those conversations is the key.

### **Question**

**Who is missing from this room?**

### **Response — LaToyah McAllister-Jones**

Usually the people most affected by the decisions we're talking about.

Citizen assembly approaches intentionally recruit across class, race, age and lived experience to rebalance who gets to shape cultural futures. But it's not just about who is present; it's about whose voice carries influence once they are there. So equity is critical. 69% of reform voters are in favour of citizens assemblies. This is because many of them feel marginalized. The grounding principle of citizens assemblies is that all voices/lived experience is valid here. Cause no harm, but we want to hear from you.

### **Question**

**Really interested in Latoyah's provocation: how do we stay in the room when it becomes uncomfortable. Could we map that provocation onto public space too? What would that look and feel like?**

### **Response — LaToyah McAllister-Jones**

Yes, and I think democratic public space depends on it.

Inclusive space is not frictionless. It's space where different histories, needs and identities can coexist and sometimes sit in tension. Rather than a single curated experience, public space should hold multiple narratives and uses.

That negotiation is part of what makes space genuinely public. And the negotiation has rules and red lines in order to keep people as safe as possible. But I would hate to design out friction; this is where some of the greatest learning will come. It's about finding consensus within that; surface the friction, and work to find a place where you can co-exist. It sounds easy, it isn't but that is how Assemblies work.

We used a technique called deep democracy in the Citizens For Culture Assembly which requires a group to take a provocation and together argue for one side of the provocation and then switch, together, and argue the other side. It is a powerful way for people to see thing from another angle, not get caught up in the back on forth, but really think deeply about each position. I think this is an interesting way to approach friction.

### **Question**

**LaToyah, were there any surprises from the citizens of culture strategy in terms of what people wanted?**

### **Response — LaToyah McAllister-Jones**

What struck me most was the depth of care people brought when given time and trust.

People didn't simply ask for more cultural events; they talked about fairness, belonging, access and long-term infrastructure. They wanted the data to back up the decision making. And they asked for more opportunities to be involved in decision making.

The conversation became systemic given enough time, evidence and space for different views.

When people are trusted to deliberate, their thinking is often more complex than institutions expect.

### **Question**

**How do we sit with the discomfort of working (as artists, orgs, funders) with extreme political parties, and should we?**

### **Response — LaToyah McAllister-Jones**

This is always complex and one I struggle with. Fundamentally, I don't believe in no platforming; I think it is more powerful for those views to be aired and for the audience to be the ones to challenge the views. But I also don't think this tracks in every situation. This doesn't have one perfect answer.

Democratic practice means engaging across difference, but with clear ethical boundaries around safety and dignity. Citizen processes can create conditions for dialogue without legitimising harm. My key reflection here is that in this moment we are in, I don't think we build consensus by excluding what makes us uncomfortable. That is how the politics of division works, culture starts the conversation from a place of lived experience and this is a different question with a different type of response.

Engagement is not endorsement but exclusion alone rarely builds cohesion.

### **Question**

**How can we demonstrate to communities that we're not only listening, but also that their feedback & contributions are having an impact - rather than just 'mining' them for data?**

### **Response — LaToyah McAllister-Jones**

Trust comes from managing expectations and transparency. In the Citizens for Culture Assembly, we report back, show where decisions changed, and create ongoing roles for citizens in governance. People need to see how their contribution shaped outcomes. It is slow, going back to people, checking you have the right understanding, using their words, not yours. This work is

slow and iterative. And counter intuitive. BUT we can be more intentional about it until it becomes second nature.

#### **Question**

**How do we create an effective 'buyin' to a citizen assembly? What words should we use without it making it seem elitist? What role can a cultural compact play within this?**

#### **Response — LaToyah McAllister-Jones**

Language matters. We talk about people shaping decisions about culture in their area rather than technical terms. Participation needs to feel accessible and ordinary. Cultural compacts can help by building shared responsibility across partners. Swe spent a long time consulting with citizens and partners about language, we made sure we had definitions for what we meant when we used words like 'culture' 'citizens', 'creativity'. We think everyone has the same understanding of a thing; you have to be intentional about that assumptions and design for it.

You create with people, nor present to people. This takes a lot longer, and you have to manage your own need for getting there quicker, short handing what you were, managing your assumptions. But you get buy in buy designing with, checking, iterating, and showing that lived experience is valued.

#### **Question**

**How can we ensure that healthy authentic communication and collaboration is at the heart of our culture**

#### **Response — LaToyah McAllister-Jones**

For me this is about embedding shared power, not just creating opportunities to talk. Talk is cheap and can be extractive. It needs to have purpose. It means clear processes, transparency about decision-making, and long-term relationships rather than one-off engagement. Some of this is about how we show up day to day, but it is also about transitional culture, funding culture, is systemic as well as grounded in the day to day. Our work brings together a diverse range of stakeholders from funders to artists to venues, to affect change across the system.

#### **Question**

LaToyah - what were the key takeaways from the citizens assembly survey?

#### **Response — LaToyah McAllister-Jones**

A strong message was that people see culture as part of everyday life, not an add-on. People spoke about access, inclusion, representation, wellbeing and opportunity. Culture was understood as social infrastructure.

People want data that backs up decision making. That surprised me.

Understanding that everyone has a cultural life; and given the space that can be rich information to augment what we offer and how we offer it-together with citizens.

Assemblies are popular right now but they are not a gimmick. With low trust in national politics and democracy, this is a way to connect with people in their real lives and go beyond just choice; it's about those voices being heard in that decision making process.

#### **Question**

**What were the elected politicians' views on the citizens assembly's findings? Did they accept them?**

#### **Response — LaToyah McAllister-Jones**

Local politicians have been alongside for the whole journey. It has been a 4 year process and most of that time was gaining buy in from the sector and the political institutions that make up the combined authority. The authorities are leaning in; some of it makes them uncomfortable but that's ok, they are used to holding all the power. They are open to how they do things differently, remember that the Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill is going through Parliament at the moment. This work speaks to the heart of the approach and politicians want to know what we think. They are just not very good and engaging authentically, in many cases.

#### **Question**

**How are we defining the term 'uncomfortable' we might view a situation, a comment or discussion as uncomfortable when that's probably not viewed in that way on the opposite side. We should ask what about it is uncomfortable? Uncomfortableness is not a bad thing. Its about facilitation.**

#### **Response — LaToyah McAllister-Jones**

Discomfort often comes from assumptions being challenged or encountering different perspectives. Good facilitation helps distinguish between productive tension and harm. Not all discomfort is negative, sometimes it signals learning. And I don't believe there is an inherent right for everyone to feel comfortable. So much of what makes many people comfortable can come at the expense of others being extremely uncomfortable. It's about recognizing what makes you personally uncomfortable and if you feel able to identify it, name it, explore it.

#### **Question**

**LaToyah - Have you had a citizen's assembly work to develop St Paul's Carnival? If so, what kind of things grew from that conversation, can you share any examples?**

#### **Response — LaToyah McAllister-Jones**

Carnival has always been rooted in community voice and ownership. Engagement with residents, artists and stakeholders shaped priorities, programming and direction. It's a living example of culture created with and by community rather than delivered to them. Themes are created with community, programming is done by the community, the design is broad and the community provide the movement and colour. But no, the assembly model wasn't used with Carnival explicitly.

## Question

**How does the public map project aggregate and analyse such a wide range of data**

### Response — LaToyah McAllister-Jones

I can't speak directly to the technical process, but from a citizen perspective the key question is transparency — how data is interpreted, whose voice is represented, and how insight feeds back into decision-making. We will be building a matrix to track the work across the region, so that we know what already exists, what needs to be build and what needs to be nurtured. Open to ideas! 😊 We are also in the process of co design a citizens panel who will help to monitor the work as well as working with the sector to find solutions to the problems that will arise. And they will!