

Cultural sustainability and cultural leadership: Annabel Turpin and Gavin Barlow (co-directors, Future Arts Centres: in conversation)

PRE- PRINT VERSION: The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *Cultural Trends* May 2026, <https://www.tandfonline.com/https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2026.2667178>

[Cultural sustainability and cultural leadership: Annabel Turpin and Gavin Barlow \(co-directors, Future Arts Centres: in conversation\).](#)

Mark Robinson, Thinking Practice

Gavin Barlow was until recently Chief Executive & Artistic Director of The Albany in Deptford, London. He is now Capital Project Director and leading on archive project Queer Up North 1992-2002: Celebrating Manchester's LGBTQ+ Heritage. Annabel Turpin is Chief Executive of Storyhouse in Chester. Together they are co-directors of Future Arts Centres. As well as leading arts centres – Gavin was CEO at The Albany for 22 years, Annabel was Director at Arc Stockton for 15 years before moving to Storyhouse in 2023 - they have co-chaired Future Arts Centres from its founding as an informal mutual support network of nine arts centre CEOs. They have grown it into a network of over 160 members across the UK working at all levels of staff and governance, and to being one of Arts Council England's 'Investment Principals Support Organisations'¹. They have each taken arts centres from perilous situations to recovery to thriving through times of financial and social change. Both are also active in broader local ecologies, always with sustainability of activity and impact in mind. Annabel was heavily involved with Tees Valley Combined Authority's support for creatives during and after the pandemic and is Chair of Arts Council England's North Area Council and a member of National Council. Gavin directed Lewisham's year as London Borough of Culture in 2022.

This interview focuses on sustainability as an organisational and sectoral quality relating to presence, activity and community engagement. It explores sustainability as both a creative act *within* an ecosystem or connected ecosystems such as “place” and “artform”, and a result of those ecosystems. The themes echo Kenneth Foster's urging to consider resilience, symbiosis, mutualism and adaptation when defining how sustainability in arts organisations “arises from the vitality and energy that is created by this ecosystem... [and] comes from [a] dynamic of adaptability and change.”²

Arts centres and sustainability

MARK ROBINSON: Let's start with a sceptic's question, what's so great about arts centres? On the Future Arts Centres website³ it says, “we believe that through offering outstanding artistic experiences in all our communities and by operating as robust social enterprises, arts centres present a fantastic model for the cultural venues of tomorrow.” Tell me why you think they're particularly suited to sustaining that kind of excellence of content and community involvement whilst being as you say, robust social enterprises. What's the special thing about arts centres, especially in terms of sustainability?

ANNABEL TURPIN: I'll have a go first. Obviously I'm going to talk about arts centres in general and some are more or less of the things that we might describe. That's a caveat for

the whole conversation. I guess the multi-art form nature of them allows them to be community driven and community focused.

That in itself should make them more sustainable: that they're responding to the needs and interests of their local communities. And again, I'm using the word communities not just in a place-based sense, but in all of the other ways that you might describe a group of people as forming a community, whether that's by identity, or need, or interest.

So I think it's not that they're better or worse than any other kind of arts organisation. I would say they're better because that's where I've spent my career, but it's more that within the ecology, they are places that can be really driven and influenced by local communities, whereas other organisations that set out to pursue best practice around a particular art form are perhaps driven by other things.

GAVIN BARLOW: Listening to what we said on the website makes me feel like they're the model for arts venues today as well as the future. What we've seen over the last 15-20 years is a resurgence in confidence of arts centres, almost of confidence in arts centres to admit they *are* arts centres. I remember when I came to the Albany, nobody described the Albany as an arts centre and people shied away from that, even if it was in the name. That's completely reversed now.

Also you see a lot of single art form venues being much more like arts centres, so I guess there's been a confidence, but also an influence. Also perhaps the ecology has shifted in lots of different ways. I think that sense of being embedded in the community, which partly comes from the fact that they are audience-led or community-led rather than art form-led, allows them to be much more responsive and flexible.

And obviously then it's also something to do with the history that's developed over time around that really strong civic role, if you like, so that the connection comes in different ways, but arts and culture is at the core of what they do. There is a range of relationships with people locally which are based on so many different things, and a range of partnerships. So in a sense it's who it's led by, but also who it reaches, and the way it's structured as well as its business models.

ANNABEL TURPIN: And I was going to say, I haven't used the word diversity, but diversity is core to an arts centre, in terms of everything it does, not just the people it reaches and the people it platforms, but the diversity of its income sources, the diversity of its art forms. It is just absolutely core.

MARK ROBINSON: So if I was to take over an arts centre and just run it doing nothing but poetry it would lack that diversity? Even if I was using the same building in the same town, it would fundamentally change that that model?

GAVIN BARLOW: Yeah, absolutely. If you took it over and did it in that way, it would suggest an Artistic Director-led model, if you like, with the Artistic Director deciding and leading their public, which just feels like the antithesis of how an arts centre works.

MARK ROBINSON: Could you say how this relates to the idea of excellence in an artform context? Because arts centres cover a range of artforms, you shape local

perceptions or those artforms. So what's your role in sustaining that range?

GAVIN BARLOW: Just because arts centres are multi-artform doesn't mean they don't have expertise in particular areas. Certainly they can and do bring in real expertise in particular artform areas, so there shouldn't be an assumption that the work is less 'excellent' or can't break new ground. They do have more flexibility in terms of the range of work they do, so they can be more responsive to audiences. But it also means that they more easily explore excellence in terms of cross-artform, multi-disciplinary work, and profile work and artists that don't neatly fit into existing artform categories.

Why arts centres matter

MARK ROBINSON: So one core function of arts centres is being multi-art form, multi-use. But can you say a bit more about how you think arts centres impact local communities or support those communities to have impact through their arts centres? Could you say more about how you think that works?

ANNABEL TURPIN: It's a really complicated question and obviously we speak for arts centres in general, and there is a huge diversity of different arts centres.

GAVIN BARLOW: In terms of impacts all of what we've said about the fact that they are reaching and are connected and are led by kind of a range of different people in a community and a whole community in a sense means that the impact and those relationships have a certain depth. And so for instance, all arts centres, I think, work with different community groups, but particularly young people. And if you can see young people coming through an arts centre, the range of routes that brings and the opportunities, the diversity of routes they can find their ways through, is powerful.

So it feels like at their core arts centres are about developing the creative potential of their communities and seeing how that can impact and develop and support those communities' development.

This runs through different ownership and sustainability models - arts centres have often been started by universities or by local authorities. But the other route is through local communities or artist communities developing and building them. And I think there's a sense - because we're talking a lot about communities - there's a strong sense of artist communities working through lots of arts centres. And again, I would say a diversity of artists in the sense of artists that might not be able to find a home in any other place. Certainly the kind of artists that are focused on socially engaged practice, but certainly a kind of artist that wouldn't find a home in another place.

ANNABEL TURPIN: I think the other thing is the place-based role, the opportunity that our centres are taking to be one of the spaces - in some places the *only* space - where lots of different communities can come together and feel like they really belong somewhere - where they can see other communities, other groups of local people, that they might not encounter in their day-to-day life. I think the 'community cohesion' phrase went out of fashion but there is something about how it brings communities together and people see their work and their activity alongside other people's. It builds that sense of place and that sense of connection. I see arts centres as ultimately places where communities become

connected to each other within their community as well as to others in that area. So I think there's a sort of a place-based role that is beyond the arts.

GAVIN BARLOW: I think there's something about collective imagination as well, because they are a place where people can find themselves, find their own roots, find their creativity, develop that creativity connecting with other people. And maybe this is more about potential, but you see a real potential in a place-based sense to find different ways to ignite a collective imagination, which I think is the first part of reinventing or revitalising local democracy.

We're thinking a lot about this, about how arts centres are anchor organisations in their place, how that means they partner across sectors and with their local authorities. But I think there's also something within that about communities coming together and actually finding a voice and also finding their influence. I think there's potentially a really strong focus on what we would call creative democracy.

ANNABEL TURPIN: I think it's because arts centres straddle that line. They're not the establishment, but they are established in place. They're able to signal that people are listening. When communities come in, it puts value and time and resource on that activity and those people, whether they're coming in to just take part in an audience or whether they're making work themselves, the whole spectrum of the different ways people engage. I think there's a sense of an arts centre being a 'proper' place in that sort of Yorkshire word, and I think particularly for disenfranchised communities, there's a sense, as you say, Gavin, of that opportunity to influence because actually someone is listening, someone proper in an institution, an anchor institution, is listening, is interested in what you're doing, is asking for your opinion, is validating it, perhaps by giving you space to platform work that is relevant to your life. I think that's where that comes into play.

MARK ROBINSON: So that notion of collective imagination and potential, you're connecting that to cultural democracy. And you're suggesting this matters because of the need for an inclusive democracy as opposed to a kind of oppositional democracy. Am I picking that up correctly?

GAVIN BARLOW: Yeah. I would absolutely say an inclusive democracy, and I think in an increasingly polarised world, it becomes a powerful possibility that this brings people together in a different kind of way.

MARK ROBINSON: And that cuts audiences and artists and everybody involved as well, doesn't it? If you're in a workshop with somebody, if you're playing the ukulele with a bunch of people, you can see the potential in yourself, but you can also see it in other people as well, which is a powerful thing. But are there any limits to inclusion around this – any groups or views that are not welcome, say?

GAVIN BARLOW: I'd say most arts centres have a set of values that guide their work, and codes of conduct that guide expectations of people taking part. Explicitly or implicitly people taking part in things sign up to those, so I guess there's a sense of excluding people who reject those in some way – but that just feels like a reasonable and sensible way of working for everyone's benefit.

ANNABEL TURPIN: I think this question has become trickier in recent times, as politics has become more polarised and people have felt freer to express their views. As Gavin says, having a clear set of values and policies to guide expectations of behaviours can help, but ultimately, it shouldn't be about excluding people because of their views, but because of their behaviours – it is generally their behaviours that impact on other people.

MARK ROBINSON: Bringing people together is also something arts centres and Future Arts Centres are *expected* to contribute to because of cultural policy. Arts Council England have published work around co-creation⁴, “everyday creativity”⁵ and “cultural democracy”⁶, for instance, as well having Investment Principles which Future Arts Centres supports others to deliver. They also have outcomes which all funded organisations are expected to contribute to, relating to individual, community and national creativity. What does this mean for your own leadership roles – perhaps especially you Annabel, as a member of Arts Council's National Council, so part of policy-making.

ANNABEL TURPIN: Whilst we can get caught up in the number of publications, outcomes, elements, principles etc, the core idea of bringing people together through creativity is something I 100% subscribe to. I think it is easier for leaders to get lost in the policy and bureaucracy (which ACE are trying to simplify) and it feel like a burden, whereas if you take a step back and look at what you are being asked to do, if you are an arts centre, it is probably what you are doing, or trying to do, anyway.

MARK ROBINSON: And what does that mean for your leadership of teams and artists within your programmes?

ANNABEL TURPIN: As the leader of an arts centre, it's made the job easier. When *Let's Create*⁷ was first published, there was a huge sense of our work being recognised, that the strategy reflected the things we'd been saying and doing. It was hugely validating, and in a way, allowed us to be what our communities needed us to be rather than trying to work within a framework designed for artform-led organisations. People – staff and artists we work with – could see themselves in the strategy in a way they couldn't before.

Local, national, international

MARK ROBINSON: Obviously, Future Arts Centres is national network of locally rooted organisations, so you're also part of national touring networks, and art forms with a national picture. How do you see arts centres balancing, if that's the right word, their roles as local hubs with also being part of national and indeed international networks?

ANNABEL TURPIN: Ultimately it is about parity between the two. Just because you're doing something at a local level that is very rooted in your communities doesn't mean that the work is not nationally significant or internationally significant. I think the modesty that sits in arts centres - for the reasons Gavin was perhaps alluding to earlier, where arts centres were very much seen as community organisations in not a good way - I think that's led to a kind of a modesty as a sector. It's really important that we amplify some of this work, that we amplify some of these practices, especially at a time where lots of organisations are looking to diversify, whether that's their artists, audiences, income streams, or the way that they work. There's huge amounts of real experience developed over a long period of time in arts centres that we should be sharing.

GAVIN BARLOW: I would say the balance has shifted again, obviously crediting Future Arts Centres here a little bit. I would say 15-20 years ago the issue for most arts centres was that they weren't nationally or internationally connected, that they were usually very well embedded locally, but there was a tendency to just look there. I think the great thing over the last few years is that it is now starting to be balanced. Yes, we're very embedded locally, but actually we see that we can hold our own on a different kind of stage, and we can be connected to peers or connected to other things nationally and internationally. So I think I think that's evolving in a positive way.

ANNABEL TURPIN: I'm not saying it's just one way. When I worked in Stockton, it felt like we were starting to do some really good things that were really working. My fear was that I would be so isolated from the rest of the sector because we were so focused locally that we'd be jolly along, thinking we were doing really good things, and the world would be speeding past us. We were trying to be ahead of the game, so that was what drove a lot of the networks that I was part of and helped develop. So absolutely that learning is two-way: if you want to be the best arts centre locally, you've got to be tapping into national and international practice.

MARK ROBINSON: And that connects to sustainability, doesn't it? Although Future Arts Centres is in many ways helping people tackle challenges that they might be facing now around sustainability, you're also building on the sustainability that has developed over 20-30 years, longer in some cases, and you can do work with centres that have sustained themselves for 30 years that is different - not necessarily better, but different - from what you can do with something that's been going for 18 months.

ANNABEL TURPIN: Yes, definitely. Both Gavin and I were in our previous roles for an extended period of time and there was a point I remember us having a conversation about recognising what you can achieve through longevity that you can't achieve if the artistic priorities of an organisation shift every three to five years. I think particularly where you're building up trust with communities, that longevity is really critical, not necessarily of the leader, but definitely of the leadership of an organisation, in terms of the values and priorities.

GAVIN BARLOW: It's what you were saying before about it being a proper place, that only comes with that nice balance where there's trust and you're not a kind of 'over there' establishment. That comes when people have seen it over 10-20 years or seen it as they've grown up.

Sustainability for whom?

MARK ROBINSON: So that leads to the question of sustainability for whom. You have talked a lot about arts centres and the communities, but how do you make sure that's inclusive and tackles the inequalities that there are in local communities, and the different cultural patterns that there might be within specific locations. From your experience, both in your individual careers and with Future Art Centres, how do you think arts centres are positioned to be sustainable for everybody, if that's the target?

ANNABEL TURPIN: I think part of that is about who you choose to work with. By that I mean your whole workforce from your board to your staff, your volunteers to freelancers,

creatives and other freelancers as well as the artists that you're bringing in, I think those choices are really critical in terms of making sure that you're reflective of those local communities and therefore inclusive of them. It's about listening and being genuinely out there and part of what is going on in your place, and obviously then you've got an extended network of people that you are choosing to work with, who are all part of those communities. It's always interesting when you're talking about *us* as the organisation and *them* as the communities, when actually all of the people around the table are part of those communities. Certainly in Stockton nearly everyone lived in the Tees Valley. They were part of the communities we were trying to engage.

That didn't happen by accident, and it certainly wasn't the case at the beginning. We made choices about the way we recruited and how we brought people into the organisation through different schemes to make sure we were representative. I think ultimately the people making decisions have to reflect those communities. Otherwise you're not inclusive.

GAVIN BARLOW: I think that's true. I would describe a similar process differently, because it was a different starting point at the Albany, but one that ensured the board and the staff team, and the way the way we work, and the people we work with are absolutely reflective of local communities. We would also say that the audiences inside the building were very similar to the people walking the streets on the outside. The same goes for the staff, but I think everyone's on a different journey in this and there are endemic issues in terms of culture, class and diversity in the arts. We can't say that we've magically escaped that.

So how do you address that immediately? It's about power and it's about how you intentionally share or give up power. I guess that's also thinking around the governance structures, how decisions are made, how work is made, and obviously everyone's on a journey to much more of a co-creative approach. But also how are we co-creating the work that we produce? How are we co-designing our programmes and how are we co-creating the future of our organisations? I think those are also important parts of how you bring those voices into the decision making for how the organisation develops.

MARK ROBINSON: I wonder whether one or both of you could give a specific example of when you found yourself at a crossroads moment of "I could do this the usual way or I could do it the risky way and give power away." Are there specific moments when you think of that journey of sharing power?

ANNABEL TURPIN: I guess the commissioning programme that we established at ARC not long before I left. It was a mix of staff and community participants that were making choices about the work we commission, and I was only facilitating the selection panels. I was not a voting member and had a realisation that they were going to commission work that I wouldn't have chosen to commission. It was about recognising that tension in myself, if I'm honest, but also going, this is what this process is designed to do, so we have to let it happen. And there was lots of things in place to protect the creatives and the staff if it didn't quite work out, we weren't doing it blindly. But that's an example: we could have commissioned and brought in a professional panel of people to make those choices.

MARK ROBINSON: I think that's an interesting example, for you as the cultural professional 'capital L' Leader to have that feeling.

GAVIN BARLOW: I think my reflection is about being willing to take a chance, being experimental and being creative and trying lots of things because lots of things don't work or don't work as you imagined. And they all take longer and are harder than you thought they were going to be, from setting up different community panels and how they work and how that really interacts and you know just acknowledging all of the issues and barriers there are to making that work and the fact that you are trying to engage lots of different kinds of people and everybody wants to find a different way. Also, you know, some people don't want to be influencing that - they just want to be entertained, so you can get yourself caught up in it a little too much.

Sometimes the more playful things are really useful, just like our Pizza and Pitches process. We set up a thing where people just throw in ideas and other people choose where the organisation puts the investment, and it's just a very simple and playful thing. It's actually about people coming together, as much as what's chosen through that. It's the conversations that are had and the people that come into that space, where you really end up having those conversations around what this arts centre should be now for people, what the programme should look like. So without saying it, it's about throwing lots of things at the wall to see what sticks. I do think that there is an element of that.

I think we're afraid as creative organisations to be creative sometimes, because we think we need to be well managed, and we need to show a very responsible and respectable face to the funders and the outside world.

Excellence and Power

MARK ROBINSON: Hearing you describe this thinking and processes like of the Pizza and Pitches, I wonder whether that fear is one of the unintended side effects of the professionalisation in the arts that's happened over the last 30 to 40 years. That leads me to the next question, which is where artistic excellence sits in the concerns of Future Arts Centres and who it belongs to, because in a way, what you're both describing there is that it doesn't belong to you because you're the chief exec or the artistic director. It's a much broader thing in the way that you talk about it. Is artistic excellence something you worry about? Is it something you worry about, but use different words for?

ANNABEL TURPIN: I guess ultimately you want everyone to have the best experience, so artistic excellence is inherent in everything we do because we are always striving to make sure that whatever someone is seeing or experiencing or taking part in is absolutely the best. The best experience it can be for them in their place, in their moment, in their lives. So that's probably the get out bit at the end. It's not the best experience for me in my life, in the experiences I've had. But it needs to be the best it can be for the people that are experiencing it. So it's inherent in what we do.

GAVIN BARLOW: Going back to what you were saying earlier, Annabel, about "Just because it's cocreated or focused on a local audience or created very locally doesn't mean that it can't be something really transformational." I'm not saying it always does, but something really transformational and world class, if you want to use that expression, can come through it, and it does. That's not always been acknowledged or noticed in the past.

I suppose it's about things coming from an unexpected place which can be artistically very exciting and can lead to things that are way beyond what you might expect. I do think, though, talking maybe against ourselves slightly, that we can be more ambitious in terms of what artistic excellence can be and the wider impact of some of the work and the way we're working. I'm thinking about the Our Freedom⁸ work which is very much around local communities working with arts centres to design a programme, but also something that's meant to reach a really wide audience and have a really big impact. Although there is huge potential there, we do sometimes get stuck in the process.

ANNABEL TURPIN: I was going to say this earlier, I think there is a balance in the whole co-creation conversation, where we have to be careful not to devalue expertise and experience. The best co-design or co-creation experiences bring together expertise and experience of whatever it is you're trying to do with the lived experiences of the communities that you're trying to make it with and for. And I think sometimes that balance is tipped one way. Perhaps what we've seen a little bit in in some of the Our Freedom work is that the commitment to a really authentic community-led process has slightly overpowered some of the knowledge and ideas and experience and expertise of the artistic leads on the project. So I think there has to be a balance there.

MARK ROBINSON: That reminds me of something I try to stick to when mentoring which is 'don't pretend you don't know something you do actually know'. That undermines the very co-creation you're trying to encourage. It's like the moment you were describing, Annabel, of "This isn't the choice I would make, but that's ok." Sitting in that uncomfortableness you weren't pretending you didn't know that or have that different perspective.

ANNABEL TURPIN: No, no, I wasn't. I wasn't facilitating something that I thought wouldn't work. Had the conversation veered into something that I thought or knew based on my experience and experience was fundamentally not going to work, I would have brought that to the table in a way that encouraged the group to think about these things. You might want to ask these questions and so on. So, yes, I think that is about balance. Do you agree, Gavin? Is that it?

GAVIN BARLOW: Yeah. It's trying to create an exciting dialogue which builds on the expertise of different kinds and the knowledge of different kinds in the room. There is a tendency sometimes I think to be to be over worthy in the sense of "I want to give up power". But actually that doesn't always bring the most satisfying outcomes or results for everybody.

MARK ROBINSON: So would you say excellent arts centre practice is about both process and what's shared – the product? And what's your leadership role in that? You're more than facilitators, aren't you, so what would observers of the Our Freedom project see as leadership?

GAVIN BARLOW: I would say that it is about both process and product, though obviously there's a different emphasis at different times. And yes, the leadership role is definitely more than being facilitators. Our Freedom was 60 projects across the country. They had a shared theme, but their responses were all very different as you'd hope and expect. I think the people organising the projects and observers would see a real rigour through the process –encouraging people to take their own path but with very clear

expectations, and very active input and feedback throughout. And actually reminding people in many cases that it was about what we're calling product, what an audience experiences, as well as process.

ANNABEL TURPIN: I agree – it is about leadership, but working in a collaborative way, both in terms of defining the process as well as creating the product or experience.

Strategies For Sustainability

MARK ROBINSON: Thinking about how arts centres achieve organisational sustainability, are there one or two strategies you've found particularly effective in ensuring arts centres can sustain the standards and qualities that you've been describing in a healthy and resilient way, and if so, what stops everybody doing them?

ANNABEL TURPIN: I guess I'd talk about partnership working. I know that's a very hackneyed phrase, and everyone's like, yeah, obviously you work in partnership, but I think it's about looking at it from the point of view of what can arts centres bring to these partners. It's not the other way around. I've talked in the past about learning that you don't go to a partner with a potential project, you go to a partner with curiosity and questions about what they're doing and what they're trying to do, and then you map that onto what you're trying to do, and that's how the partnership evolves. So I think in terms of how arts centres become sustainable, not trying to do it all on your own ultimately is a good way of working. I think that's definitely a tactic if people aren't already using it.

But you need to be really thinking about what and who the partners are, and they are not always the usual suspects either. I have a rule about only working with willing partners. If there's a big organisation you want to work with and they're not coming to the table, move on. They're not always the most valuable ones.

GAVIN BARLOW: I know we never refer to COVID, but it was one of the lessons of COVID, I thought. Business models and diverse business models, yes, really important. We would still say that. But suddenly they were nothing and you realised the things that were keeping you going were the relationships and the network, the pattern of relationships and partnerships that you had developed and nurtured. That was it really. You didn't even have a building. That's all you've had. And so you saw that was the path of sustainability because without those meaningful things where you were contributing to a wider set of things, as well as being able to have a greater impact, or greater reach than you could yourselves – you had nothing without that.

ANNABEL TURPIN: Going back to what we said right at the beginning, arts centres are just a collection of relationships. It's not a relationship with a single art form - that doesn't come into it in a way, though relationships with artists, definitely so. That's why you have to really meaningfully invest time and resource into developing and sustaining those relationships and thinking about it in that way. I sometimes talk about capacity as being the number of relationships you're maintaining, not the number of activities you're doing. Because for me, that's what an arts centre is: it's a group of people and a set of relationships of mutual support and benefit.

MARK ROBINSON: So if collective imagination and potential are the sum of those mutual and symbiotic relationships might that help answer the question of how arts centres

navigate all those threats and challenges in the environment without simply becoming self-preserving. How do you avoid people thinking, “Oh dear, here they come again, wanting to keep their arts centre alive.”

ANNABEL TURPIN: I hope we're getting better at talking about the impact we have, not what we do. I think that's been a real thing for me in the last few years - really shifting from that, you know, patter you get so often from any arts leader or person about what they do to really trying to talk about the impact and the difference we make. That's been a thread for Future Arts Centres as well to try and help other people make that that type of shift because that, you know, and before - I'm going to mention COVID again - we always used to describe Arc as an organisation that worked from its building and imagine the day when we didn't have a building, would the organisation still have a purpose, could it still survive? And obviously it came to pass that we had to test that, and it did survive, and it was needed and communities still wanted what we were offering, which is ultimately for me the test of sustainability in the broader sense.

GAVIN BARLOW: In terms of just being a set of relationships, I'm also thinking that there is value in the buildings. Organisations can change and disappear and that's OK, because actually you've still got those relationships out of which things can develop and there's a legacy. It's not survival at all costs, but there is also something about the building as a place that people can go to. I feel like if an organisation fails you would want those relationships to be able to revitalise what that building did. The buildings are important as well.

ANNABEL TURPIN: Certainly. They're critical. What I learned the other side of COVID was actually, yes, we can survive, but we need the building to meet the needs of the people that we're working with because actually that desire to connect in person is there. Let's face it, there was lots of talk during COVID about audiences not coming back and that's been proved fundamentally wrong. They have wanted to come back, which actually underlines the value of the building and the critical nature of having a physical space that people can come to. That's been an interesting learning curve. Not sure I would have designed a global pandemic to test the point, but it was useful learning, nonetheless.

Co-leadership

MARK ROBINSON: Part of your approach to developing sustainability as an individual and a collective thing has been Future Art Centres. You were both involved in bringing that first group together and obviously you co-lead it at the moment and have done for a while. What have you learned about trying to achieve sustainability by doing this together as co-leaders of Future Arts Centres rather than picking one of you to be in charge?

ANNABEL TURPIN: Fundamentally, it's easier to do it if you're not on your own, and that's probably the mantra for the whole of Future Arts Centres and goes right back to the beginning when it was just a group of peers that were supporting each other. That's essentially what Future Art Centres is - a peer support network. No one's got all the answers. It's very hard, it can be very lonely place being sandwiched between a board and a staff team. So I think it does come down to that working together, that collective wisdom, I suppose, and it's the same for Future Arts Centres as an organisation having two of us leading it. First of all, there's some diversity of thought, though increasingly less as we spend more time together, maybe. We might have to address that at some point, but it is being

able to ebb and flow a little bit around energy and interest and ideas. We bring different things to it. It's just easier to do with someone else.

GAVIN BARLOW: Yeah, I think that's true. It's so difficult to talk about co-leadership because it's so dependent on the actual people and how they can work together. Obviously it can be impossible in certain situations. I think there is something around that ebb and flow, and obviously because we're doing other things and have been running other organisations, sometimes the leader has to put their organisation first. But actually it makes sense - if you're doing different things you need that space for the ebb and flow.

It is interesting when you see us pitching things to each other, bringing our own different passions or ambitions into the space and it's always an interesting and rich process to take that through to an outcome. I think if you're working together effectively there is something about coming up with something you know you'd never have been able to do by yourself, in terms of that process of thinking together and having someone to bounce off.

MARK ROBINSON: So it's an almost a little mini ecology between the two of you? Ebb and flow is for me is a really important thing when we think about sustainability - it's never static. Maybe the opposite of sustainability in many arts centres – or anywhere - isn't necessarily bankruptcy or closure. It might be burnout, which is too much use of energy.

In a way you've got that within the leadership as well because you've obviously been working together for a long time now as well and so far as the naked eye can see, the relationship is sustainable, as co-leaders anyway.

ANNABEL TURPIN: Yes, it is. I think there's something about energy as well. To have sustainability in any organisation you've got to have the energy and the passion. We all know it's not easy running these kinds of organisations. I think there's something about the ebb and flow of energy that actually for this really helps again.

MARK ROBINSON: So tell me, what are the key things you've learnt from your careers about cultural leadership that have helped you sustain that energy and passion while making a difference to the places you've worked?

GAVIN BARLOW: Seeing that difference in real time you're helping make in places, and in people, even in small ways, is probably the key thing that sustains that energy and passion. Energy and passion are infectious, so there might be an obvious ebb and flow, but other people will have it, and you'll get it back from others.

ANNABEL TURPIN: I've learnt so much! You get back what you put in, so if you bring energy and passion to what you do, you will get that back. Being close to the 'coal face' helps, seeing the impact first hand as Gavin says. Also, you're not on your own – that's the purpose of Future Arts Centres – and we're all learning, all of the time. It is about confidence more than anything else, whether it's real or faked confidence.

MARK ROBINSON: Is there anything that either of you want to add about why the sustainability of arts centres matters? Some visual arts or theatres leaders might say they were more concerned about art galleries and theatres – “proper” art galleries and theatres - than they are about local arts centres. What would you say to that?

ANNABEL TURPIN: I think it's about an ecology, but I think there's something powerful about the entry points that the arts centres have, again for all sorts of people as artists, as audiences, as participants. So lots of people will have their first experience in an arts centre perhaps, and that feels really important. So the multiple doors that arts centres have, the multiple points of entry, however you want to describe it, is slightly different to an art gallery where there might be two or three doors that that people can come through, and for me that's a really important part of that bigger ecology.

GAVIN BARLOW: I think that's it absolutely. It's not arts centres versus art gallery, is it, but it is about an ecology and it's hard to see how there's a successful one without organisations like arts centres. It goes back to that 1970s book, doesn't it? "Every Town Should Have One"⁹. You see that policy now in Ireland, where they are suggesting every population of a certain level should have an arts centre accessible within it¹⁰. We see the potential and power of that, as part of viable and sustainable social infrastructure. That's really important to the successful development of the country and society and communities.

First experiences

MARK ROBINSON: Building on that point about ways into the arts, I'm interested to end back at the beginning. What was your first contact with what you would now frame as an arts centre, even if you might not have called it that?

For me the student union at University in Liverpool in the 80s was a kind of arts centre. You had theatre, music, film. You had poetry readings, bars, political meetings. You could get your haircut. I'm not sure I know what else. In a sense that was the place that helped me make best use of the Everyman¹¹, say, as a cultural hub, not just a place to see theatre. So where did you start?

ANNABEL TURPIN: It's interesting because I don't think I'd have ended up working in arts centres if I hadn't worked in the students union when I was at university, which is where I got my events experience that then helped me get a job. The thing that first excited me about arts centres, working in them, was the mix of audience. I started at Warwick Arts Centre watching an international classical music audience mix with people who just watched Nigel Charnock in the studio. It was that mix of audiences I was really excited by.

GAVIN BARLOW: I don't think there were any arts centres in Manchester when I was growing up! This is how old I am - that started off when I was at university. When I came back to Manchester, a little bit lost, The Green Room was somewhere I immediately gravitated to and started volunteering because I was unemployed and got a job there. So it immediately became a place I could be at home as a young person, adrift in the city, and find a tribe a little bit, but also a meeting place of different communities, as you say. I don't know, just a world of possibilities. Personally in a wider sense it's almost like it's a safe haven, but one that has this potential of a world of excitement and new creative possibilities. It goes back to that building thing. It's something about that safety of feeling at home, but also a kind of ambition and excitement and possibility.

ANNABEL TURPIN: That's really interesting, that even for someone like you, with the education you had, when you went back to Manchester, which obviously didn't have as many cultural assets as it does now, but even with all the richness of the cultural sector in

Manchester, where you found your entry point was in the thing that was closest to being an arts centre.

GAVIN BARLOW: It's interesting to reflect on that because I haven't really thought about that. There was something about being a queer young person as well in that space. There was a big gay scene, but that was alcohol and drugs and one where you are a kind of a commodity within a system. This was the only place I could see that was open and friendly and safe and welcoming - somewhere I could be my authentic self essentially. And, you know, in 1988, in Manchester, I don't think there was any anywhere else I could say that was the case.

MARK ROBINSON: Does it tell us anything about what makes an arts centre sustainable, or about the challenges of sustainability, that The Green Room closed in 2012 after Arts Council England chose not to include it in the first set of National Portfolio organisations and alternative funding could not be sourced? Having closed an organisation under similar circumstances myself (AV Festival) I do think "sustainable on what terms?" is always a vital question.

GAVIN BARLOW: Well I wasn't close to the Green Room in later years so I'm not sure I can judge, but it was around for nearly 30 years, which is success in many ways. I have a sense that it had maybe not adapted to change in the ways it needed to. Perhaps it does say something about over-reliance on one funder though. Losing that Arts Council funding resulted in closure, so always having multiple income streams and a range of stakeholders and supporters is likely to be a much more sustainable position.

Mark Robinson, Thinking Practice
www.thinkingpractice.co.uk
mark.robinson@thinkingpractice.co.uk

THINKING
PRACTICE

¹ Investment Principles Support organisations are part of Arts Council England's National Portfolio of regularly -funded organisations. They work with other cultural organisations to support their delivery of Arts Council England's four "investment principles": Ambition and Quality; Dynamism; Environmentalism, and Inclusivity and Relevance.

<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/lets-create/strategy-2020-2030/investment-principles/investment-principles-resource-hub>
² Foster, K. (2022). *Arts and Cultural Leadership: Creating Sustainable Arts Organizations* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003263654>

³ Future Arts Centres: <https://futureartscentres.org.uk/>

⁴ Heart of Glass and Battersea Arts Centre (2021). *Considering Co-Creation*. Arts Council England.
<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/research-and-data/considering-co-creation>

⁵ The Audience Agency and Centre for Cultural Value.(2023). *Everyday Creativity*. Arts Council England.
<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/developing-creativity-and-culture/communities-and-engagement/everyday-creativity>

⁶ 64 Million Artists with Arts Council England (2018). *Cultural Democracy in Practice*. Arts Council England
<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/cultural-democracy-practice>

⁷ Arts Council England, Let's Create <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/lets-create>

⁸ A national project in 2025 to mark the 80th anniversary of VJ Day and the end of World War 2:
<https://futureartscentres.org.uk/what-we-do/public-projects/our-freedom/>

⁹ Lane, J (1978) *Arts Centres: Every Town Should Have One*, Elek

¹⁰ Arts Council Ireland, undated. *Place, Space and People, A new Arts Council policy framework for socio-spatial equity in the arts.*https://artscouncil.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/AC_Spatial_Policy_English_Final_Web.pdf

¹¹ The Everyman Theatre, Liverpool – a theatre founded in 1964 which has been through several organisational and structural iterations. It had a long-running bistro/bar, where Mark Robinson first encountered hummus.