

From Them to Us: Sifting for Gold

Arnolfini, Bristol

Arnolfini is at the beginning of a story of change, on a mission to create a more democratic contemporary arts organisation, a place of creative expression for worldclass artists alongside the people of Bristol.

As incoming CEO in 2014, Kate Brindley asked her storming-forming team how they could achieve this. She has a track record in boosting the popularity of museums and galleries and placing them at their heart of their community. She brought Middlesborough's mima to the world's attention, gave Banksy the run of Bristol Museum and Galleries, and solidified Wolverhampton Art Gallery as a beloved city landmark through audience-focused engagement.

In this brief interview, Kate describes the vision and the process Arnolfini is embarked on.

A human space

What does "audience-focus" mean in an organisation which is intended as a "*powerhouse of experimentation and artistic excellence at the heart of Bristol's rich cultural identity*"? To Kate Brindley, there's no contradiction: "*the sector has made contemporary art an elite pursuit*" it doesn't have to be.

Her task is to create a throughline from Arnolfini's beginnings in 1961 - with its fine purpose:

to create a place where all the contemporary arts could coexist and interact in order to stimulate creativity, to provoke thought and to give pleasure to a wide range of people.

To a future which engages the people of Bristol in newly relevant ways. She is asking the team at Arnolfini to:

"grapple with the question: how do we articulate that purpose in the 21st century? How do we create opportunities for artistic expression, how do we invite the public to have their say and express themselves in an impactful way?"

Contemporary visual arts may not necessarily be "for everyone", but Kate believes that means that the organisation needs to reach out strenuously to the "*curious and interested*" in an inclusive way. What is important is to create a democratic space, a democratic invitation. "*I want to make contemporary art human again*".

The galvanising idea here is "freedom". In many ways, Arnolfini has fewer barriers than most cultural institutions: a central visible location, accessible building, free entry. Kate believes these are more than random features, they are major benefits which needs to be amplified and built upon.

“Being free is central to our purpose. Anyone can walk in. We need to link that idea with free thinking, independence of mind, and freedom of expression”.

That means addressing the hidden barriers - unfamiliarity with the conventions and language of contemporary art, a sense of being an outsider without the requisite critical faculties. Kate is asking everyone in the team what they can do to address those barriers. The answers are increasingly reflected in simple, audience-focused ways: the open access reading room, helpful welcoming staff, feedback mechanisms, all-comer café, straight-forward comms - all without undermining the pleasingly industrial beauty of the spaces. But obviously these ideas need to come alive in more than cosmetic ways:

“This is not a space where work is only presented and consumed. It’s part of our heritage that we are an educational charity, and we want to focus on opportunities for self-expression that empower the individual.”

That means offering a lot of choice in the channels by which people can do that, and Kate feels strongly that the gallery is only one place of engagement. Partnerships, public realm and a ubiquitous education programme will increasingly form part of the Arnolfini offer.

Organisational change

To bring about this transformation, Kate has reshaped the organisation.

“Our structures were all about serving the programme. The new SMT is lined up in a different way, with senior posts for both Programme & Audiences, bringing together the yin and yang, giving them equal status. We’ve mixed up the new team - some people bringing organisational memory, others new perspectives. I wanted to create an interdisciplinary team that could work together in a collaborative way.”

It was important that the new direction was developed collectively, incorporating ideas from across the new team.

“You can’t underestimate how long it can take to do this meaningfully. It was a new approach for our Board - and they found this a bit of surprise - they were quite impatient in the first place, wanting instant dividends for their investment in change. But people are inspired by what they see and hear, by authenticity and truthfulness. A year on, everyone started to see the results.”

As she says, you have to live the changes

“Once you’ve let people have their say - you really have to let them do it. You have to give people room and headspace to make their ideas work, while managing the risk. You have to know when to intervene and when not: it’s a difficult one. Letting go of control is still a challenge - experience teaches you the importance of trust, but I still get it wrong!”

This demonstrates Kate's people-centred leadership approach, which acknowledges that everyone is different. There are strong similarities here with the approach of many of the people interviewed in this series.

"There's no formula. It's an approach based on listening, and creating a space, a bespoke response. At Arnolfini, there's been a burning platform which focuses the mind, but that's no excuse for not making the time to take people with you. There was a lot of passion among the team, but also a lot of baggage. I felt I was sifting for gold. Given time and encouragement, some people step up and shine"

Staying at the sharp end

Another similarity is that the way she treats her staff as individuals mirrors how she believes cultural organisations should engage audiences. I asked her what transforming experiences or insights had led her to place audiences at the forefront of thinking?

"It's a lifelong philosophy. I was once a teacher, a formative experience that taught me how important it is to stay close to your audience. I've always worked at the sharp end. It's very easy for a CEO to get divorced from the public. I deliberately keep in touch, I like to do an FOH shift sometimes to keep it real.

"It was a positive choice for me to build my career in the public sector, to do with my personal values. I am driven by a desire to create public value and meaningful human experiences. This is much more important to me than being a curator per se."

Kate also asks all her staff to see audience impact as a key priority in their work.

I was interested in the ways the team stay at the "sharp end", how they get into the shoes of their audiences. Kate explained the importance of her wide and diverse network *"to be your mirror"* and offer that wider range of outsider perspectives. The gallery also hosts a bi-monthly open meeting framed around a particular topic, and bringing together people from different spheres: business people with cultural professionals, 3rd sector leaders, teachers, insiders alongside outsiders.

In the past, she has also worked with a peer network of critical friends to help triangulate the insider/outsider views. She has plans to develop something more ambitious along these lines at Arnolfini. Whether the platform is formal or not, she says *"you have to hear these voices in a genuine and meaningful way"*.

Playing a leading role in the city and in many partnerships is another sign of a more extrovert emerging culture. *"Being part of Bristol is in our DNA: we couldn't just exist anywhere. So we have to ask ourselves, what does that mean for our behaviour, programming and relationships? We have to understand ourselves as having a key role in the creative ecosystem.*

Just recently we had to turn down a national partner as it could have damaged a Bristol relationship.

The fierce urgency of incremental change

Developing that position in the ecosystem “*where we can really add value*” is just part of the change that Arnolfini is undergoing. Kate is a supporter of Obama’s views on the importance of incremental change. Reorientation won’t happen overnight, “*once you’ve introduced a way of working, once the organisation is committed, you have stay with it. It’s a long journey, of iterations and adaptations. I learnt this doing the Not For The Likes of You programme and working on Our Museum: small changes add up*”.

The rewards are multiple, she believes. Over time, audience-focus creates cultural-creative, social and financial value in a virtuous circle. An authentic, listening engagement process builds trust and confidence, which generates good ideas and commitment from staff, interesting high profile creative partnerships, relevant programming. In turn these have the power to build public popularity and drive revenue. She mentions the example of Arnolfini’s Richard Long retrospective, the artist’s association with Bristol engaged wide local audiences alongside national ones, captured the sector’s interest, and generated not just secondary spend but long-standing loyalty. She quotes fellow museum director Nina Simon on the way in which the Santa Cruz MAH created social value through community-building and in doing so, massively increased their finances and standing in the industry.

Audience-focused leadership?

So, is there a distinctive form of leadership that is more audience-friendly?

“Probably but you can’t force it: it’s not political or cynical, it has to be rooted in your value system, to come from where your passion lies. I think these kind of leaders are motivated by making a difference to society. If there are hallmarks, I guess they would be: humanity, listening, adaptability, inclusivity. We’re looking for the answers but not in the usual places, and in an open-ended way. And we really want to take everyone with us: if you have a passionate sense of agency, you can’t NOT change things”.

As with other interviewees, audiences lie at the heart of **purpose** - in this case personal and corporate. Bristol as a **place** is part of the organisation’s DNA, while Kate’s approach to **people** as diverse individuals in and outside the organisation is again the defining aspect of her leadership.