



Cultured Conversations



Cultured Conversations is a digital series produced by Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Exploring issues and ideas from the cultural sector in Aotearoa New Zealand, this series is hosted by Gallery Director, Kirsten Lacy, and invites exceptional leaders from arts, philanthropy, economics and politics to discuss topical issues facing the sector today.

In this episode, Nick Hill, Chief Executive of Auckland Unlimited, joins Kirsten Lacy to talk about the opportunities for art and culture in Tāmaki Makaurau, as well as Nick's own special interest in the arts.

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Kirsten Lacy:

Kia ora, and welcome to *Cultured Conversations*. I'm Kirsten Lacy, Director, Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery. We're filming for the first time in this magnificent atrium of our gallery. We're open to our public and you may see and hear evidence of people coming through as we converse today. It might be a little bit distracting for us but I'm delighted that the doors are open and wanted to share this feeling, knowing that many institutions and communities remain shut down worldwide.

In our Gallery and world, the cultural life of this city, a significant merger has taken place between the economic development and tourism agency of Tāmaki and the arts culture and visitor destination agency. The new entity, Auckland Unlimited, became real on the first of December, two weeks ago, and I want to explore that. I'm so excited, grateful, to welcome the newly appointed CEO, Nick Hill.

Nick, firstly, congratulations on your appointment. I wondered if we might start off with a quick precis of the new organisation.

Nick Hill:

Mōrena, Kirsten. Thank you. So, Auckland Unlimited is a wholly-owned subsidiary company of Auckland Council, and that gives it an ability to do a whole lot of things at arm's length from the Council. This new merger brings together the cultural and economic activities that the city owns and it's going to provide us with an opportunity, after ten years, to really use culture as a way of driving activity and bringing people together and telling the story of Auckland. With telling the story and creating a cultural platform for Aucklanders, we can drive visitation, attract investment, track talent and ideas to Auckland.

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KL:

There are a lot of synergies across all the different moving parts but it's complex as well. I've heard you describe your job as being the best job not just in Aotearoa but in the world. Why is that, Nick?

NH:

On a personal level, it brings together things I'm really passionate about and which I've spent my life working on. I grew up with music and art and sport; they were my passions. And then I've worked in government and I've worked in the private sector. I'm a bit of a geek when it comes to public policy. I love Auckland. Auckland is where all of New Zealand and Aotearoa's future prosperity and success really depends. New Zealand is poised globally in terms of where we sit from an environmental, cultural, political point of view. I think I sit in this really unique, exciting place in time.

KL:

We'll touch on the national leadership agenda in our conversation today, but before we get there I wanted to first get to your migration. We're both migrants to Aotearoa: me much more recently, having come with my two boys at not a dissimilar age to the age you were when you arrived with your family from South Africa. In terms of shaping placemaking, migrants really bring a lot with them. I'm curious to know if, in coming from South Africa, there is anything that stays with you in terms of your family's cultural heritage, from the place you grew up, as you think about placemaking today.

NH:

My family were and are hugely influential for me. My parents were rebellious – they fought against apartheid in South Africa. We lived elsewhere in the world and eventually decided they'd bring us to New Zealand, which was the other side of the world. We came by ship, pulled up in Princes Wharf. I remember driving down to Hamilton, thinking that the green in New Zealand is fluorescent. When you come from South Africa, it's very brown and grey.

So their political beliefs and their commitment to their children is what I came to New Zealand with, and they literally left South Africa with all that we had on the ship. We had nothing else. You could take no money. My father was a doctor and we arrived in Hamilton to a job on the other side of the world, but we didn't know what we were coming to. That willingness to take risk, that willingness to do it for strong beliefs, moral and political, and that commitment to give their children a better life, means you come to a country with a view of it that's slightly different from people who grow up here.

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I can remember the cultural shock of arriving at Melville High School in Hamilton after having been to a privileged white boys' school in South Africa, where we dressed for dinner, and learning to cope with all of that; being called a white racist and various other things, which couldn't have been further from the truth. So when you ask what does it mean for placemaking, I think that's one of the profoundly important things about Tāmaki – that it's incredibly culturally diverse. Most people have stories to tell, even going back to mana whenua – those stories help to create the fabric and the culture of a place. We all bring our own bits of that. You're doing that right now.

KL:

It's interesting you began your answer noting the difference in flora and the colour, which is also about light, right? Not having ever been to South Africa, I can only imagine how distinctly different it might be. I know you spend most days walking the harbour and enjoying many of the opportunities that our islands represent for Auckland in placemaking. What is it about Auckland, Tāmaki, and its cultural life that really ignites and excites you?

NH:

It's interesting you talk about the light; for me, I think back to South Africa and it's the sounds and the smells as much as anything. I remember going to sleep at night. It usually would rain at about five o'clock and everything would freshen up. It would go dark and then we'd hear Africans singing to keep the Tokoloshe away. That visceral—

KL:

What's the Tokoloshe, sorry?

NH:

It's a little creature that's about two feet high and kind of like a little devil that comes and gets you at night. Maybe a little bit like a taniwha. The Africans in South Africa build their beds up with bricks so that they're about four feet off the ground, because that way the Tokoloshe can't reach them. It's that sort of cultural, visceral experience that for me really binds you to a place – those stories become real.

You asked me about this place. I think the physical place of Tāmaki – with the three harbours, the maunga, the bush and the forests – is incredibly powerful, but so is the mana whenua, and the stories of the various cultural and ethnic groups that now live here help to shape what that all means. The walking

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around the harbour – I mean, the water’s amazing, the way the light plays on it. It’s always different. In fact, there’s a spot: almost every time I go for a walk, I take up my camera and take the same picture, and I haven’t yet gone back and played them all back because every time it’s different. It’s that sort of richness that attracts me.

KL:

It’s interesting hearing you talk about the sounds of Africa and the sounds of our bush, which is so alive with birdsong. We don’t have a lot of mammals but there’s a lot of birdlife here.

NH:

Less than there used to be. It needs to come back.

KL:

Yes, which is part of the conservation work, which we’ll be leading with our friends at the Auckland Zoo. I think a lot of people would be interested to know just how much music is in your life. You’ve shared with me some musicians you’re passionate about, and you’re a guitarist as well . . .

NH:

Well, I wouldn’t call myself that. That sounds grand . . .

KL:

But why is it that music is so important to you and the cultural life of the city?

NH:

It goes back to the arts and, for me, music is probably the one that speaks to me most, giving me a connection and a truth that goes beyond the intellectual understanding of the world we live in. I’ve always found it a great escape. I find playing takes you to a place that’s much more peaceful and insightful, and my music tastes are incredibly broad. I grew up with classical: Beethoven’s Violin Concerto used to be on a lot at home, and I learnt the violin. I used to cart it off to school and would get made fun of because it wasn’t the instrument you would play. But I’ve always loved Beethoven. I’ve always loved classical music but then I became involved in a blues band. I love Black music; in particular, I love African music and mbaqanga from the townships and Fela Kuti and King Sunny Adé and now, these days, hip hop and RnB, they all speak to me the same way.

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KL:

It would be fair, perhaps, to describe you also as a Sunday painter, a hobby painter perhaps – a new passion. Arts in daily life, it's a huge part of our wellbeing. You've touched on that. Where does that sit within Auckland Unlimited? How do you imagine communities engaging with culture in Tāmaki?

NH:

Well, what you're doing with the Gallery, Kirsten, is amazing: *Toi Tū Toi Ora*, turning over the whole Gallery to contemporary modern Māori art, is a fantastic step. Bringing people in to be here for the blessing, with 300 mana whenua, on the Friday morning at five o'clock, walking through and blessing it, and then seeing the people who came through. I came through on my own on the Sunday to see the exhibition, and the people there; my guess is that a number of those people wouldn't have been there otherwise.

So how do we create these institutions to be much more a part of the city, not something that everyone goes, 'That's a beautiful building?' We're very proud of the Gallery but people don't go. It's got to be much more engaged. It's got to be part of who we are and people need to feel that it's part of who they are. For Auckland Unlimited, our job is to create the platform – to do that more successfully, more boldly, take more risks. But it's the same for the museums, it's the same for the APO, it's the same for theatre, it's the same for the Zoo. You mentioned the Zoo. People go to see the baby hippopotamus but they leave talking about conservation in Tāmaki Makaurau. That's our job as Auckland Unlimited; to sit in the background and create the institutional platform and background that allows you to be much more risk-taking and bold and visible.

KL:

Is Auckland Unlimited, under your leadership, going to lead the cultural agenda for Tāmaki, and how would you define what the cultural agenda might be?

NH:

For me, the time has come around when we need to elevate the way policy-makers and decision-makers understand the role of the cultural sector in the city and this country. It's not something that's just added on after we've paid for the roads and the rubbish and putting pipes in the ground; but there is a tendency to do that, particularly when we're financially stretched, as we are. I think the role the cultural sector plays is pretty fundamental in terms of building social cohesion, binding together what is a very diverse city geographically, economically, socially, culturally, ethnically – that's a huge strength. But it also could be a huge weakness.

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For the cultural sector, our job is to have Aucklanders proud; all Aucklanders really proud of where we are and where we live. That's a role that the cultural sector can play. And what do we do to promote that? I think there's some pretty boring behind-the-scenes policy-type things that we need to be involved in. We need to get the institutional structures more incentivised, to think about how we do stuff for the future, the quality of governance, how we improve funding, understanding what ratepayers should pay for, what the Crown should pay for, and the role we play in Aotearoa, in the South Pacific. Coming back to the Gallery: this is a gallery that is leading in the South Pacific. That's how we need to think about it. We need to occupy that space by being bold and taking risks.

KL:

The diversity in the City is something you've touched on. We know from the demographic data that it's only going to become more diverse, yet so many of our institutions – and I include my own in that – don't reflect that in their structure, the horizontal and vertical structures. How will you tackle that as a CEO?

NH:

I think my record's reasonably good in terms of recognising the importance of diversity of all kinds, but I do think that as we look to set up Auckland Unlimited, it's going to be a bicultural organisation, I think we have an opportunity to put that front and centre as we design the organisation. What does that really mean? I think there's been a lot of lip service and a lot of genuine intent, but it's very hard in a complex world to give effect to that. So I think we have the chance right at the outset; we build that into the foundations of the way we're set up. I'm not entirely sure where that will take us. In fact, it feels slightly risky. But I don't think we have a choice. The time has come when that needs to be who we are.

KL:

Circling back to the beginning of our conversation – you said Auckland is a kind of economic gateway and, I'll put words that it now, perhaps also the cultural capital of New Zealand, potentially. What are the national agendas that our organisation might lead on? And I don't just mean in the cultural space; I mean right across the portfolio of economic development, culture and the arts.

NH:

It's a pretty fundamental question. By the way, I don't think about it as cultural capital. I think you play the role you play and you lead – whatever that might be, someone else can give it a name. When we say cultural capital it looks like we're trying to compete with the rest of New Zealand; I don't really care about that.

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In terms of the agenda for Auckland, from an economic point of view, I think we struggle with the rest of New Zealand understanding who and what we are, the role we play. People are scared of Auckland and that plays out in lots of ways. They don't come here; they don't direct here. They resent us and more so since Covid. It plays out at a policy level in Wellington, so we've had successive governments that are not prepared to back and support Auckland and the growth it needs. It's capital constrained. More importantly, the structure of our economy is one that is much more geared towards the weightless economy; the creative industries – we've seen it with the development of film and gaming and some of those tech industries. New Zealand needs Auckland to be good at that. We are at the global connector. We can use our multicultural, bicultural, incredible diversity as a real strength. We are New Zealand's only global city and increasingly moving into that space, but we're teenagers at the moment. This is a bit cute but the cones around the place are like pimples – we're struggling to burst out of where we're at.

I think James K. Baxter wrote a poem called 'The Fear of Change', talking about how New Zealanders will desire to keep everything safe and not deal with the really hard, big issues; how we're not good with emotion so we're not good with the big, passionate things. In that poem, he writes about a revolution among artists and fighters, and finishes it by saying that New Zealanders will basically argue over whether the corpses were wearing red or black; that we don't engage enough in the big, emotional, ideological issues. We like things to be middle and safe. Auckland Unlimited has a role to challenge some of that for Auckland and for New Zealand.

KL:

I just want to ask you one more question, about your mother, before we wind up. I'm curious – if she were here listening to this conversation and giving you advice about how you would step forward into this really significant role for Tāmaki that's obviously going to have a huge influence, what might she say?

NH:

My mother was an incredibly powerful influence on me. She was very intelligent, very selfless, very kind, but incredibly courageous. She was chair of the Black Sash in Natal, which was a woman's movement that would protest against the impact of apartheid on Blacks. But she was a mother and she devoted herself to other people and other causes. I think her advice was always one of service and integrity in terms of your being true to your morals and your beliefs, not materialistic at all. I never quite lived up to any of those things but certainly that would be her advice – that your service in terms of personal values is the most important thing.

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KL:

In my role as the Director at Auckland Art Gallery, I lead my team very much to be in the service of the community and the broad public. In your role attracting business enterprise, investment in the city, as well as spanning the space of civic engagement and council function, who is it that you work for? I ask that question in the context of a city council that's cash-constrained; there's possibly not enough taxes to move us out of adolescence. You get a sense of that as you walk through the city. How do you understand who it is that you're employed for?

NH:

We've been talking about what's good for Auckland. And that resonated with people. What does that really mean? I think it's about the current generation of people but it's also about future generations. At a practical level, I think where that takes you is to what young people are saying is really important. The councillors are in service to them. I think if we locate our moral compass around what is good for Auckland, how young people see that today, I think that's a pretty good compass.

KL:

You're very much a CEO who lives and thinks in the moment but your answer touches on a horizon line in terms of that question, doesn't it: are we for stakeholders today or what is the horizon line in terms of the service that we're providing to community?

NH:

I feel a bit tired to answer that question! You're balancing all of those things. A lot of my job is actually in the real, in the moment right now; trying to keep the challenges away from people so they can get on and do their jobs. In the political world, there are a lot of competing pressures and wants and needs. I see my job as essentially trying to create the space and clarity around the purpose to allow people to then go and do it. I see that my job is to help you to lead this amazing Gallery that is a beacon in the South Pacific and points to Asia and the rest of the world.

What does that mean today? What does it mean tomorrow? It probably means heading up to the finance and performance committee and answering a whole lot of questions that they need to ask and making sure that hygiene is maintained so that at the end of day, really important things can happen.

KL:

Thank you so much for joining me today, Nick.

You've been listening to *Cultured Conversations*. My name is Kirsten Lacy. I'm the Director of Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery. You can contribute to the conversation online – let us know what you think. We'd love to hear from you at www.aucklandartgallery.com.