



# Cultured Conversations



**Cultured Conversations is a digital series that delves into the value of the arts and importance of visionary leadership in this time of global uncertainty. In each edition, Gallery Director Kirsten Paisley is joined by a guest whose thoughtful conversation offers listeners motivation, resolution and solace.**

**In this episode Kirsten Paisley talks to CEO of Heart of the City, Viv Beck.**

**Kirsten Paisley:**

Kia ora and welcome to Cultured Conversations. I'm Kirsten Paisley, Director, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Today, we're going to talk about the heart of the CBD, here in Auckland, the place where Auckland Art Gallery resides and has lived, breathed and loved art with audiences for 130 years. I'm joined today by Viv Beck, CEO of Heart of the City, director of many boards and she also held at one time the Acting Director position of the Auckland Art Gallery. Welcome, Viv – it's great to have you here.

**Viv Beck:**

Well, thank you very much. Kia ora.

**KP:**

So Viv, we've been talking a little bit about the role of the Gallery in the CBD, and the changing of the CBD, which has been so impacted by Covid. If you think about Covid impacts, we can almost taste them, here in the heart of the city, in Auckland. Tell us about what's happened.

**VB:**

Absolutely we can. Just three or four months ago, we were talking about growth. We were talking about the unveiling of the first major redevelopment that's been hidden behind all those orange cones. We had 50 events, a lot of them arts and cultural, lined up over the next three months. Then we hit Covid and it's really tipped things upside down, to a certain extent. It's revealed some really interesting things. What we had been seeing was a city that was growing tremendously across all fronts, in terms of people living in the city, working, studying and visiting. The growth trajectory was absolutely skyrocketing. There was a lot of investment and we were seeing the effects of that – it was all very buoyant. We were seeing a changing population, so a really diverse group of people here. And the mix of things that were bringing people into the city centre was arts and cultural events, events generally, attractions, dining, retail, entertainment – they were all bringing people here and we were on a really rosy path. What has happened through this time is quite fundamental.

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It's been terribly distressing in many ways to see things come to, if not a grinding halt, start slowing down as the first border controls came on. It really was a perfect storm, in terms of loss of international tourists, loss of international students, large-scale events, and people starting to work from home. The impact was massive on our businesses, and on the life and soul of the city centre, as it did come to a halt, really, in March.

But through that time, we've seen some really interesting and insightful things, too. We had noticed the growth of an urban community – we might perhaps come back to that – but we had certainly started to feel it. I've spoken to you before about Late Night Art last year; Art Week in October and Late Night Art, which we work with the Auckland Art Gallery on, have really grown from strength to strength. Last year, as we walked around that night, we could really feel that sense of an urban community, right up till two minutes to nine, when it was about to close, we could see people lining up to see those exhibitions. It was absolutely fabulous. But what we've seen through this time is that ongoing sense of community. Clearly, we had a lot of people move out to their homes so they weren't here. There were a lot fewer people here. The role we tried to play through that time was just continuing to connect. People obviously couldn't buy anything, other than groceries and essential goods, but it was really important to keep that sense of community and connection with the city centre alive, and that role changed as we went through the alert levels. I think we could also see as we come out the other side, how important that vibrancy is and the potential for the arts and cultural offering to play a significant role in the recovery period.

**KP:**

In terms of the economic impact of the lockdown, do you have numbers around that that you can share, about what was lost there? What was the hit?

**VB:**

Well, as I said, it was a perfect storm for us, with basically all of our major sources of customers drying up. Through that lockdown period, it was over 90 per cent down on the same time last year. You could literally see the graph go down and remain through the lockdown at a very low level. It was varied across different businesses but it was basically 90 per cent down. Then we've seen it come up the other side, and as we went through each level it just got a little bit better – it's sitting now at 20 to 30 per cent down. Some areas are stronger than others but on average it's still about 20 to 30 per cent down. Of course, we haven't got the students back, nor the international tourists. We're obviously very focused on recovery and how we support our businesses through this time, and how we make sure the economic recovery is as good as it can be, with things like domestic tourists, events, the whole 'build local' – all the things that we've been talking about are really important.

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**KP:**

We've noticed at the gallery an enormous visitation change. The weekends are what they were – we're just as busy if not a bit busier than we were on the weekends last year at this time. But the weekdays are a different story. Now, in a school-holiday period, the visitation rates are much starker. It's much busier in a holiday period, compared to the normal working week, which I guess reflects the fact that the visitors to the CBD are residents of Auckland and surrounds. During this time, there was a lot of conversation about changing working methods as well, and we were encouraging businesses to embrace much more flexible workforces – that you could work from home; proving that to ourselves during the period that we've been out of the CBD. But what's the long-term impact or position that you would have about the work-from-home phenomenon? Which is growing, alongside the four-day week and other things like that.

**VB:**

It's a bit early to tell exactly, but I'd have to say: isn't it great to be back? That event we had at the Auckland Art Gallery recently, that breakfast event – you must have noticed standing up there, talking to that group of people, just how thrilled they were to be there and actually be able to talk to people. There's nothing quite like it. Having said that, we've got to be realistic about that huge social shock – social, health and economic shock, something we'll never see again in our lifetime. But what it showed is that people could do a lot of things remotely. Clearly, some couldn't, so that was particularly challenging. But in terms of businesses that could operate using technology, they did it, and I think there will be some enduring flexibility from that. Having said that, we're certainly hoping that people will see that the reasons why people gather in a city are still relevant. The benefits of having a whole lot of things together, the diversity of the offer, having interesting things to do. When we started our careers, would we want to be at home? No, I don't think so. So the reality is there will be change and some businesses it might work well for. Interestingly, with Waikato University – the other day I heard a clip saying that they were looking to have online classes and the students actually came out, the student group came out and said, 'We don't want that.' It's early to tell but realistically there will be change. Bearing in mind we're building a city for a lot of people, we've got infrastructure that needs people and the vibrancy depends on having people. We're hoping that those benefits will prevail.

**KP:**

Do you think there'll be more of a transition or a more rapid transition to a commuter workforce, to an urban dwelling workforce? What are the kind of buildings we need to be thinking about that? Auckland needs to be investing in the CBD. There's only so much real estate there; we need to really think carefully about what we do with it. What are your thoughts about how, in fact, urban population growth might rise to the challenge of the stay-at-home workforce?

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**VB:**

Actually, residential growth was actually growing six times faster than the rest of Auckland. We've seen phenomenal growth in residence in the city centre; they're a significant group now. Depending on which statistics you look at, there are about 40,000 of them. Thirty years ago, there were about 1300—

**KP:**

It's hard to imagine. It's not that long.

**VB:**

No, it's not. I've heard people talk about the fact they could go out and virtually guarantee they'd see the same people, because they knew who was living here. It's not like that now. There are a lot of apartments being built, so we've seen a lot of growth and I think we will see the repurposing of property. But the reality is cities have survived epidemics before. We're clearly dealing with something significant here, with a global pandemic, but I think things will settle and into a place that is good. For some businesses, they may bring some change; for others, I can anticipate in time that there'd be some appeal for international businesses. I would have thought if some of our businesses move out, there might be some change that happens over time there as well. It's just going to take a little while to determine what that change is.

**KP:**

And what about major cultural infrastructure? Have we got it right yet? Is the city future-proofed, fit for purpose in terms of 50 years from now? Thinking also about the Gallery – you've lived and breathed the Auckland Art Gallery, as I do. Is it big enough? What are the cultural infrastructure projects that you think the city needs to be thinking about now, in order to meet the challenges of a growing urban population down the road?

**VB:**

In terms of the Auckland plan, which goes out to 2050 – that's envisaging a place of community and participation and identity. There's the city centre masterplan, which has got a slightly shorter time span, out to the 2030s; it's talking about a successful place of commerce, innovation, creativity – all of those great things. So we're talking about a place that's great for people, identity, heritage. All of those principles are the forward plan for Auckland.

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When you think about the infrastructure, it does need to be different, I think. We've got a masterplan that does actually give us a guidepost for investment over the coming years, but I think there's work that still needs to be done. For example, looking at it from part of the city's perspective, this in a way was a conversation when we were thinking international tourists, but at some stage in the future we will be there again – in the meantime, we're talking about what to do for New Zealand. We do need some great attractions that draw people to a place like this. It needs to keep developing and inspiring people to want to come here. What are the needs of the future generation, really, not just what we might like? All of those conversations about stadia and entertainment centres and cultural centres need to be thinking ahead, and the work needs to start now. We're a great believer in the waterfront, which is one of our major assets, from the city centre's perspective; in terms of the physical assets, we need to be planning that now. We need to have a very long horizon and we need to be working towards that, so that we're building something that actually meets those future needs. That's really important. The same goes for our arts infrastructure.

**KP:**

Yes. One relatively well-proportioned but not enormous public gallery, for a population of this size, makes sense, but for the population 50 years from now it's not enough, right?

**VB:**

And the things people want to do will be different. Even thinking 20 years out – if you think of your teenage children, what they do now and what they will be doing in 20 years, it's quite important we have those different dimensions thought about and the diversity of the city.

**KP:**

Brand Auckland – is it a Pacific city? Is that part of our brand? How might it be reflected in the infrastructure that we're talking about? Have we got the brand right? What is it and where is it going?

**VB:**

I think the Auckland plan and masterplan do really focus on a couple of things: one is our Māori heritage and the importance of actually bringing that to life. There are some really really strong principles around guardianship and collaboration and a welcoming place. That needs to manifest in behaviour, as well as the physical infrastructure. The other thing is we're very multicultural, so bringing to life Māori and Pacific. The fundamentals are important – I think it's a work in progress. It's really important that we keep doing that. That's one of the really good things that continues to endure through the plan: guiding the investment is really bringing that to life more.

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**KP:**

Can Auckland be a gateway to the Pacific? There's a lot of talk about borders opening up and a trans-Tasman borders but what about the Pacific? It strikes me that there's an opportunity there that perhaps might meet us ahead of Australia even.

**VB:**

It certainly seems that way, from a health perspective. We've been supportive of opening borders because we think that at the moment we've got some challenges. We're not suggesting that should be rash but the reality is, as a small country in the south pacific, on the one hand we can be very safe but we're trading nation; the flow of ideas and people is really fundamental to our development. Those relationships with the Pacific are very important, as they are with Australia. The ability for people to move between countries is important, as soon as we can feel comfortable that that can be done safely. Depending on your view of finding vaccines, we're going to have to be able to find a way to live through this.

**KP:**

In fact, to thrive. New businesses must be emerging all the time around this new environment.

**VB:**

On the one hand, we can strengthen. Some of the values that have come through really strongly through the lockdown are really important to retain and build from, and include those cultural ties, but I think we've also got to understand that we gain a lot from that interconnection, from international connection. Finding ways to bring that to life in this period will be really important. Coming back to your question about the Pacific: I know that there is some reticence there in terms of the risks but I think developing those systems at the border is really important.

**KP:**

There's a lot of work to be done there in order to reap the benefits of more exchange.

**VB:**

What do you think, by the way? What's your sense of talking about that and going back to that infrastructure point? What are you keen to see through this period ahead, if we look out not just to the immediate future?

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## KP:

I think there's an absence of civic spaces that are free and publicly accessible. I often talk about the Auckland Art Gallery; for example, you stand in the atrium of the gallery. It's one of the only free, publicly accessible, inspiring pieces of architecture standing in the city. That's not enough. It should be populated by many other opportunities for people to congregate, share ideas and to express ultimately who they are in the world today. There's an enormous amount of investment needed in public cultural spaces for people to congregate and to share and express who they are. What form that takes – well, I've got some thoughts about that, too. I think we really do have one of the nation's most significant art collections here in Auckland, and the opportunity to grow our international exhibition and contemporary exhibition offer is enormous. It makes sense to me to be talking about 'Auckland contemporary' right now and to be planning towards a major Kunsthalle-type institution as an appendage to the existing Auckland Art Gallery, or a second campus, if you like, that supports and nurtures contemporary ideas and their expression from around the world and New Zealand, being part of the Pacific. With a facility like that, we would be able to give form and voice and colour to what Auckland can be as a Pacific city, drawing on its Māori heritage. And that's a little bit about what we're doing with our programme this year, to showcase contemporary Māori art in a very fulsome way. The story of New Zealand through visual art – everyone wants to see that in New Zealand and so do tourists as well. We need enough exhibition real estate to really show the strengths of the incredible collection that Auckland has here. So I think there's a lot of room for growth, in terms of visual arts and public institutions and I really see the Auckland Art Gallery as being the centre of that potential opportunity that's on the horizon.

## VB:

Gosh, there's so many things there. Where do I start? There's so many things I can pick up there. Firstly, I do agree that beautiful, beautiful Gallery is magnificent. You stand there and it does something quite special; to just be there, with those beautiful kauri pillars. Public space is really important, I agree. What we've been excited to see is more art coming out into public spaces. We're just at the very early stages of that, I think, but public space is vital; where we start to see it come to life. Even having Lisa Reihana in the Aotea Centre. That's wonderful. You can just come in in the middle of an afternoon and there it is, it's wonderful. Having that vision around, how we bring that to life – I would even love to see more on our special streets, public art – I think there's a lot we can do. Utilising and drawing on the collections is another thing. I'm not sure if you were planning that wonderful exhibition on Māori contemporary art that opens on the fifth of December, which we're all looking forward to. I'm not sure if you were planning that anyway, you probably were . . .

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**KP:**

It was designed for the America's Cup, and for local audiences . . .

**VB:**

That's the sort of thing we have to do; and that fits so beautifully with the vision for the city, which is about bringing heritage and identity to life and telling those stories. It's integral and we have to have a collective vision, which I think is another layer that's still to be developed. We're sensing it; we've got lots of development happening. We'll be able to come in on an underground in a few years' time, get out at the arts centre and walk – that will be amazing. All of this development is really important, in terms of the building blocks for building a vibrant, beautiful, accessible, city centre. But we do have to have that vision around what else it is going to be. In some ways, what strikes me from this Covid experience – devastating as it is and will continue to be for many businesses and families across our city for some time to come – we really want to build on the ideas and thoughts that are actually going to be so important for our future. Obviously, in the near term for New Zealanders and for Aucklanders, but then as the borders open that opens up a whole window to the rest of the world.

**KP:**

Doesn't it? I wanted to talk to you, Viv, about homelessness in the CBD and what's happened through Covid and what we've learned through Covid. I know you're involved with the building of a new apartment building with Auckland City Mission, which is an incredibly inspiring project, a public-private partnership. We've got to talk about that as well, but our hoteliers have had this incredible journey through the last three months; they've moved from being a safe haven for people in isolation to being a home for people who were otherwise homeless and now, with domestic tourism opening up with September and Christmas in our window view, having to transition again to something else. We seemed to solve homelessness overnight, but what's going to happen to make sure we carry these kind of learnings forward?

**VB:**

Actually, the homelessness goes back a wee bit in time, so I think there's been an extraordinary success through Covid in terms of housing people – but there's quite an interesting story. I'll just give you a little snapshot of it. Going back probably three or four years now, there's been a wonderful relationship established between organisations like City Mission, the City Commissioner Chris Farrelly, Lifewise – it was actually Moira Lawler, but she's just recently departed – ourselves and a number of others have worked to get a collective sense of resolving the issue of people rough sleeping. We were all concerned about it and we came together. Lifewise came up with the Housing First concept, but we all got together on it and it's had public money through central government and local government support for that

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programme. It's been a wonderful story of getting in behind a solution that we all thought had value, to really provide support to a part of our community that was vulnerable and needed support, and it's been tremendously successful, that relationship. So we had some pretty solid foundations there and we've developed a work-experience programme, working with city missions – so there's been a number of years of work that have led to this.

But you're right. What happened with Covid is that there was a new attention on finding homes for the people who hadn't been housed yet; actually, a lot had been through Housing First. It's a great programme because it concentrates on the needs of the individual, not just giving them a roof. You find an appropriate home first and then make sure they've got all the support around them. It's been tremendously successful. We've also supported the James Liston Hostel groups across the city, so there is a place for people to go if they need emergency help for up to 12 weeks. That's been about an infrastructure and a wonderful relationship, and probably the best example I've seen of public-private and not-for-profit working together for a common goal, which then manifested in the result through Covid. So they're different circumstances but those relationships have been built over a period of time, which have been really valuable.

Coming now to the hotel sector, it's interesting because, as I said before, we've had so many hotels being built because we had tremendous growth in international tourism. There is a wide-ranging group meeting different needs for the future—

**KP:**

Getting a hotel room was tough, absolutely.

**VB:**

Just like that, the international tourist stream was turned off, and we've got all these hotel rooms. They have adapted and they've adapted for quarantining; they've adapted for housing people who need housing, and some of them are still operating as hotels. In a way, it's been able to provide businesses still with some revenue through a really difficult time. It's obviously had some difficulties because of the various challenges that have come about through the quarantining process. But it's at least been a mechanism for people to survive and for domestic tourists to still be able to come and stay in a hotel. In fact, that's one of the things that we're doing as part of our recovery work – promoting staycations in the city centre; come and stay in a lovely hotel, which people may not have thought was previously accessible to them. Get away from home, come to the gallery. We are very much about promoting all the things that people have previously loved about coming to the city centre, including the art gallery. It's as relevant now as it was. It's basically a pragmatic solution through a difficult time.

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**KP:**

In concluding and thinking about the 12 months ahead, what's the key take-out on the horizon line for the CBD in Auckland?

**VB:**

I think we've got to be positive about opportunity. There are some tremendous stories of businesses adapting and changing what they do, and we've really got to acknowledge that. I think we've got to do everything we can to support others in more difficult situations, where they can't easily adapt, for a variety of reasons: it could be the nature of their offering or where they're located. We've got to provide as much support as we can by bringing as many people in and giving them reasons to come in. I think we've also got to make sure that we're keeping the vibrancy alive, because that is one of the things that was so noticeable about how the city centre was developing. I think of simple examples like Vulcan Lane, a gorgeous part of the city. Pre-lockdown, you could go up there, come down in the morning, as I did every day, beautifully alive with people having breakfast and coffee and talking and interacting. You could come up at the other end of the day: beautiful musicians playing, people eating out in the street, lighting absolutely gorgeous – we've got to do everything we can to keep those places alive and do things like bringing art out into the public spaces. We've got Restaurant Month coming up in August to support all our hospitality businesses and we're bringing the city art to life through Art Week. All of those things are really, really important over the coming months, as part of recovery and retaining vibrancy.

**KP:**

Thanks so much, Viv. Not that I needed encouragement to go out tonight but I'm certainly going to hit the laneways of Auckland for a drink after our interview.

**VB:**

Look forward to seeing you!

**KP:**

Thanks so much. You've been watching Cultured Conversations. I'm Kirsten Paisley, Director, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. You can find out more about the series online and we also encourage you to use the hashtag #culturedconversations in all your dialogue about art and culture, in New Zealand and Auckland, the heart of our city.