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Cultural citizenship through museums' place-based public programmes: an evidence-based framework for cultural policy and organisations

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In line with the renewed interest in cultural citizenship (CC) and increasing appetite for participatory governance, institutional accountability and a citizen-led culture, this policy brief offers a guide for funders and cultural leaders who want to support cultural organisations in navigating their role in the current political climate and their political responsibility as democratic spaces. Based on theoretical and empirical research, the brief focuses on CC as a framework for cultural policy and management to advance our understanding of the civic role of museums, particularly through their place-based public programmes (PBPP), and the conditions that help them thrive as sites of CC. Following a review of how CC has been operationalised in policy, the brief provides insights and recommendations on how CC operates on the ground through PBPP, in order to address the disconnect between high-level (national and supranational) policies and their implementation at the hyperlocal level.

KEYWORDS

cultural citizenship, museums, public programming, citizen-led culture, participatory governance

Introduction: what is cultural citizenship and why it matters for museums today

Today, cultural institutions are under pressure to rethink their civic role in a world marked by polycrisis, polarisation and inequality. The increasing mistrust towards institutions has also produced a growing appetite for accountability, participatory governance and citizen voices (Strauss, 2022), showing that what needed questioning was not the relevance of museums but their way of connecting with communities.

At the international level, we have witnessed a rise in interest towards citizen-centred, place-based policymaking, particularly in the UK, Europe and the US (Durrer, 2023). While the mechanisms are shaped by the place-specificity of each policy context, the uniting principles underpinning this interest are supporting social cohesion, reinforcing democracy and creating conditions for belonging.

In this policy brief, I focus on how the term 'cultural citizenship' (CC) has been operationalised in policy¹ and how museums can support CC practices through evidence-based insights. An inquiry into the civic role of arts organisations, led by the Calouste

1 Elsewhere, I have carried out a comprehensive interdisciplinary review of the policy and theoretical literature on cultural citizenship. See Gigante (2024a).

Gulbenkian Foundation in 2019, found that ‘there is far less in the literature that presents policymakers with instructions on how best to foster the conditions in which arts organisations may better develop their civic role’ (Doeser, 2019, p.24). This brief offers such ‘instructions’ by drawing on a robust, cross-cultural evidence base grounded in place-based strategies across ten international art organisations (Figure 2).

The brief also builds on postdoctoral research concerning the civic role of cultural institutions and public culture more broadly, the growing interest in ‘place’ and ‘the local’ as policy priorities, and the responsibility of culture and cultural production in diverse societies.² It offers a guide for funders and cultural leaders who want to support cultural organisations in navigating their role in the current political climate and their political responsibility as democratic spaces.

As a societal concern, the relationship between culture and citizenship is longstanding. In museum practice, this can be traced back to the French Revolution, when the royal collections were made public, and the very first ‘public’ museum was created. As an academic concept, CC emerged in the 1990s within debates on belonging (Ong, 1996), recognition (Pakulski, 1997) and minority cultural rights (Rosaldo, 1994), and has been productive across disciplines and geographies ever since.

The Museum Studies literature focuses on how the museum can equip communities with competencies to participate in civic cultural life (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel, 2018), construct identities (Dahlgren and Hermes, 2015) and express themselves (Kuttner, 2015). However, the mechanisms through which CC can be enacted remain largely unexplored and the articulation of CC disconnected from its theoretical lineages.

Here, cultural citizenship in museums is intended as ‘post-national forms of political belonging and agency over one’s spatial-cultural context through situated and collective cultural practices’ (Gigante, 2024a, p.16). That is, the ability to redesign the boundaries of political belonging, to challenge borders and norms and co-creating our surroundings by coming together through culture and arts.

Citizen’s juries, panels and assemblies, such as the *Voice Assembly* at New Art Exchange (Nottingham, UK), are perhaps the most notable example of a trend in museum practice that has been operating in this sense, pushing the discourse of participation beyond access, engagement and co-creation, and edging into genuine partnership and citizen control (Gigante, 2024b; Jancovich et al., 2024).

This policy brief suggests that CC provides useful language to understand and support the political contribution of museum work in contemporary democracies.

Framing: how CC is advancing belonging through culture in European policy

In policy discourse, the phrase ‘cultural citizenship’ has featured since the early 2000s, to denote the cultural dimension of formal

citizenship, with a focus on how governmental bodies could facilitate CC processes. As such, policy was concerned with identifying indicators to mark the quantifiable aspects of CC.

In the European context, CC featured as one of the four dimensions of citizenship in the Council of Europe’s report on “Education for Democratic Citizenship” (Veldhuis, 1997). Here, CC was instrumental in the full exercise of political citizenship and identified with a set of competencies (cultural awareness, knowledge of heritage and history, literacy skills) that would enable citizens to engage in a democratic society.

Northern European countries such as the Netherlands (Raad voor Cultuur, 2007) have also operationalised CC in their policy in an attempt to navigate the complexities of postmigrant societies, where the boundaries of defining citizenship through culture become a terrain of negotiation.

Notable is also the work of British scholar Mercer (2005) in creating a policy framework for CC that included qualitative indicators such as 1) cultural vitality, diversity and conviviality, 2) cultural access, participation, and consumption, 3) culture, lifestyle and identity, 4) ethics and governance.

European experiments with cultural citizenship clearly show the tensions and potential of the concept, particularly between exclusionary and emancipatory approaches. On the one hand, CC carries normative connotations when mapped onto legal membership in a nation-state (what makes a “good” cultural citizen are specific cultural competencies). On the other, it can signify the power of culture to redesign the politics of belonging.

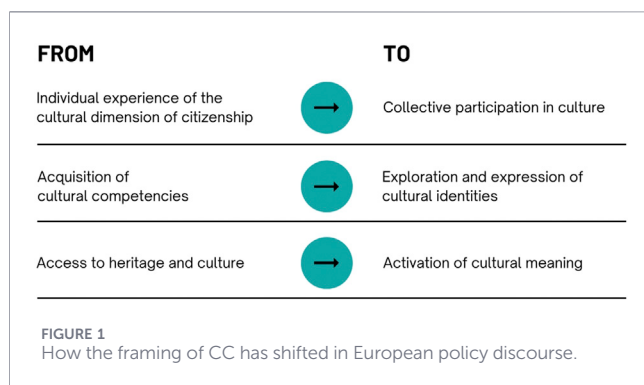
In recent European cultural policy, CC has been linked to a more explicit effort to platform people-centred approaches to participation in culture and meaning-making – a process that has been in part expedited by the COVID-19 pandemic, which foregrounded the role played by local communities within the cultural sector.

- The 2020 Rome Charter (UCLG, 2020) identifies five cultural capabilities for equitable CC: the opportunity to explore cultural roots, the right to free cultural expression, the ability to share cultures, enjoy spaces and resources, and protect common cultural resources.
- The Porto Santo Charter (Porto Santo Conference, 2021), titled *Culture and the Promotion of Democracy: Towards a European Cultural Citizenship* and adopted under the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU, places CC within the endeavour to build a pluralistic society where cultural institutions foster cultural democracy through their processes, modes of organisation and public offer.
- In the *Culture and Democracy: The Evidence* report (European Commission, 2023), CC is defined as contributing to ‘the right of citizens to shape their society and to influence the creation and interpretation of meaning in that society’ (European Commission, 2023, p.63).

This renewed engagement with CC language in European cultural policy signals a shift, as illustrated below (Figure 1).

Beyond Europe, a more politicised use of CC can be found in the Australian context, where the term has been employed to support cultural diversity and value the forms of cultural capital that

² Post-doctoral research projects relevant to this brief have been carried out as part of Culture Commons’ Open Policy Development Programme “The Future of Cultural Devolution”, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council Place-Based Research Programme at the University of Glasgow.



community members acquire through cultural production, the forms of capital needed to access cultural production and how these are leveraged to make claims of cultural citizenship (Khan et al., 2017). Here, CC considers how culture shapes practices of citizenship and opens up spaces for those excluded from formal membership.³

Despite efforts to activate CC, policy documents often seem to dim its radical potential by:

- reducing it to a set of competencies and defining it in terms so vague that operationalisation becomes difficult;
- framing it as something that needs to be managed and measured without understanding its mechanisms on the ground;
- treating it as the cultural dimension of citizenship and conflating it with civic duties, diminishing its potential for emancipatory outcomes and social cohesion.

Next, the policy brief provides insights and recommendations to cultivate CC through place-based public programming, based on an original tripartite framework that recognises the three fundamental spheres of such work, namely spatial, relational and political. In doing so, this policy brief addresses the gap between theory, practice and policy implementation by integrating a refreshed understanding of the concept, practice-based knowledge and applicable suggestions for practitioners and funders.

Findings

In what follows, I draw on original qualitative research conducted between 2021 and 2022 across ten art organisations in the UK, Southern Europe and the Americas (Figure 2), alongside subsequent research on the role of culture in place-based policy and practice.⁴

The research involved twenty-one interviews with museum directors and public programmers across education, outreach and engagement departments, and investigated ‘public programmes’ as

social process rather than curatorial practice. Of particular interest were place-based, public-facing practices delivered mainly in person through participatory formats.

These exemplars serve to ground CC in emancipatory practice and explore the political potential of situated cultural practices in museums.

In doing so, I aim to overcome the gap between policy formulation at national and supranational levels and implementation at the hyperlocal level.

The research shows that PBPP in museums emerge as strategic sites of CC, providing a space for democratic innovation through situated, collective cultural practice (Gigante, 2024a).

Despite being an under-researched and underrated area of museum practice, public programming is the public forum where “art, scholarship and education intersect with people, equity, inclusion and social justice” (Szántó, 2020, p.250). While literature on participatory (Simon, 2010) and situated museum practice (Badovinac, 2022; Byrne, 2018) is prolific, it often focuses on education or curatorial. This policy brief addresses a gap on the transformative potential of *public programmes* as an ‘interstitial’ yet autonomous practice that integrates different aspects of institutional work.

Evidence suggests that:

- Operating at the intersection of departments and straddling the inside and outside of museums, PBPP bring together communities of cultural citizens within and around them through collective practice. As such, they can promote collective action and belonging.
- Effectively, PBPP become a liminal space between the inside and the outside of the museum, both relationally (staff and local communities can meet) and physically (the everyday politics of the neighbourhood and the practices of public programmes are discussed together and colour each other in the process). An example of this is *Museo Situado* (2018-present) at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid) which is an active collaboration network between the museum and local associations operating through monthly assemblies (Gigante, 2021; Gigante, 2024a).
- Through PBPP, the museum can address civic responsibilities beyond traditional civic-cultural ones, such as collection care and provision of object-based learning, and venture into experiments of political belonging and democratic innovation.
- The strategic importance of public programming for the civic role of the art organisation is also evident across the research. In an interview, the director of the Museo Salvador Allende in Santiago de Chile explained how, during the social uprising of October 2019, the team decided to ‘close the exhibitions and open the museum to the community [...] to make the museum available to the social process of our neighbourhood’ (Gigante, 2024a, p.125). In the following months, the museum programming included local cabildos (assemblies), wellbeing workshops and relevant talks on the new constituent process.

Effective strategies of CC are articulated through spatial, relational and political spheres that build on each other and are equally crucial (Gigante 2024a).

³ I have theorised on post-national and progressive cultural citizenship in Gigante (2024a).

⁴ Subsequent post-doctoral research projects focused on citizen assemblies through further empirical research on New Art Exchange, placemaking and culture-led regeneration strategies.

ART ORGANISATION	TYPE	LOCATION	Relevant segment of public programmes	STAKEHOLDER(S) beyond staff members	DELIVERY MECHANISMS
Eastside Projects	Artist-run Visual Arts Organisation	Birmingham UK	Smithfield Market Stage 1; Sonic Signals; Cultural Citizens; EOP Thinkers	Local artists, curators and writers; local market vendors; schools and young people; local policymakers; private sector developers;	Artist residencies; off-site interventions; cross-sector partnerships workshops; training courses for professional development; iterative evaluation of programmes through critical friends
Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea	Civic Modern and Contemporary Art Museum	Bergamo Italy	Le Altre Storie; Individually Together; TI Bergamo. Una Comunità; Posto Fisso	Local residents, including migrant communities and vulnerable adults; third sector organisations; schools and young people; artists	Community workshops; public exhibitions; mediation training; participatory arts-based projects; cross-sector partnerships
Mansions of the Future	Arts and Cultural Hub	Lincoln UK	Culture is a Verb; Takeover Programme; Public House; Communal Lunches; Lincoln Creates Network + Artists Talks Series	Local residents; third sector organisations, international, national and local artists, academics and students	Artist-led interventions; community-led use of space; off-site projects; knowledge exchange, networking events; discursive events and workshops; community building events
Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende	Modern and Contemporary Art Museum	Santiago Chile	Mirada de Barrio; Haciendo Barrio; Textileras; Nueva Constitución Textil	Neighbourhood residents; historians, sociologists, lawyers; local artists and creative practitioners	Arts-based workshops; discursive events; public talks and presentations; co-curated exhibitions; assembly-based formats; community building events
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía	National Modern and Contemporary Art Museum	Madrid Spain	Museo Situado, including Picnic del Barrio; Voces Situadas; Escuelas de formación de promotoras de salud comunitaria, de Derechos, de Español para Población Migrante, de Mediación Situada	Local residents, including migrant communities; neighbourhood associations and grassroots collectives; artists and cultural practitioners; healthcare professionals; lawyers; interpreters	Assembly-based formats; training programmes based on community needs; mediation training; discursive events; community building events; community use of space; multilingual mediation
New Art Exchange	Contemporary Art Gallery	Nottingham UK	YOUnique Festival; Walk The Talk	Neighbourhood residents with diverse heritage; young people; artists and creative practitioners; local community organisations	Community-led use of space; community-led curation and programming; themed walks; pop-ups in local green spaces; cross-sector partnerships
Nottingham Contemporary	Contemporary Art Gallery	Nottingham UK	Loudspeaker	Women facing multiple disadvantages from nearby rural locations; artists and creative practitioners; third sector organisations; support workers; peer mentors	Arts-based workshops; cross-sector partnerships; referral networks; peer mentoring; co-curated exhibitions
Primary	Artist-run Visual Arts Organisation	Nottingham UK	Making Place Programme, including Ejaradini, Chimera Plantarium, Skillshares, Tell Me Something I Don't Know, Social Practice Social, Nourishment	Neighbourhood residents; local artists and creative practitioners; schools and young people; local policymakers;	Knowledge exchange; community use of space; artist-led off-site interventions; arts-based workshops; peer mentoring; networking events; discursive events; community building events;
Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History	Civic Art Museum	Santa Cruz USA	LatinX Engagement Plan, Café Charla, Día de los Muertos Celebrations, Creative Community Committee, Lost Childhood	Local communities with diverse heritage; foster youth; vulnerable adults; third sector organisations	Co-curated exhibitions; discursive events; community building events; multilingual activities
Whitechapel Gallery	Contemporary Art Gallery	London UK	Angel Alley project; Community Conversations; Voices that Matter; Postcards from the Diaspora	Local residents with diverse heritage; local business owners; local arts organisations; third sector organisations; artists and creative practitioners	Cross-sector partnerships; arts-based workshops; assembly-based formats

FIGURE 2
Comparative table of the case studies in Gigante (2024a). Adapted from "Comparative Table of the Art Organisations in the Study" by Lucrezia Gigante.

The spatial sphere concerns the physical environments where activities are carried out (in the gallery or other locations in the neighbourhood) and the symbolic meanings attached to them. The relational sphere captures the inherently collective and interpersonal nature of place-based cultural practice. The political sphere is about understanding the power dynamics of cultural production in place, from deciding whose voices are heard to what structures of solidarity can be implemented.

Evidence suggests that:

- This is often not captured in policy documents, which treat CC as an abstract concept, but this tripartite framework is useful for translating those principles of participation and social cohesion into practice. For example, through conversations with the community members (relational) it might become evident that a particular community in the neighbourhood is facing a particular issue (spatial) whereby this will need the activation of specific structures of solidarity (political).
- The public programme strategies and practices surveyed in the research consistently showed elements of local knowledge, through physical or symbolic engagement with place, a reliance on relational work, and an aspiration to address the everyday politics affecting the lives of local communities.

- Building takeovers where communities lead or curate the activities taking place in the museum (e.g. the *Takeover Programme* at Mansions of the Future) are a concrete example of how physical infrastructure can be the point of departure for citizen-led cultural practice that is relevant to place, provides opportunities for social cohesion and fulfils community needs.

Relational infrastructure is essential to practices of CC.

This includes relationships within departments or areas of practice (crucially curatorial, learning and engagement), relationships with communities, and cross-sector partnerships. However, the research revealed structural fragilities associated with the relational dimension (Gigante, 2024a).

Evidence suggests that:

- Despite being considered 'soft', relational infrastructure is what sustains institutions by providing them with relevance and legitimacy. It is not a nice-to have but an essential component of healthy, interconnected institutions that not only operate and exist in place, but in that place are situated.
- Relational work is crucial to a project's success but is often invisible in institutional structures. High staff turnover during

COVID-19 highlighted the vulnerability of this work, often described as exhausting and demanding.

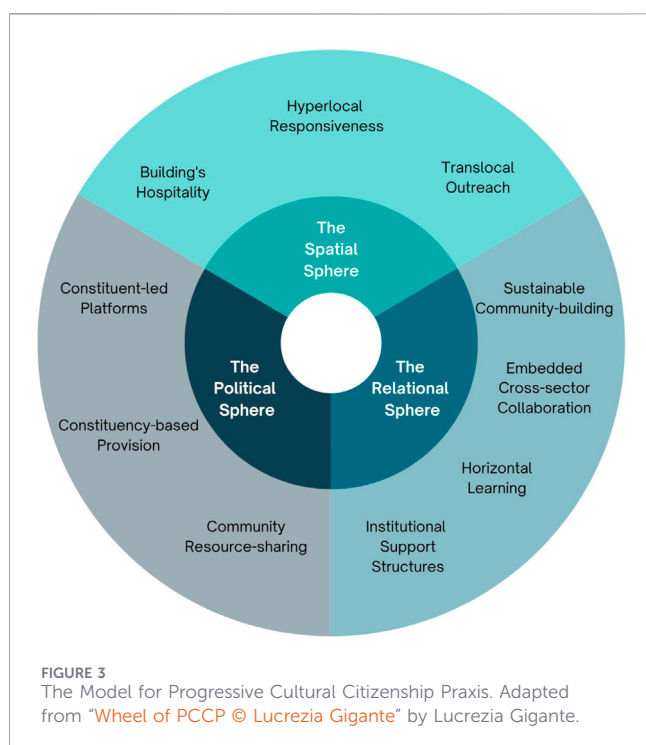
- Funding patterns do not account for the implications and requirements of relational work (continuity, slow pace) (see also [Courage et al., 2025](#)). Project-based funding structures tend to reward novelty and wide reach, whereas place-based work is often carried out (and is most successful) with small numbers and over time.

Evidence-based policy implications and recommendations

The cross-cultural evidence base gathered by surveying PBPP strategies across ten international exemplars informed a Model for Progressive Cultural Citizenship Praxis ([Figure 3](#)) which brings together the spatial, relational and political spheres and can be used as a tool by cultural leaders to interrogate their existing programming and guide the design of new programming. What follows addresses the gap identified in the Gulbenkian report ([Doerer, 2019](#)) at the beginning of this brief and offers applicable ‘instructions’ on the conditions that help CC praxis thrive both in practice and policy.

PBPP are instrumental in fostering CC in museums.

PBPP emerge as a strategic means by which cultural citizenship can be fostered in museums, not as practices in aid of curatorial strategies, but as the first entry point for local communities. This is a governance issue that calls for a rethinking of the hierarchies of knowledge production. With a growing interest in accountable and participatory institutions, PBPP strategies offer museums mechanisms to deliver on their civic and democratic aspirations.



To cultural organisations:

- Foster cross-departmental interactions and integrate PBPP across museum's operations,
- Improve visibility and documentation of PBPP to enable further study on their long-term impact and development,
- Support institutional learning and change through iterative critical reflection (see tools for institutional self-reflection in [Gigante, 2024a](#)).

To funders:

- Reframe funding criteria that embrace open-ended outcomes and evaluation frameworks that capture a different, deeper way of working with communities that accounts for impact as depth instead of spread (e.g. longevity over numbers, incremental meaningful change over novelty, deepening relationships over constantly reaching new groups),
- Strengthen mechanisms that support participatory and democratic decision-making in the sector (e.g. Voice Assembly, community critical friends such as Cultural Citizens at Eastside Projects).

Spatial, relational and political spheres are equally crucial to the success of CC strategies in museums.

Cultural citizenship praxis is most effective when projects can articulate their relevance to place, are supported by relational work and aim to improve the everyday lives of local communities through solidarity and collective action. For example, if the project has strong local relevance but time and resources have not been devoted to building relational connections, local buy-in might be limited. On the other hand, if a relationship has been established and local communities have been invited to voice their needs and concerns, but there is no accountability and commitment to act on them, the relationship might be damaged, and with it, the trust. Ultimately, the lens of place is what holds these practices together and provides the groundwork on which to build.

To cultural organisations:

- Tend to all spheres equally, from place sensitivity to people-centred approaches and political responsibility towards communities,
- Work within and beyond the physical site and in response to communities' 'felt experience of place' ([Madgin et al., 2026](#)) (e.g. off-site pop-ups and street-level interventions),
- Make resources available to local communities, including skills and use of space (e.g. building takeovers),
- Embed local expertise as a strategic input for the design and delivery of PBPP (e.g. *Museo Situado*),
- Deliver programmes that reflect the diversity of local communities (e.g. tours in multiple languages, community-led skillshares).

To funders:

- Design place-based funding with awareness of the relational dimension of place-based work and how it will benefit the lives and needs of local communities ([Madgin and Gigante, 2026](#)),

- Support joined-up place leadership through cross-sector partnerships (Richardson et al., forthcoming) where actors of the local cultural ecosystem share skills and resources (e.g. Loudspeaker at Nottingham Contemporary where the art organisation worked with grassroots partners to reach women facing multiple disadvantages),
- Recognise the role and skills of museum professionals engaged in PBPP as central to the functioning of museums as sites of CC.

The relational infrastructure is at the same time the most fragile and the strongest pillar of CC practice.

From an institutional perspective, relational infrastructures are the most invisible and vulnerable to change and staff turnover. Not only do local knowledge and trust-building reside with staff directly involved in place-based practice, but they are also shaped and dependent on the individual values, vision, and sensitivity of the postholders. This carries both potential and risks. On the one hand, the relational labour of place-based, community-oriented work is fuelled by passionate individuals and community relationships flourish as a result; on the other, this makes it challenging to sustain and transfer.

Further, a piecemeal approach to funding and programming poses a serious threat to the careful, slow, and deep work required to build trust and rapport with communities (Courage et al., 2025). Long-term visions are impaired when funding is secured through short-term grants, and relationship-building is difficult when presence and commitment cannot be guaranteed to communities upfront. When museums are already struggling to overcome mistrust from local communities, project-based engagement risks causing more harm than good.

To cultural organisations:

- Support relational infrastructures to protect them during institutional changes such as staff turnover (e.g. archival systems for community contacts, see Gigante, 2024a, p.165),
- Encourage cross-pollination within the organisation to share and embed relational knowledge across areas of work [e.g. buddy system to encourage cross-departmental work, see Gigante (2024a), p.165],
- Initiate cross-sector partnerships to foster skills-exchange (e.g. collaboration with community anchor organisations).

To funders:

- Design funding cycles to ensure co-production is supported with continuity,
- Account for the relational infrastructure required to develop, deliver and evaluate PBPP across all stages of the project lifecycle (see Courage et al., 2025).

Conclusion: what next?

As we observe incremental shifts towards participatory governance in cultural institutions, cross-sector exchanges will be crucial to help museums thrive as situated institutions and design place-based policy that sustains them and fosters the conditions for democratic innovation.

The challenge is not only to recognise the value of relational labour and potential for social cohesion within public programming, but to equip it with adequate infrastructure through funding models that value long-term commitment to communities, evaluation frameworks that go beyond quantitative metrics, and institutional practice that makes space for slowness and care.

Cultural citizenship is one of those phrases that will not cease to spark debate and inspire new visions as we continue to advocate for the power of culture and its role in democratic societies. Drawing on a robust evidence base, this policy brief outlines how museums can foster citizen-led cultural practice and how, in doing so, they become sites of progressive cultural citizenship. This work requires a great deal of risk-taking and a willingness to embrace complexity, reflexivity and collective leadership, because it is also a work that cannot be done in isolation.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the author's doctoral dissertation, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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Conflict of interest

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Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

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