

[Introduction]

Welcome to Cultura Circular in Conversation, a series of audio interviews exploring art, culture, ecology and climate change. Can you imagine festivals in Latin America and the Caribbean shining not only through their creativity but also through their positive impact on the planet and the cultural connections they foster? This is precisely what we aim to promote through the Cultura Circular programme, developed in collaboration between the British Council and Julie's Bicycle. We begin with a brief introduction to the project by María García Holley and Graciela Melitsko-Thornton. Following this, Paola Moreira Blasi speaks with the organisers of two festivals that, through music, participatory design, and urban tours, highlight opportunities and showcase progress in sustainability.

Joining us on this journey are Juan Ernesto Murua Palacio from the Bienal de Música in Córdoba (Córdoba Music Biennial), Argentina, and LuisRa Bergolla from Festival Itinerando in Caracas, Venezuela. Thank you very much. Now, over to María.

[María]

Welcome to Cultura Circular in Conversation, a space to explore how culture and sustainability can transform festivals and artistic practices across Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United Kingdom. I'm María García Holley, Director of Arts and Culture for the British Council in the Americas and the Caribbean. Cultura Circular was born in the post-pandemic context, when festivals were striving to regain their vitality following a global pause, while also facing the undeniable challenge of climate change.

This programme connects in-person, digital, and hybrid festivals across the region with the UK, encouraging a cultural exchange that extends beyond the artistic. Through mentorship with experts, financial support, and the integration of sustainable practices, Cultura Circular fosters new ways of creating and experiencing culture with environmental responsibility. With over 110 festivals in 75 cities, we've woven a network of projects committed to sustainability and innovation.

Thanks to the training and support provided to our partners, we are promoting better practices to reduce the environmental impact of the cultural sector. In this podcast, we'll delve into the experiences, challenges, and inspirations of those who are transforming the cultural landscape. Join us on this journey.

[Graciela]

Thank you very much, María. I'm Graciela Melitsko-Thornton, speaking from Julie's Bicycle in London—a non-profit organisation dedicated to mobilising the arts and culture sectors around the crises of climate, nature, and justice. Specifically within Cultura Circular, our role focuses on

designing activities including training, mentorship, and network collaborations, supporting festivals in their environmental efforts.

I'm delighted to share, through these audio interviews, the experiences of some of the festivals that took part in the programme's activities—festivals that undoubtedly combine creativity with environmental care, while promoting new practices and setting milestones in building an alternative future, both ecologically and socially.

We invite you to listen. Thank you, and see you soon.

[Paola]

Hello everyone, welcome to this podcast where we talk about circular culture. I'm Paola, and today I'm joined by LuisRa from Venezuela and Juan from Argentina. Hello to you both, how are you?

[Juan]

Hello, good morning, good afternoon everyone. Thank you very much for the invitation.

[LuisRa]

Thank you, Paola, for the invitation.

[Paola]

LuisRa, to start, could you tell us about your festival and the work you do there?

[LuisRa]

Well, the work we've been doing in Caracas has an important background. Even before taking on the challenge of creating an urban tour festival that combined different sustainable mobility options, we had already been working on a social programme we named Caracas en 365. Through this programme, which aims to generate urban experiences focused on heritage interpretation, we wanted not only to work on themes of identity and belonging but also to explore how reoccupying public spaces could help us overcome our fear of the city. And I mention the fear of the city because we must remember that Caracas was ranked not only nationally and across Latin America but also globally as one of the most violent cities in the world.

This fundamentally changed how we interacted with one another and with public spaces. The tours, the heritage interpretation experiences in public spaces, allowed us to start a resilience process that helped create connections between communities and gave us access to areas that had been abandoned or isolated due to violence. This, in a way, allowed us to exercise our right

to the city. So, with this accumulated experience—already ten years of work—we felt ready to take the next step and create a festival that integrates public space, heritage, and sustainable mobility.

[Paola]

Juan, in your case, what is the festival you work on like, and what makes it unique?

[Juan]

Our festival is called Bienal de la Música (Music Biennial). It's a relatively young festival, and we're now preparing for its third edition.

As a Biennial of Music, it is quite a novel concept, as there aren't many precedents—not in the country, nor globally. There are certainly other biennials, but not specifically focused on music. This gave us an advantage because we weren't constrained by comparisons, which allowed us to explore transdisciplinary connections with other art forms.

The first edition took place as we were coming out of the pandemic, and here in Argentina, we had a very strict lockdown. When restrictions were lifted, public spaces took on a major role.

So, as a guiding principle for the festival, we decided to take all activities into the city—bringing performances to locations that had the potential to host cultural events but had been overlooked or marginalised, either due to security concerns or underuse. We identified the potential of these areas and focused on that.

To connect this with public spaces, we created a special programme within the Biennial called *Suena la Ciudad* (The City Sounds), which I direct. Through various workshops and collaborations with faculties of Architecture, Industrial Design, Art, Cinema, and Music, we curated the festival's venues, where the performances of the Bienal de la Música would take place.

These events evolved beyond just concerts—they became theatrical experiences, film screenings, dance performances, and artistic interventions. Public spaces embraced this diversity of activities, and this became the guiding theme for the second edition and now the third one we are planning.

Another key focus of the Biennial is democratising design, architecture, and technical resources such as sound and lighting. Here in Argentina, nearly 80% of cultural events take place in public spaces, but due to bureaucratic hurdles and payment delays from the state, these events are often staged using the lowest-quality equipment available.

So, as part of the Biennial's mission, we aim to democratise design and artistic practices by bringing them into the city. The core idea of the Biennial is to use the city itself as a stage.

[Paola]

Your festival has a strong focus on sustainability. How did that interest come about, and when did it become a key part of the project?

[Juan]

I think, in the beginning, many of the sustainability aspects of our festival emerged from a lack of resources and from trying to rethink how festivals and events were organised here. When we started engaging with Cultura Circular and participating in their mentoring programmes, we realised that many of the ideas we were working on fit into that framework.

For example, we held an event within the framework of Cultura Circular at the Córdoba Legislature. The venue is fully equipped with sound systems and multimedia technology, but it had never been used for music or theatre—only for parliamentary functions.

That experience made us realise the potential of using spaces that are already prepared and don't require layers and layers of additional technical equipment or scenography to be repurposed. Instead, we started looking at locations that had been designed for one function but could easily accommodate many others.

During the first edition of the festival, we also organised a workshop with around 100 participants, including architects, industrial designers, and artists. They were divided into three teams, each of which designed a stage. Later, they had the option to participate in the construction process as well. The idea was to build the stages using recycled materials or, where new materials were necessary, to think about them from a reuse perspective.

That first edition also gave birth to what we now call our materials bank—a collection of materials and equipment acquired for the Biennial, which is now available for any independent or non-independent production that needs it.

For our first Biennial, we also chose locations in underdeveloped areas of the city that had enormous potential. One example is Parque Sarmiento, one of Córdoba's largest parks, which has an island in the middle. Originally, this island was used for public events, but over time, it fell out of use because of a bridge that connects it. Authorities considered the bridge unsafe for large crowds.

As part of the project, we carried out an audit of the bridge in agreement with local authorities, reinforced it, and made it usable again. Since then, more than 400 events have been held on the island.

Sustainability became part of our identity as soon as we started working with Cultura Circular—it was a moment of realisation for us.

[Paola]

LuisRa, in your case, what led you to integrate sustainable practices into the festival, and how has it evolved since then?

[LuisRa]

Well, with our Recorridos Permanentes (Permanent Tours) programme—a social initiative focused on reclaiming and interpreting public spaces—we had already developed the necessary foundations to create experiences that were inherently sustainable.

In that sense, the pedestrian route was the preferred option, as it allowed citizens to remap and reclaim public spaces, fostering connections with their heritage. This was accelerated by the arrival of COVID-19 and the social distancing measures that came with it.

Caracas had already been experiencing a kind of urban distancing, and when the pandemic added a layer of social distancing, we found ourselves searching for ways to regain a presence in the city. Then, the British Council launched a call for projects that combined culture and sustainability, and we saw an opportunity.

The pandemic had some unexpected effects in Caracas—bicycles that had been gathering dust were being used again, private businesses started offering electric scooter rentals, and successful global mobility models like Uber, which had disappeared due to economic crises, were making a comeback.

We realised there was a surge in these alternative forms of sustainable mobility that could complement the work we had already been doing. Pedestrian routes remained at the core of our approach because, as we know, in the inverted mobility pyramid of sustainable transport, pedestrians are the top priority.

But in Caracas, the capital of an oil-rich country, this hierarchy is reversed. Cars dominate the streets. With fuel and energy being extremely cheap, there's a strong perception that private vehicles and public transport are the most viable mobility options.

With the festival, we saw an opportunity to integrate these three key areas—public space, heritage, and sustainable mobility—while also collaborating with civil society organisations that promote heritage interpretation tours. This was key to fostering a sense of belonging and cultural identity.

For us, sustainability is an extension of the work we had already been doing—encouraging citizens to reclaim public spaces as their own.

In some countries, urban walking tours are seen mainly as a form of leisure or tourism. While that aspect remains true for Caracas, we also view these walks as an act of citizenship—where we can move freely without the presence of police or security escorts.

We empower ourselves with our identification cards to claim our right to walk freely in our city and use our mobile phones to become chroniclers of urban life—documenting positive experiences and memories in places that were once associated with violence.

[Paola]

This is all so interesting, LuisRa. Tell us, over time, how have you strengthened Itinerando's sustainability approach, and what changes have you implemented along the way?

[LuisRa]

We understand that we must keep pushing forward, even as we explore other mobility options. The pedestrian route remains the backbone of our work because it allows us to continue fighting for pedestrian rights, which are extremely challenging in Caracas. For example, the right to a proper pavement—for pedestrians.

We don't just want pavements to be free of obstacles; we also want them to include urban infrastructure that facilitates the right to walk freely in the city. We want wider pavements, even broader than the vehicle lanes, free of obstructions but also equipped with features like tactile paving, which allows visually impaired people to navigate more independently without needing assistance.

Caracas' pavements lack this quality. They are full of obstacles, from urban signage and kiosks to tree roots that break up the path, preventing smooth movement. And more recently, after COVID, we saw an attempt to incorporate cycle lanes, which ended up being placed on pedestrian paths.

The problem is that bicycles move at a different speed than pedestrians—they shouldn't share the same pavement. They belong alongside vehicles.

Caracas is divided into five municipalities, and in the largest and most densely populated one, the entire cycle lane development was built over pedestrian walkways. So, while we should be discussing smart city solutions and the integration of technology, we are instead dealing with basic 20th-century issues—fighting for our most fundamental rights.

In Caracas, an urban walking tour is not just a leisure activity—it's a form of protest. It's a way of saying, "We are here. We demand better infrastructure, better pavements, because we are exercising our rights as pedestrians."

This, despite the fact that mobility in Caracas is overwhelmingly dominated by private cars and petrol-fuelled transport.

[Paola]

Juan, in the case of the Bienal, how has this sustainability approach evolved over the editions? What transformations have you incorporated?

[Juan]

Well, something that has been incorporated into successive editions—and in this upcoming edition we are planning—is very much in line with what LuisRa was describing.

We have partnered with various organisations in Córdoba that advocate for universal city accessibility. One of the strongest groups we work with is called “Juntas por el Derecho a la Ciudad” (Together for the Right to the City), a collective of women including architects, designers, and lawyers.

We rely heavily on this group to ensure universal accessibility for all our Bienal events—whether in public spaces or more conventional venues. We also aim to leave a lasting impact by conducting trials and experiments regarding pedestrian flow, the integration of public transport, and the use of pavements—just as LuisRa mentioned.

With each edition, we add another layer to our sustainability efforts. We have also developed strong partnerships with the Ministry of the Environment and organisations responsible for waste collection and material processing to facilitate reuse.

Currently, we are working with the Ministry to develop a certification for sustainable events. The issue here is that many events claim to be sustainable, but in reality, they are not.

For example, there’s an event that uses almost a kilometre of LED screens, yet it carries a “sustainable event” label just because it runs one out of twenty generators on biodiesel.

The problem is that no one questions whether using a kilometre of LED screens is necessary in the first place. We need to rethink event planning from the ground up with genuine sustainability in mind.

This is precisely what we aim to address through the workshops we run at the start of each Bienal. Our main focus is education—adding new layers to how we coexist with the city, with fellow citizens, and with public spaces. I believe this is where the Bienal has evolved the most.

[Paola]

And in this sense, what transformations have you noticed in the community as a result of the festival?

[Juan]

Well, one of the most noticeable changes is how certain spaces we proposed—previously marginal in the everyday life of the city—have gained prominence, embraced by the very citizens who have made them their own.

The city itself is a work of art—any city, really. The question is how to frame it, how to highlight certain parts of it. We've observed that people have started doing this on their own—identifying and reclaiming spaces, drawing attention to places that may have previously been overlooked.

That's something we've always been appreciated for. And we've also seen how, over time, more events and activities have started taking place in the spaces we initially selected for our festival.

[Paola]

LuisRa, and in the case of Itinerando, what changes have you observed in how people interact with the city since the project began?

[LuisRa]

The first major transformation was internal. Initially, we thought our practices were already sustainable, given that pedestrian routes, cycling, and electric scooters produce very few emissions.

We believed we had already won that battle. But after joining the Cultura Circular programme—especially the mentoring sessions with Julie's Bicycle—we realised that we could make fundamental changes internally as well.

Before, we thought sustainability was something that happened on stage, in front of the audience. But the real shift came when we understood that we, as a team, could design, plan, and execute projects more sustainably.

Through mentoring sessions with Graciela from Julie's Bicycle, we were exposed to successful case studies where low-cost, low-impact solutions were used to achieve the same goals.

I think it's these small actions that, when added together, create significant change.

[Paola]

Juan, and in the Bienal, how has your experience in the programme influenced the way you organise the festival? Was there anything in particular that proved especially useful?

[Juan]

Yes, at first, we realised that we had a very limited understanding of sustainability and circularity. We thought of it as something more predefined.

Being part of the programme—engaging with other festivals and the mentors—opened up a whole new perspective. It made us pause and rethink almost every aspect of the Bienal through the lens of what we learned in Cultura Circular.

During the second Bienal, as part of our workshops, we developed an inflatable structure entirely made from recycled plastic. This piece collects data on how audiences interact with it—how they move around it and how it influences their experience.

The structure fits inside a Carry-On when deflated, making it incredibly practical. It drastically reduces transport costs, setup time, and the resources needed for stage construction and technical infrastructure.

We developed it as a way to experiment with spaces, audiences, and artistic performances—exploring how these elements interact in a sustainable way.

Through Cultura Circular, we realised how valuable it is to integrate research into our artistic interventions. The audience doesn't just watch a performance—they become part of it, stepping into the installation, interacting with its acoustics, and altering the sound experience.

We took this structure to heritage sites across Córdoba—places where large-scale events were typically impossible due to conservation restrictions.

Since our installation left no trace and caused no damage, we were granted permission to use these locations—but only for 30 minutes. That was enough time to set up, perform a short show, and dismantle everything.

Everything about this project was designed with resource optimisation in mind—from its construction to its operation. We even used solar-powered batteries for all electrical components.

This initiative was a direct result of our experience in the Cultura Circular programme.

We were inspired by other festivals that turned audiences into active participants—raising awareness alongside artistic interventions. That struck us as incredibly valuable, so we incorporated it into this edition with Cultura Circular's support.

[Paola]

This is all fantastic work! Juan, from your perspective, what are the biggest environmental and climate challenges facing the Bienal?

[Juan]

Well, here in Córdoba—and in Argentina in general—there's still a lot of catching up to do in terms of sustainability and resource management.

That's our biggest challenge: convincing sponsors and state institutions to adopt new ways of thinking. The mindset is still stuck in old habits, and every time we propose a sustainable initiative, we have to justify it two or three times over.

So, our main challenge is shifting that mindset.

Right now, we're working on transitioning all the electricity used at the Bienal to renewable energy and biodiesel.

We're collaborating with the Ministry of the Environment to make this happen.

We also focus on creating smaller, more manageable events that allow us to monitor sustainability metrics effectively. We don't want sustainability to just be a vague label—we want it to be measurable and meaningful.

[Paola]

LuisRa, what environmental challenges have you identified?

[LuisRa]

Unfortunately, in Venezuela, we don't have official statistics or reliable monitoring systems.

But based on past studies and long-standing observations, our biggest environmental challenge is vehicle emissions.

We're an oil-producing country, which means fuel is cheap—but it's also highly polluting. Not all petrol is the same. Some fuels are cleaner than others, but in Venezuela, we use some of the most polluting types.

This culture of cheap petrol leads to higher levels of pollution than in many other countries.

Industrial emissions and waste burning also contribute to pollution, but they're nowhere near as significant as emissions from cars.

On top of that, Venezuela's vehicle fleet is ageing, meaning older, more polluting cars remain on the road.

Since electricity is also subsidised—primarily generated from hydroelectric power—Venezuelans don't experience the high energy costs seen in other Latin American countries.

This has led to the proliferation of air conditioning units, and when power failures occur due to lack of maintenance, people resort to portable generators.

These not only contribute to noise and air pollution but also alter the architectural aesthetic of heritage buildings, where they are often installed.

Walking through the streets is, in a way, our form of resistance.

In Caracas, driving to buy bread at the corner shop is normal—it's too cheap not to. Carpooling isn't common because petrol costs are negligible. In other countries, people share rides to split fuel costs, but here, economic incentives for sustainability simply don't exist.

We live like nouveau riche, believing that oil will never run out—and that we can keep going indefinitely without considering the consequences.

[Paola]

LuisRa, each festival has its own way of innovating, whether through its relationship with public space or how it integrates sustainability. Would you say that innovation is a central feature of your festival?

[LuisRa]

Being innovative is a challenge, but of course, this pursuit must always be present in the equation. One of the things we are most proud of in terms of designing the festival experience, and something that carries a strong innovative element, is the complement to in-person tours—regardless of their mode of transportation—through what we call Itinerarios Sonoros (Sound Itineraries). These are digital experiences designed for platforms like Telegram, allowing us to create narrated sound journeys enhanced with multimedia files.

We originally conceived these Itinerarios Sonoros as a complement to the in-person experience, enabling visitors to listen to narrated capsules by experts such as architects, sociologists, and artists. These narrators had the opportunity to reinterpret a site, a space, a local resident, a historical figure, or something else considered valuable by the community. Additionally, the experience could be enriched with multimedia content, including interactive maps and before-and-after comparative photographs.

Later, we discovered that marathon runners use an excellent app that provides a bird's-eye view of the routes they have completed.

We leveraged this application to create 3D videos that allowed both those walking the routes and those experiencing them from home—whether due to mobility issues or personal preference—to visualise the context in which these sound tours took place. Additionally, the audio recordings of these narrations serve as a means of preserving memory.

We understood from the outset that our experiences were ephemeral, so it became crucial to record these memories—either through oral narratives captured in audio files or by complementing them with urban chroniclers.

The Itinerando festival featured nine itineraries in different sections of the city, sequentially remapping Caracas from west to east. Each tour was led by a specialised guide who was an expert in the area and had a particular preference for sound or a specific mode of mobility. These guides worked in pairs with what we call urban chroniclers, ensuring the experience was documented.

[Paola]

Juan, how does innovation fit into the Bienal?

[Juan]

The fact that our festival is a Bienal de la Música (Music Biennial) is already innovative in itself. Since there aren't many precedents for this format, we are constantly working within a framework that hasn't been explored before.

This can be challenging, but it is also incredibly positive because it allows us to explore new ideas. One of the most innovative aspects, I believe, is our approach to building relationships with institutions and collectives.

This wasn't something that happened before. In the past, when we tried to be part of other events before founding the Bienal, we struggled to find advisors or team members to collaborate with. Because of this initial difficulty, we made it a priority to ensure that, within the Bienal, we would extend this collaborative mindset as widely as possible.

[Paola]

How do you think your festival contributes to social and cultural development?

[Juan]

We've noticed that many artists who have participated—whether in the festival lineup, workshops, or planning activities—have started incorporating certain principles into their own practices.

This has allowed us to observe, on a very micro scale, how the transition towards more sustainable events and urban spaces is taking shape. Some artists have also become more aware of the environmental impact of their performances—particularly their carbon footprint.

Many now consciously choose which festivals they participate in based on sustainability criteria. Through their involvement in the Bienal and access to relevant information, several artists have made the decision to support only certain types of events.

We find this very interesting, and we also see it as a kind of legacy—something that can be developed even further in the future.

[Paola]

Beyond sustainable mobility, Itinerando also invites people to rediscover Caracas' public spaces. How is the festival influencing the community's relationship with its city and urban heritage?

[LuisRa]

One of the most gratifying aspects of designing this festival was the opportunity to create experiences—nine in total—each supported by a specific mode of mobility.

We conducted a thorough study, not only assessing the presence of significant heritage sites, statues, and historic buildings, or the influence of notable residents in each area, but also examining how each segment of the city reflected a particular mobility dynamic.

From there, we developed a three-tiered curatorial process to foster a sense of community between participants and the spaces they explored.

The goal was to locate heritage sites in non-touristic or vulnerable areas, ensuring that mobility became a supportive element of the urban experience.

We are very pleased that, for the people of Caracas, sustainable mobility is not just a means of transport but a tool for strengthening their identity as empowered citizens.

[Paola]

LuisRa and Juan, thank you both so much for this conversation and for sharing the incredible work you are doing with your festivals.

[LuisRa]

Thank you, and thanks to Julie's Bicycle and the British Council once again for amplifying our experiences and allowing us to learn from neighbouring initiatives that we are keen to explore further.

[Juan]

Thank you very much—it's an honour to be part of this information repository, this podcast, which we can revisit ourselves and which can also serve other festivals or anyone interested in learning about these practices.

We truly appreciate Julie's Bicycle and the British Council for creating these spaces.

[Paola]

Congratulations, and see you next time.