

## **[Introduction]**

Welcome to Cultura Circular en Conversación, a series of audio interviews exploring art, culture, ecology, and climate change in Latin America and the Caribbean. Can you imagine festivals across Latin America and the Caribbean standing out not only for their creativity, but also for their positive impact on the planet and the cultural connections they generate? That's exactly 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.

Then, Paola Moreira Blasi speaks with the organisers of two festivals: Laura Varón from the Ibanasca Festival in Colombia, and Patricia Contreras and Bárbara Martínez Moreno from Luciérnagas para la Paz Festival in Mexico. First, let's hear from María. Thank you.

## **[María]**

Welcome to Cultura Circular en Conversación, 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 Cultura Circular. I'm Paola, and today I'm joined by Laura from Colombia and Patricia and Bárbara from Mexico. Laura, Patricia, Bárbara, welcome! How are you?

**[Laura]**

I'm good, hello, thank you! How are you? Thank you very much for inviting me to this space.

**[Bárbara]**

Hello, thank you! We're very happy to share about our festival.

**[Patricia]**

Hello, I'm Patricia, and thank you so much for the invitation. We're here from Mexico, very excited to share a bit about the Luciérnagas para la Paz Festival with you.

**[Paola]**

It's a pleasure to have you here today. Bárbara, could you tell us more about Luciérnagas para la Paz and the type of activities you organise?

**[Bárbara]**

This festival began in 2020 and emerged because one of our programmes at Arte Sustentable involves artistic and cultural residency exchanges with some international organisations. In this case, in France, with two organisations: Les Poussières and Auberfabrik.

Through these exchanges—these fortunate exchanges—we learned from them a technique for building lanterns. In Paris, in a peripheral city called Aubervilliers, these two organisations have been organising this collective lantern-making event for several years, culminating in a grand parade.

It was a very fitting idea for us to bring to Mexico, specifically Morelos, where we live, and it was a great success.

It was successful because it also became a way of reclaiming public space in a context where Mexico is a wonderful country. Still, one must take into account that it has limited security. Creating these collective spaces for creativity, where people come together to build something that will later be used in public spaces—at night, no less—is significant. Public spaces in Mexico can be unsafe, and they are even more so at night.

So, this reclaiming of space led to a very emotional festival in 2020. After the pandemic and some other challenges, we decided to revive it for 2025 with this incredible opportunity, as the British Council is supporting us in making the festival happen.

Through this initiative, we connected with B-Arts, an organisation based in Stoke, in the United Kingdom. They were the original founders of this method of building lanterns and holding a grand parade.

They taught it to the French organisations, who then passed it on to us. So now, we have built a deeply emotional and fascinating network focused on community building and festivals that are more about the process—meeting people, looking each other in the eyes. And that is exactly what we are going to do: the Luciérnagas para la Paz 2025 Festival, which is about to begin, in collaboration with B-Arts from the UK.

**[Paola]**

Laura, and in the case of Ibanasca, what is the festival like, and what kind of initiatives do you organise?

**[Laura]**

We are a foundation that addresses gender issues through artistic and cultural expressions. We started working at the end of 2020, and last year, in 2024, we held our fourth edition.

The festival is a space and a platform for visibility for women artists from different parts of Colombia and Latin America. The festival takes place in Honda, Tolima, a city three hours from Bogotá. It has a very important history because it is located at the centre of the country, and the Magdalena River, a major river, runs through it. Honda has played and continues to play a key role in Colombia's history, and now it is experiencing economic and tourism growth. The festival was created in response to the need to build a community of women.

I moved to Honda, which is quite a small city, and a friend and I had the idea of starting to build a women's community. That's where the foundation began. Then, in 2021, I met Paula Kitaen, a local artist, and together we started dreaming about creating spaces for women in urban art. That's when the festival started to take shape, along with another colleague, who is also a

cultural manager. The festival's first edition emerged from that process, and it has evolved over time.

The core of the festival is muralism. We invite women from different parts of Colombia and Latin America to intervene in public spaces.

This year, thanks to our partnership with the British Council, we had our first guest from the UK. Every year, we have a curatorial theme. Last year's theme was "Women and Knowledge", in which we paid tribute to all the women who preserve traditions through food and craftsmanship. Based on this theme, we engage in conversations with all the festival participants, and from there, the creative process of the murals begins.

So far, we have painted over 60 murals in Honda, which is quite remarkable. I believe Honda is the only city in the world where almost all urban art—about 98%—has been created by women. It's very powerful.

We also organise guided tours, which have contributed to the transformation of public spaces, tourism development, and strong community engagement. In addition to murals, the festival always includes talks and workshops—education is very important to us.

We hold audiovisual showcases and open calls for women producers and filmmakers. We screen the works of Colombian and Latin American women, and this year, we also had directors and producers from the UK. We also organise exhibitions, including photography exhibitions, all aimed at giving visibility to women's work.

And, as Bárbara mentioned, Colombia is also a dangerous place. I feel that making a statement that women can occupy the streets, that we are reclaiming them, and that it should be normal to see a woman painting in the street, being the artist and the creator of the work, is very powerful—especially in a small town where people don't often see these possibilities.

We are also expanding into cultural production, especially in audiovisual projects. We have made short documentaries and have just launched a book on the historical memory of cuisine, allowing visitors to Honda to explore the city through its food. The book includes the stories of local women, the dishes they prepare, and illustrations by a local artist.

We are a cultural and artistic ecosystem, and many things emerge from this space. The festival is a way to showcase the processes we are developing within the foundation.

**[Paola]**

Ibanasca is quite a unique name. Why did you choose it, and what does it represent for you?

**[Laura]**

Ibanasca was an indigenous shaman of the Pijaos, a tribe that lived in Tolima. She lived on the volcano. When the Spanish arrived, they believed she was hiding treasures. But the truth is that she was about to be colonised, and she was protecting her land.

As she was a shaman and possessed vast ancestral knowledge, they burned her alive, accusing her of being a witch.

According to legend, when she was being burned, the smoke from the fire rose to the Nevado del Tolima, and it is said that her spirit still resides there.

Our project is an offering to honour everything she did. One of Ibanasca's goals is to reconnect with what existed before colonisation—it's a gift to the goddess, whom we feel has opened many paths for us. It is also a symbol of resistance and struggle within the territory. That is why we wanted to pay tribute to her.

### **[Paola]**

Patricia, how did Luciérnagas para la Paz begin its journey towards sustainability? Was there a defining moment that led you to focus on this issue?

### **[Patricia]**

Well, this festival is part of one of the projects of the Asociación Civil Arte Sustentable. Sustainability has always been one of the core principles of the association, which is reflected in projects like this festival.

This all started from a sense of awareness about how we, as cultural organisers, share projects with the community and their impact on people.

For example, in Cuautla, we have been continuously observing how the river has become increasingly polluted and how the local community has lost awareness of environmental care. The river is a beautiful, large one, but it has been neglected over time.

So, one of the activities we are holding during this festival is a small lantern-making workshop at the Cuautla River, aimed at raising awareness about the space.

We also want to create awareness about how much waste we generate and consume during the festival. A common issue is plastic bottles—many people bring them to the workshops. Instead, we will have large water containers available, encouraging attendees to bring their own reusable bottles, refill them, and avoid buying disposable plastic bottles that end up as waste.

Additionally, we will have waste separation stations to ensure that any disposable bottles brought to the festival are properly sorted and sent to recycling centres rather than ending up in the environment.

In Zacualpan de Amilpas, one of the communities we work with, people are highly aware of the local ecosystem and the impact of climate change and waste pollution.

Listening to their testimonies about how the environment has deteriorated, or even how certain plant species have disappeared, has been eye-opening for us. It has made us reflect on the actions we can take through our projects to reduce environmental impact.

**[Paola]**

Laura, and how was it for Ibanasca? What motivated you to incorporate sustainability into your festival?

**[Laura]**

Well, this year, we collaborated with a project focused on sustainability processes with an environmental, economic, and social approach.

We had always worked with the social and economic aspects, but we didn't have enough information to implement a truly responsible sustainability process. Winning the Cultura Circular Grant made us much more aware of it, and it was a very interesting experience.

It made us more conscious about integrating sustainability, not just in the festival, but across all the processes we undertake. It became something transversal.

We implemented several strategies and mapped out the sustainability initiatives in Honda. We also carried out community education projects. We acted as a bridge for the community, opening various spaces for learning about art and recycling, composting, and food waste management.

For example, we worked with the women who run the kitchens in the marketplace to explore how to use food scraps better.

Another beautiful initiative was setting up an eco-wall. Everyone working at the festival—around 80 people—was required to bring their own reusable bottle.

During the festival, we drank water from the eco-wall, which had been installed beforehand and filled with rainwater. This way, we avoided waste.

Afterwards, we donated the eco-wall to a school in Honda. Some schools in Honda lack resources and don't have easy access to clean drinking water, so this also raised awareness among students.

The Yaru team, who were fantastic, led a workshop at the school, teaching students how to use the eco-wall. This has started a process of education and awareness within the Honda community.

We love to connect art with everything we do. We painted a collective mural next to a river called the Gualí River, and alongside the community, we cleaned the river, held a workshop, and then created the mural together.

I feel that these activities make a real impact on people's awareness, especially among children. The community becomes more receptive, open to learning, and more understanding of why sustainability matters.

**[Paola]**

Bárbara, and in your case, how has your approach to sustainability evolved? Have you incorporated new ways of integrating it into the festival?

**[Bárbara]**

Yes, because I was deeply impacted by the idea that peace is a contextual and entirely holistic process. Peace also means that your relationship with the environment and your territory must be respectful and mutual enrichment.

That's why the festival is called Luciérnagas para la Paz—because it is fundamentally about creating bonds, strengthening social fabric, and reclaiming public spaces. But public space also includes key environmental elements. That's why sustainability has taken on a new dimension for us. It's not just about practical measures like promoting bicycle use or banning disposable plastics—though those are, of course, important.

Instead, we now see sustainability as something deeply connected to the way we relate to our environment. It's about developing a profound awareness of how we can improve, strengthen, and protect our territories—preventing them from being harmed by pollution, violence, or insecurity.

We now approach sustainability in a comprehensive way. It's no longer just about technical solutions like saving water—although that remains essential—but about embracing an ethical stance that refuses to violate rights.

**[Paola]**

Patricia, in your region, what are the most significant environmental and climate challenges you face?

**[Patricia]**

Oh, well, in terms of climate—the heat. One of the challenges we've faced during the festival regarding the climate is that the lanterns we make have a candle inside.

During the festival's first edition, we followed the same process used in France and England for placing the candles. However, by the final day, when we were ready to distribute the lanterns, we realised that many of the candles had melted due to the heat, and we had to replace them. So, as part of the lantern-making process, we had to adapt to the climate we have in Morelos, which is indeed very hot.

In terms of environmental challenges, I think Bárbara made a great point about the awareness of space.

Huautla is a small city, but it has grown significantly in recent years. Many people have moved here from other regions and states. As a result, the sense of shared space and responsibility is no longer what it used to be. I believe it is a major mission to raise awareness about how we want to live and how we want to care for the spaces we inhabit.

**[Paola]**

And what about you, Laura? What kind of environmental issues have you identified in Ibanasca's context?

**[Laura]**

Well, the heat as well. It gets extremely hot—temperatures can reach 45°C in the summer. This intense heat affects us, especially during the festival days when we are painting outdoors in the streets—it's exhausting.

Another major issue is that the Magdalena River is polluted, despite being one of the most important rivers in Colombia. I feel that more awareness needs to be raised.

As Bárbara mentioned earlier, I sometimes feel that people are not as connected to their territory and don't fully understand the importance of the river. So they throw waste into the river, which leads to pollution, bad odours, and overall damage to the water. People simply aren't aware of the consequences.

This is one of the biggest challenges we face—raising awareness about caring for the river. Things are starting to change, but there is still a long way to go.

**[Paola]**

Tell me about Ibanasca's experience in the Cultura Circular programme.

**[Laura]**

It has been an incredible and very challenging experience, and it has been essential for us. It also felt like a vote of confidence—we had already worked with other organisations before, but this felt like a real trust-building step for us and our team.

It was a moment of realisation—understanding that we had certain criteria to meet and things to accomplish, and that helped us organise ourselves better. It also allowed us to form alliances with the UK, which was very valuable.

Thanks to this, we discovered a wonderful project called Lon-art Creative, and they have an initiative called Sheroes. Through them, we built a partnership to work together, and we left the door open for future collaborations. Coincidentally, our focus areas are very similar, so the connection was fascinating.

This experience also gave us more credibility, allowing other organisations to trust us more and support our growth. It has helped us become much more aware of the importance of sustainability and conscious practices, both within the team and in our projects. I found it particularly interesting that the programme wasn't just about "Here, you've won the grant"—they provided real ongoing support.

They guided us in thinking about key aspects of our team, helping us reflect on how we work. This support and everything we have learned has helped us become more mindful—which I believe is the ultimate goal: to do things consciously, with love, and to do them well. It has truly opened our minds.

**[Paola]**

Bárbara, regarding the Cultura Circular programme, what impact did this participation have on the work you do with Luciérnagas para la Paz?

**[Bárbara]**

Well, honestly, as I mentioned before, I feel very fortunate because at Arte Sustentable, we already had experience with exchanges with other organisations in Europe. But what Cultura Circular really did was highlight the importance of integrating sustainability across all aspects of our work.

It also validated something we had already been doing, albeit intuitively: this holistic vision of peace, human rights, and environmental rights. We already had these ideas interwoven in our work, but Cultura Circular helped consolidate them.

It also allowed us to establish a new relationship with another organisation in the UK, something we hadn't explored before. This feels like the beginning of something auspicious.

At the end of the day, in cultural organisations, it's like giraffes stick with giraffes, rhinos with rhinos, right?

We find each other along the way, and these connections are incredibly enriching. They help us see beyond the limits of our own territory, allowing us to learn from others and have a broader impact.

**[Paola]**

Patricia, tell us how your activities connect with peace and gender issues in public spaces.

**[Patricia]**

Well, the idea behind Luciérnagas para la Paz was born because the festival takes place in Cuautla, a municipality in Mexico, specifically in Morelos, where insecurity levels are incredibly high. The festival was created in response to this reality.

We decided to organise an event in public spaces at night, which are even more dangerous. We started noticing certain comments and stories, such as:

*“Oh no, let's go, it's still early”,  
“I don't want to go out at night”,  
“No, I no longer go out at night”,  
“No, I don't go anywhere at night”.*

I've heard similar things from friends, including Bárbara, and from people who have lived in this community for many years.

They told me that it wasn't always like this—that in the past, people used to ride their bikes at night, gather in the streets, sit outside their houses to chat and greet their neighbours. All of these daily routines were lost due to insecurity.

That's why the festival exists—to encourage people to go out at night through an artistic activity where they can feel safe, have fun, and spend time with their families. It's an event where parents and children usually participate together.

And when it comes to women, this year we're holding a unique activity just for them because the festival coincides with 8 March (International Women's Day).

We are collaborating with a feminist collective called Intrépidas Barraganas to host a lantern-making workshop exclusively for women as part of our 8 March activities. The event is called “The Moon Goes To Us”.

During the lantern-making session, we create a safe space for conversation where women can share experiences from a gender perspective. It is a space for active listening, and it is incredibly enriching.

**[Paola]**

Laura, when you work on Ibanasca's artistic interventions, what is the creative process like, and what strategies do you use to ensure that each piece reflects the community's identity and memory?

**[Laura]**

Well, every year we choose a curatorial theme. We start by conducting a small research project and writing a concept text. When we invite the artists, we send them this text so they have context, along with additional information. When the artists arrive in Honda, we begin with a tour of the territory.

We take them to the river and the most important museums, and by then, they already have a concept in mind, which we further develop together. Each year is different.

For example, this year, we worked in a vulnerable neighbourhood, so the process was shaped by the goal of contributing to the cultural and tourism development of the municipality. We don't just paint anywhere—we focus on activating areas with potential that aligns with the community's needs.

Creating the murals is, of course, a personal process for each artist, but it is deeply connected to the community. We engage with local residents, and some artists even allow children to participate in painting their murals.

We also have a programme where we invite young people who enjoy painting but aren't professionals—boys and girls who can assist the artists. This creates a knowledge exchange, and that's essentially what our creative process looks like.

**[Paola]**

Bárbara, looking ahead, what are the next steps in your journey towards sustainability?

**[Bárbara]**

First of all, we need to conduct an analysis once the festival is over, right? What did we observe? And based on that, we can take the necessary measures to strengthen the areas that present red flags, so to speak. The key is to continue advancing in the adoption of tools and models that allow us to stop using disposables completely and to promote bicycle use in a more committed way, right?

Certain things help us improve these practices. And the other aspect is to create activities around the river. We had already considered it for this year, but we couldn't consolidate it due to operational and logistical issues. However, for 2026, one of our main venues will be the river, and one of the core themes for reflection through artistic expression will be the river, with various activities happening there, right?

And, of course, one of the key things we do is always connect with organisations and cultural and artistic groups, so we aim to coordinate actions. It's all about reflecting on the importance of this natural resource in the city.

**[Paola]**

Laura, and in the case of Ibanasca, what new challenges or goals are you setting for this journey?

**[Laura]**

Well, the festival has grown significantly in recent years, and in the next edition, which will take place in October 2026, we are moving to a larger city. This means developing a strategy together with the local community, which will present different challenges because we have always hosted it in Honda, which is a more manageable city. Our goal, in collaboration with a university in Ibagué, is to work alongside students to create this strategy so that they can become aware of the importance of such initiatives from an early stage in their careers. We will also be working with Yarumo Lab, a wonderful partnership that emerged as a result of winning this grant.

**[Paola]**

Patricia, is there a memory or experience from the festival that has been particularly meaningful to you?

**[Patricia]**

Oh, so many! Well, let's see, this festival has had two editions so far, and in the first one, I was more involved in operational tasks on the ground. It was my first contact with the French organisations that Bárbara mentioned and the first time I participated in such a large-scale project. Personally, it allowed me to build connections with people here in Morelos and friends from France.

So, beyond my professional growth as a cultural manager, I've learned so much—I'm still learning—about handling the operational aspects and organising things. Now that I'm with you in Cultura Circular, I've also discovered new tools that can be implemented in festivals to help them grow and become better structured, right?

I take away many beautiful experiences, especially working directly in the community, leading workshops—it's so enriching to see people creating their lanterns, spending time with families, children, and parents, watching them build them. And on the day of the event, we managed to secure a school with a large gate leading to a football field, so we gathered all the lanterns there. People started arriving with their lanterns at the field, and it was absolutely stunning at night to see them lighting up one by one, again and again and again. Seeing the children's faces as they walked with their lanterns—it was pure joy, honestly, so much fun.

**[Paola]**

Laura, now a question for you. Throughout the festival, what has been the moment that filled you with the most pride or made you feel that your work is truly worthwhile?

**[Laura]**

I think there have been many moments because cultural management is really difficult—both in Colombia and, I'm sure, in Mexico as well. But it's incredibly rewarding. I feel that we keep going because we know it needs to be done. When you create a project like this, it's not just about the initial idea—you see how it takes shape and grows thanks to all the people who identify with the need for these spaces to exist. That has been truly beautiful.

And also, working alongside friends, supporting each other when things get really tough, and you find yourself asking, Should I keep doing this? Then your friends are there, saying, Yes, absolutely! It's beautiful! Look at everything we've built. I feel like those moments make it all worthwhile. We have to keep building and creating, even if it's hard—winning grants, getting funding, and expanding the team. That's how we realise that things are going well, even if the process is difficult and slow. The important thing is to keep going and never stop.

**[Paola]**

Bárbara, if you could imagine the future impact of Luciérnagas para la Paz, what changes would you like to see in the community and in the lives of women and girls?

**[Bárbara]**

Well, our vision is for Luciérnagas para la Paz to become the festival of this municipality. Because it truly represents not just an approach to the arts but also the opportunity to share a space, to look each other in the eyes, to recognise ourselves as part of a community, as part of a territory. It also means reclaiming public spaces that have been denied to us for so long due to violence and insecurity. In other words, it has all the essential elements to become a deeply cherished event for the community or the town where we live.

That's what we're working towards—for it to become a cultural and social emblem of the city. We also want to highlight important elements like the river, the streets, and the possibility of joining efforts with other cultural collectives. That's the direction we're heading in, and we are confident that, with the support of initiatives like Cultura Circular, we can achieve it. We also want to grow this project so that it becomes one of the main cultural and social events in the community. That's our goal, and we will keep moving forward, step by step.

**[Paola]**

Laura, Bárbara, Patricia, thank you so much for this conversation and for sharing the incredible work you do through your festivals. It's truly inspiring to learn more about how sustainability, art, and the regeneration of public spaces can go hand in hand.

**[Bárbara]**

Thank you for having us. I hope we can continue this conversation.

**[Laura]**

Thank you so much. This space has been really beautiful. I loved meeting you all, and you're always welcome in Honda and Colombia.

**[Patricia]**

Thank you, Paola. Thank you for the invitation and for this space. And Laura, thank you as well! You are absolutely invited to Mexico—to collaborate, to take part, to exchange contacts. And well, just—thank you so much.

**[Paola]**

Congratulations to all of you. Until next time!