

# RSA JOURNAL

Issue 3 2025

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## TOWARDS BELONGING: Afua Hirsch ON IDENTITY AND EXCLUSION





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RSA Journal — Issue 3 2025

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EXCLUSION

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**Exclusion**  
This edition's cover image features Afua Hirsch, author of *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* and the subject of this edition's 'In conversation' interview.

Cover photo by **Kate Peters**, whose work is deeply rooted in what it means to be human, feel connected and have a sense of belonging. A selection of her portraits forms part of the permanent collection of the National Portrait Gallery, and she counts *FT Weekend*, *Guardian Weekend*, *Wired* and *Time* magazine among her numerous international clients. She is based in London.



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Starting in 1783, the RSA published *Transactions of the Society*, which became *The Journal of the Society of Arts* in 1852 ('Royal' was added to the title in 1908). The publication assumed its current name, *RSA Journal*, in 1987.

Vicky Kington



# Rising to the challenge

**T**hus far in 2025, editions of *RSA Journal* have explored aspects of what it means to live in a society that is truly connected, addressing topics such as trust, mobility and opportunity – some of the variables that determine social cohesion. But even a passing glance at the news pages signposts the fractured reality of the world around us and, by extension, reminds us of those who may not have (or have ever had) a seat at the table.

So in this, our third issue of the year, we explore exclusion, and the challenges it creates which both define our present and future and erect roadblocks to our goal of societal connection. Challenges that the Fellowship have never, in the long history of the RSA, shied away from.

Award-winning writer and broadcaster Afua Hirsch is the subject of this edition's 'In conversation' interview, in which she reflects on the enduring role of race in shaping British identity through its people and institutions (including the RSA). Today, questions of racial identity remain as complex as ever across the UK, and Afua's personal experience of being 'othered' resonates powerfully in the present, with marginalisation and bias still deeply entrenched issues that are reflected in the current immigration debate dividing the nation.

A piece by Ken Costa, author and former global financier, examines

the generational divide at the heart of 'the great wealth transfer'. As Baby Boomers pass their assets to younger generations, what does this mean for society? Tensions between age groups have sharpened, with many Zennials seeing older generations as out of touch or even selfish in political and social terms. Ken makes the case that capitalism – often the very focus of this criticism – can provide solutions to the challenges younger generations face. In line with

**“Many of the contributions in this issue reflect a common theme: our collective need to bridge divides and strengthen communities”**

the RSA's founding values, he argues that collaboration and open dialogue must be central if we are to secure solutions that work for all.

Turning to the question of social connections, Tony Clements, Chief Executive of Ealing Council, outlines work with the RSA to place connection at the heart of Ealing's mission. With growing evidence that strong communities require shared values and social capital, Ealing is

seeking to reverse a decline that has fuelled inequality, weakened civic participation and eroded trust. Through a unique combination of data insight, community engagement, and place-based strategy, the council and the RSA are working to unlock collective potential by fostering trust, belonging and opportunity.

Many of the contributions in this issue reflect a common theme: our collective need to collaborate, both domestically and globally, to bridge divides and strengthen communities. *RSA Journal* has been a crucial tool in that connection since 1783, and today the *Journal's* new digital companion, RSAJournal+, is building on that history, offering fresh, more accessible ways to dive into the ideas that shape our world. As RSAJournal+ continues to evolve and expand over the coming months and years, our hope is that it will provide new ways for Fellows to connect, think, reflect and act.

Even in the face of the multiple challenges, I am consistently buoyed by the unique power of the RSA's worldwide Fellowship to constantly evolve, and to bring people together during polarised times to find thoughtful solutions to today's challenges. ■

**Vicky Kington** is Director of Content and Communications at the RSA.



# RSA NEXTGEN

Anna Merchuk’s passion for people inspired her to create Ukrainian refugee charity Nadiya



**Where did you grow up?**  
Stryi, Lviv Region, Ukraine

**What did you want to be as a child and what are you now?**  
As a child, I wanted to be all sorts of things – a hairdresser, writer, politician, anti-corruption campaigner – but above all, an actress. Right now, I work in the charity sector, helping refugees rebuild their lives and genuinely love what I do. I’m still working towards a career in acting and also hope to launch my own business soon.

**What’s your idea of happiness?**  
I don’t define happiness as a certain action or a moment; to me it’s a way of living. It’s being comfortable with yourself, your

own thoughts and choices, and appreciating small things that happen every day.

**What’s your idea of misery?**  
Probably being a nuisance to yourself. Complaining, whining and making other people miserable just because you are in a bad mood. It’s also not knowing what you want to do with your life. So many people I’ve met are just completely dead inside. You ask them what their dream is, and they say, “I don’t know”.

**What are you most passionate about and why?**  
I’d say people. They fascinate me. Their stories, feelings, experiences. Everyone has their own little world inside – their



Scan the code to learn more about refugee charity, Nadiya [www.nadiya.org.uk](http://www.nadiya.org.uk)

ups and downs, their tragedy, romance, something they are ashamed or proud of. I think this is why I am so eager to be an actress; to portray that incredible scope of human emotion. That’s also why I co-founded Nadiya, a charity that supports refugees – especially Ukrainians – to find housing and integrate into UK society. These aren’t just ‘numbers’ or ‘cases’, they’re people with histories, humour, ambition, pain. I’m passionate about making sure they’re treated with dignity.

**Tell us about someone who has inspired you.**  
Ukrainian composer, singer and cultural activist Volodymyr Ivasiuk. He was a genius who wrote more than 100 songs and was killed by Russians in 1979 for promoting national identity and Ukrainian language. He is a symbol of patriotism and freedom for Ukrainian people. I am extremely proud to be a child of a nation with a long history of an invincible spirit.

**If you couldn’t be yourself, who would you be?**  
Probably someone like Phoebe Waller-Bridge. Witty, fearless and creative.

**What is the one thing every person should be doing to help the planet?**  
Try to make the right choices. I know we are all influenced by different factors – our upbringing, propaganda, inequality. But at the end of the day, we must be able to do the right thing. Otherwise, what’s the point?

**Why did you become a Fellow of the RSA?**  
It’s a very cool community with people who know what they want out of life and how to achieve it. I truly believe that you become whoever you surround yourself with. The RSA brings together all social groups, all ages, all sorts of characters. Who wouldn’t want to be a part of it? ■

Photo: Courtesy of Anna Merchuk

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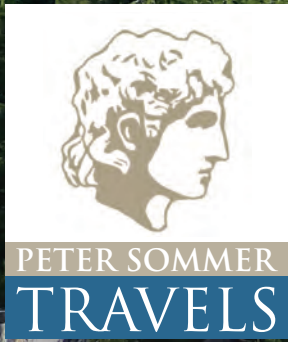
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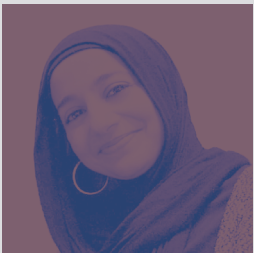
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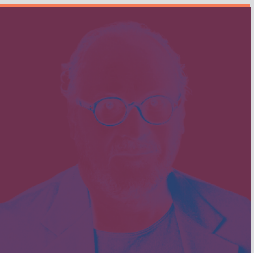
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NEW FELLOWS



Sabeehah Mahomed

Sabeehah Mahomed is a researcher in AI ethics and policy at The Alan Turing Institute. She was recognised in the international list of ‘100 Brilliant Women in AI Ethics’ in 2025 and has been endorsed by the British Academy as a ‘Global Talent’. Specialising in AI and children, Sabeehah has engaged over 250 children across the UK in co-design fieldwork and led impactful policy contributions, including organising the world’s first Children’s AI Summit in London, and international advocacy at UNESCO and the Council of Europe. She holds an MSc with distinction in Digital Humanities from University College London.



Garrick Jones

Garrick Jones is a Co-founder of the Ludic Group. He works with Fortune 100 companies, governments and the UN on digital transformation, large-scale systems change and collaboration. A Fellow at the LSE and the Royal College of Art, his research spans creative economies, decision-making and digital environments. Garrick has co-authored three books: the best-selling *The Curious Advantage – the Greatest Driver of Value in the Digital Age*, *ALIVE* and *Digital Humans: Thriving in an Online World*. Garrick also co-hosts the acclaimed podcast *The Curious Advantage*, in which he speaks with leaders in the arts, science, business and technology about ‘curiosity’, and is an accomplished pianist and composer.



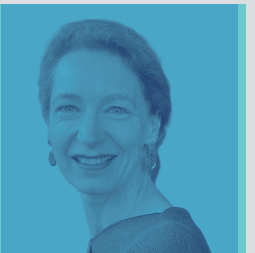
Dianne Whelan

Dianne Whelan is an award-winning Canadian documentary filmmaker, photographer, artist, author and public speaker. She has written, directed, and produced three award-winning films, a three-part series for the Canadian Broadcast Corporation, authored two books and has exhibited her photographs in numerous art galleries. In August 2021, Dianne was the first person to complete the land and water trails of the 24,000km Trans Canada Trail, and this journey is the subject of her new Oscar-qualified film, *500 Days in the Wild*. Previously, she released documentary *40 Days at Base Camp*, shot on Mt Everest, and accompanied by her book about the experience, *Base Camp: 40 Days on Everest*.



Dan Poole

Dan Poole is an award-winning filmmaker and actor. His work spans theatre, film, documentary and voiceover. Trained at London’s Mountview Theatre School, he has performed internationally, including at the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre and at the oldest theatre in India. His credits include productions at the National Theatre, Royal Court, the Globe and the Almeida, and screen roles in *Batman Begins*, *Valhalla* and *Dungeons & Dragons*. He is the co-director of *Muse of Fire* and director of *The Space: Theatre of Survival* (Sky Arts). His production company, Timebomb Pictures, produces documentary films, including Dan’s seminal work *Section 1591* – a project seven years in the making, about child trafficking in the US.



Julia Stamm

Dr Julia Stamm is Founder and CEO of She Shapes AI, which champions women pioneers who develop and use AI responsibly for social good. An award-winning tech-for-impact leader with nearly 20 years’ experience at the intersection of science, policy, innovation and technology, Julia previously led The Data Tank and the Global Solutions Initiative, and founded The Futures Project to align innovation with societal needs. Julia holds a PhD in philosophy and is an adviser and international speaker who has held senior positions in organisations such as the European Cooperation in Science and Technology, the European Commission and the G20.





ECONOMICS

# COMMON WEALTH

With Baby Boomers about to pass down trillions, who stands to gain? And can intergenerational collaboration reshape capitalism for a better future?

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Words: Ken Costa   Illustrations: Sandra Rilova



“A generation goes, a generation comes, yet the earth stands firm forever.” So says Ecclesiastes 1:4. And in essentials, this is correct. The fact that my generation, the Baby Boomers – whose youngest members are now in their 60s – are currently ceding our power and influence to those younger than us is nothing new. It is merely the passage of time running its course.

But there is a feature of this particular generational changeover that makes it unique: wealth. Wealth has, of course, always been passed down the generations. But the magnitude of the transfer that is occurring – it has already started in earnest in the form of gifts and house purchases – is unprecedented. In the US alone \$84trn is expected to be passed down over the next two decades. That figure in the UK is estimated at between £5.5trn and £7trn.

#### Generational clash

This is the largest handover of generational capital in human history. The beneficiaries of this ‘Great Wealth Transfer’ (as it has been dubbed) are empowered as never before by technology, and this empowerment is further strengthened by their influence through social media – we could arguably just as well call our current moment the Great Power Transfer or the Great Influence Transfer.

The potential fallout from the transfer could be either catastrophic or magnificent. After this particular coming and going of generations, the earth will hopefully still be standing firm. But the same cannot necessarily be said for global capitalism.

Why? Blame it on the conflicting ideals of the generations passing on the wealth and those receiving it. We are in a distinct period of generational clash. Boomers and their Millennial and Gen Z (taken together, Zennial) heirs do not see eye-to-eye on much, appearing content to stay in their silos and mudsling. Boomers characterise Zennials as a feckless, work-shy and entitled bunch who spend too much money on flat whites and avocados instead of saving for a deposit on a house. Meanwhile, Boomers are ridiculed as an analogue, out-of-touch, emotionally stunted group who have ridden the wave of the low-interest decade and asset inflation, enriching themselves at the expense of the next generation.

This is unsustainable. Not just because it is unpleasant and unfair to all involved. But because the Great Wealth Transfer is a unique opportunity to build a better capitalism, or risk losing it forever.

Capitalism is the best method we have for securing freedom and prosperity for all. But

we must ensure that the younger generations want to participate in the market rather than simply burn it to the ground. If they have no money, they can’t buy houses or other assets. You can’t be a capitalist without any capital. Zennials and Boomers must both be included in the development of this better capitalism or else it has no chance of survival. The exclusion of one will, by definition, exclude the other. The hindsight of the Boomers and insight of the Zennials are both essential pieces of the puzzle.

Many Zennials are suspicious of, if not downright hostile towards, the benefits of capitalism and the market economy. This might be expected of younger generations, who throughout history have typically been more liberal politically, slowly becoming more conservative as they get older. But it is worth remembering that the oldest

## “Zennials are a hugely capable, even prophetic generation. What they really want is change”

Millennials are now well into their 40s. There is no longer any guarantee that Zennials will ‘grow out’ of their progressive views or their scepticism of capitalism.

#### When it all came down

And they have good reason to be sceptical. For Millennials especially, the spectre of the 2008 global financial crisis looms large. It is their ‘original sin’, which ended the sustained period of unprecedented global economic growth and prosperity they had been raised in just as they were entering the world of work.

The formative years of my and my contemporaries’ lives were, by contrast, shaped by the zeitgeist of the 1960s. The decade which tore up the limitations, borders and perimeters of the old world. Nothing was off limits. A me-first world which proudly proclaimed that all the boundaries had gone. And all this coincided with the exceptional post-war economic boom in the West. In the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s the dominant trend was rising prosperity. At its worst, this became the loads-a-money, Gordon Gekko, Greed-is-Good caricature. It is no wonder the 1980s were termed the ‘Decade of Excess’. Financial markets were deregulated to create greater competition, and monetary policy was eased to levels that led to the current indigestion and danger in the capital markets.

And then it all came crashing down. I can remember the moment exactly. I was in my office when the rumours first started. There had been



whispers for months, but there were always whispers. This time, however, it felt terrifyingly real: the most serious financial crisis since 1929’s Wall Street Crash was upon us.

From my office window I could see the City of London as usual – the hushed, almost churchy quiet and the rows of gleaming buildings. It looked horribly like the calm before the storm. Within days, Lehman Brothers would collapse. The image of bankers with their cardboard boxes would fill screens around the world. In turn, that would trigger the meltdown of the financial system on both sides of the Atlantic, undercutting the very foundations of our modern economy. Banks running out of money, employees unable to be paid, families being evicted from their homes. The mechanics of society screeching to a deathly halt. As I saw it all ahead of us that day, I felt a growing sickness.

I was chairman of one of the most prestigious investment banks in the world at the time. When it came to the financial universe, at least, I had reached as far as it was possible to go. But that day was like nothing I’d ever experienced before. There is a tendency in life to imagine that

the status quo is permanent, almost a fact of nature. But, as I stared around the magnificent buildings of the City, I knew that the opposite was true. We had made all of this. The banks, the financial system, even the notion of paper money in the first place – all of it was merely a human invention. We had invented the means of our own destruction. Soon there would be panic outside my office door.

But in that moment, there was just a fragile calm. The sense of a world held in suspense, waiting for the axe to fall. Scientifically, we knew more about the world than any generation before us. Technologically, we had created elaborate systems that spanned the globe. Our planet was connected like never before. And now that very connectivity was about to undo us, sending panic ricocheting to all corners of the earth. The system was about to show itself for what it was. Something impermanent. Illusory. Nothing more than elaborate smoke and mirrors. The foundation of our modern society, the rock on which our

system was built, trickled away like sand.

And it is in this new world that Zennials started their careers.

Seventeen years on, the effects can still be felt. Recent analysis from the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows the alarming level of stagnation in Britain ever since, with the average working person earning a lower wage in 2022 than the average working person in 2008, when adjusted for inflation.

#### Empowered for change

But this suspicion of capitalism, this scepticism, however legitimate it might be, needs to be assuaged or else we will all lose out. Zennials are a hugely capable, even prophetic generation. What they really want is change. Change to a better, more inclusive capitalism is, I believe, the solution that will benefit everyone. But the change needs to happen quickly, and it needs to be effective.

As a generation, Zennials have a firm and explicit agenda for the change about to come. They are significantly empowered, not only by the financial endowment they are about to





receive, but by technology, a world in which they are natives, not immigrants.

Like it or not, Zennials will drive the global agenda of the coming decades. The programme will be heavily accented towards wider social concerns, ethics, environmental protection, justice and equality. A new creeping socialism could well be the result of this intergenerational transfer if capitalism itself does not undergo a major change. I believe this is the biggest danger of the Great Wealth Transfer.

Higher taxation and larger government will be seen by many in this cohort as an inevitable consequence, necessary to achieve their overall

social objectives. Danger signals should be flashing to those who wish to see a vibrant, incentive-based, risk-rewarded, value-creating capitalism emerge from this moment of great transition. But this is still achievable, through something I like to call CO: the tool via which a socially energised capitalism, which includes rather than excludes, emerges from the Great Wealth Transfer.

In essence, CO is a shift from the radical individualism of post-war generations to a prioritisation of collaboration, compassion, community and collective experience. More succinctly, it's a shift from me to we. A shift

to understanding that what individuals can gain from working together in CO is greater than what they give up in order to participate. It means CO-leading, CO-working and CO-creating. We give up far less than we gain by acting together towards a CO-destiny. And the gains are economic as well as ethical.

#### Connection at the core

Collaboration will be the key. And conversation. Being aware of each other's needs, challenges and perspectives – even fears – is the key to unlocking the power of intergenerational collaboration. As mentioned, the exchange of ideas between the generations that we need to preserve and expand capitalism is currently non-existent. If that continues, either capitalism itself could come crashing down altogether, or the inheritocracy that has emerged over the past decade or so becomes more entrenched, further excluding those not set to benefit from the Great Wealth Transfer.

Because that is the outcome if we continue down this path. Our current capitalism is effectively set up to exclude, hence the inequality we see all around us. Left to run its course in this same environment, the Great Wealth Transfer

### “Danger signals should be flashing to those who wish to see a vibrant, incentive-based, risk-rewarded, value-creating capitalism emerge”

might only serve to make this more acute. The haves will end up with more and the have-nots with less. If you have access to the Bank of Mum and Dad (and Mum and Dad have planned effectively), you'll be sitting pretty; if not, then good luck. The intergenerational inequality and conflict we have discussed will simply morph into intragenerational inequality and conflict. No matter which side you sit on, that is surely not a desirable outcome for anyone.

But, through intergenerational collaboration, we can change this. We can develop a renewed, invigorated, sustainable, socially energised capital system that leads to the kind of immense prosperity and productivity that benefits all.

Boomers need to step up to ensure that the baby of value-based capitalism is not thrown out with the bathwater of a purely values-driven agenda. We need to reassert the importance of profit but also recognise where it exists alongside the essential driver of a purposeful

capitalism. Because Zennials aren't happy to just do well, they want to do good. And, no matter what level they are at in a company, they want a stake in what the results are and to know that their input is valued.

This flies in the face of our old version of capitalism where ideas come from the top and those further down the ladder do the work to put those ideas into action. But that is hardly the most productive way for an organisation to run, anyway, as it means ignoring ideas that could be valuable. Involving Zennial employees now in the formulation of mission statements gives them a stake in the ethos and purpose of an organisation and also allows for that invaluable combination of insight and hindsight that will be so vital in the coming decades.

In the workplace, this will mean implementing processes like reverse mentoring and 'feedforward' – rather than feedback – so that businesses can adapt effectively to a new world in which Zennials predominate. This is how we develop the CO-working environment that will be crucial to the new capitalism. The type of hierarchical structures that have been embedded in the organisations I've worked at for the majority of my career are part of the old capitalism that Zennials mistrust. These organisations will need to adapt.

We are at a pivotal point in the emergence of a new way in which capital is earned, invested and deployed. Tension continues to build between Boomers and Zennials. But what we need is reconciliation and understanding so that capitalism can make it through this era of change strengthened, resilient and fit to face the challenges of the next generation.

There is a hopeful outcome to this unprecedented shift of wealth as Zennials inherit the financial world. But it requires a mutuality based on respect for the contributions of the two generations and the elimination of conflict. We disagree but we need to learn to disagree well, for the benefit of all. How Zennials will shape the future of the market economy is not just up to them, but their predecessors, too. ■

**Ken Costa** is Chairman of Helios Fairfax Partners, the largest private equity group in Africa, and Emeritus Professor of Commerce at Gresham College. He is also the author of *The 100 Trillion Dollar Wealth Transfer: Will the Handover from Boomers to Gen Z Revolutionise Capitalism?* A veteran investment banker, he previously chaired UBS Investment Bank for Europe, Middle East and Africa and Lazard International.

**Sandra Rilova** is a Spain-based illustrator and animator. She has created work for The Folio Society, Penguin Random House and the *Havard Business Review*. From 2018–2020 she created all the illustrations for the new Hans Christian Andersen Museum in Copenhagen.





RSARCHIVE

# Minding the gaps

The RSA's newly appointed senior archivist reflects on archives, identity and the artefacts that connect us

**Words: Abby Matthews**

**T**he act of recording our thoughts and actions – through literature, art, correspondence, reports or spreadsheets – is deeply human. These diverse records, from the romantic to the routine, form the core of archival collections. Together, they create a narrative tapestry rich with detail and



complexity. Yet archives are, by nature, selective. They are made of records deemed worthy of permanent preservation, often leaving gaps or silences where we might long for clarity. Rather than viewing these absences as flaws, we might consider them as spaces ‘where the light gets in’.

## Windows and mirrors

Working with archives offers a compelling window into human life. It's one of the reasons many of us in this profession advocate so passionately for their value, not just as evidence, or in supporting governance or business practices, but in fostering identity, placemaking and community cohesion. While heritage collections are sometimes undervalued (seen as useful for ‘branding’ or a good quote), archivists understand their deeper potential: to ask questions, build connections and reflect the shared and divergent paths of human experience.

Archives hold power because they mirror our humanity, inspiring with their age and content – but they can also exclude. Marginalised voices often go unheard, and historical perspectives can be skewed by omission. Archivists are trained to recognise bias – in what we collect, how we describe and how we interpret. Acknowledging this bias is vital; it opens the door for dialogue and more inclusive storytelling. Today, archives and heritage collections are increasingly being called upon to create thoughtful, creative and inclusive paths into difficult topics. They give us safe distance to question the past and reconsider its echoes in the present.

## Surprising connections

Since joining the RSA this spring, I have been immersing myself in its collections – seeking familiar reference

Photos: RSArchive, London Borough of Sutton Archive



points of my own in a new and rich archive. One familiar name stood out to me: David Knights-Whittome, a photographer who was elected to the Society of Arts in 1897, and whose work I encountered in a previous role, managing the archive for the London Borough of Sutton. There, I helped lead the digitisation of over 11,000 of his glass plate negatives – images that captured a local community between 1905 and 1918, during a transformative period in British history.

Knights-Whittome's association with the Society is limited in our records to his election as a Fellow, but we know that he was an early beneficiary of Henry Cole's copyright reforms, by registering his formative work with the Stationers' Company (records of which are now held in the COPY1 collection at The National Archives). Largely self-trained, he would no doubt have been keen to read many of the educational articles which appear in the *Journal of the Society of Arts* in the 1890s and beyond.

Far top left: (l) Miss Abbot, c.1907, photographed by Knights-Whittome in his Sutton studio (r) David Knights-Whittome, self-portrait in the studio, c.1906

Far bottom left: Portrait of Henry Cole by Julia Margaret Cameron

Left top: Trial painting of a portrait of a man by Miss Stephens, 1820

Right top: Excerpt from the *Journal of the Society*, No.2466, February 23, 1900

Right bottom: Trial painting of an unfinished portrait of a young woman in a hat by Eliza Anne Drummond, 1822

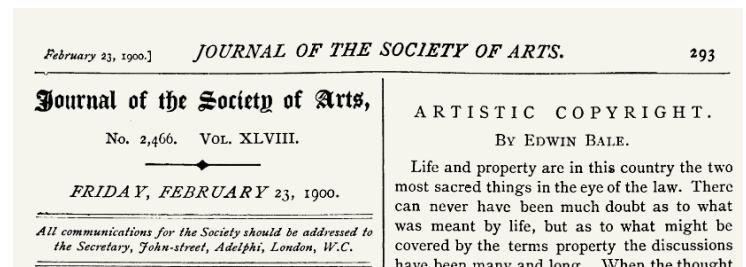


Scan the QR code to view images from the David Knights-Whittome Glass Plate Negative Collection at Sutton Archives

## The RSA archives welcome researchers



To book an appointment, please email [archive.team@rsa.org.uk](mailto:archive.team@rsa.org.uk) or scan the QR code to view the catalogue online.



## Silent stories

My work on the Knights-Whittome project revealed stories of housemaids, scientists, scholars, soldiers, suffragists and more. These portraits, often unnamed and undated, speak volumes. Each sitter's gaze bridges a 120-year gap with surprising immediacy, evoking emotion and recognition. I'm reminded of the words of another photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron, who aimed to record “the greatness of the inner as well as the features of the outer man”. Without comparing the two, this ambition might equally have applied to any of the portraits in Knights-Whittome's collection whose likenesses prompt a multitude of questions.

Counterintuitively, the lack of personal detail available about these sitters has invited viewers in. The gaps in our knowledge about these individuals fuelled engagement with communities – students, survivors, creatives, people with lived experience of loneliness and exclusion, and audiences from various backgrounds, places and viewpoints – all of whom were able to research, reimagine and share these silent stories, bringing new perspectives to the images.

Though the collection lacked diversity in its original makeup, its themes – loss, love, resilience and endeavour – were universal. The project's reach extended internationally and sparked conversations and

creative responses that moved well beyond the original archive. It was a reminder that gaps and silences can be as meaningful as what is recorded. They prompt empathy, imagination and new narratives.

This experience shapes how I now approach my role with the RSA's archive. I am eager to uncover its threads, explore its silences, and contribute to a future collection that is ‘inclusive in its exclusivity’. By recognising what is missing as well as what is present, we can better represent the layered stories that define our communities and choices. The archive is not static; it's a space for ongoing discovery, dialogue and connection. I look forward to sharing more as that journey, and my experience here, unfolds. ■

**Abby Matthews** is the RSA's Senior Archivist. She previously managed the London Borough of Sutton's archive, which houses the Knights-Whittome Glass Plate Negative Collection.





# FAR FROM HOME

Today’s housing systems exclude the young and vulnerable, says former UN Special Rapporteur Leilani Farha – and it will take a radical shift to treat housing as a human right, not a privilege

**Words:**  
Nicholas Wroe

**Artwork:**  
Amy Casey

“The housing world we have created for young people is so unjust,” announces Leilani Farha. “For some, it starts from the minute they want to leave home. For many others, it starts a long time before that.” Farha’s stark assessment comes from decades spent documenting housing failures across the globe, and her analysis goes far beyond individual inconvenience, or even acute hardship, to explain how housing insecurity threatens the foundations of democratic participation and social connection.

Farha says she has been “meditating” on what is lost when we lose the security of housing. “And it is so much. Of course, there is the practical loss of shelter and so on, which is obviously and publicly catastrophic. But there are also so many psychosocial aspects to it that play out in every sphere of life that we maybe don’t see so clearly, but have equally profound and negative impacts.”

**Putting down roots**  
Farha’s trenchant stance on housing and democracy

stems from remarkably varied experience of grassroots advocacy, international diplomacy, legal expertise and bearing witness to housing’s importance to human dignity across six continents.

Born in Ottawa in 1968 to Lebanese-Canadian parents, Farha’s route to becoming one of the world’s foremost housing rights advocates took her through an English literature degree at the University of Toronto before pursuing an unusual combined law and social work degree. This intersection of legal frameworks and human systems would become a key feature of her work.

During her time at law school in the mid-1990s, Farha was surprised to discover that students could undertake human rights internships in many locations (including Israel), but none had ever gone to Palestine. “The politics of Palestine were at our dinner table when I was growing up,” she explains. “Our family lost land in the 1948 Nakba. So I knew there was something not right about that, and I was determined to go to Palestine.”

Above:  
*Keeping It Together*:  
acrylic  
painting  
on paper  
(2009)

She had picked a momentous moment. In 1994, Yasser Arafat was returning from exile, Palestinian prisoners were being freed and the Oslo peace accords were signed. Farha ended up working with former prisoners, most of whom were

previously students themselves, at the Palestinian Human Rights Information Center. “Palestinians had really centred their arguments on civil and political rights and together we learned about the human right to housing, which was relatively new. It provided a legal

framework under international law for people not only to have a home, but also to have the right not to have it demolished, to be evicted and displaced. It really opened my eyes.”

On returning to Canada to finish her law degree, Farha completed her articles with an

international housing NGO. She continued to work in the sector, at a grassroots human rights organisation focused on housing which provided her with a crucial grounding in practical advocacy, connecting abstract legal principles to lived experiences of discrimination

Photo: “Keeping It Together” © Amy Casey, 2009







Above:  
**Corralled:**  
acrylic  
painting  
on paper  
(2010)

## “When young people cannot establish stable housing... they become disconnected from the civic life that underpins democratic participation”

and displacement. Farha’s reputation for effective administration allied to innovative legal activism that embraced human rights saw her become a leading figure in the field, and she was appointed United Nations Special Rapporteur in 2014, a position she held until 2020.

### Housing for the few

The expansion of Farha’s role at the UN, from local housing advocate to a worldwide authority, was reflected in her and her team’s ambitious effort “to follow the money” in housing across the globe. Their research estimated that,

in late 2017, the global value of residential real estate was \$220trn – a staggering sum that, since the 2008 financial crisis, says Farha “has nothing to do with housing” but instead reflects the interests of finance through the creation of an interconnected “ecosystem of governments, banks, investors and central banks”. According to Farha the process also encourages national banks to reward “bad behaviour from a human rights point of view”, offering lower interest rates to investors who acquire buildings where rents are likely to be raised to satisfy lending conditions and profitability,

which often results in tenants being displaced. Governments often then support these investors through public programmes and funds that mirror bank risk assessments. And, in parallel, housing can become a place to hide (sometimes illicit) capital which can then provide security for trading financial instruments on global markets.

“We were seeing people living on sidewalks in the most affluent countries in the world, and new mortgage-based housing systems in the Global South. Our minds were kind of blown by this as a predictor in a financialised system – the very system that was being imposed on Southern countries. Financial vehicles for generating returns rather than providing shelter. Now, everyone talks about financialisation and commodification, but back then we really felt we were in new terrain.”

Farha points out that it is the most vulnerable who suffer in this system, “people of low income and from racial minorities, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, single parents, women, refugees and migrants, to name just a few.” The young are also disproportionately affected – and when young people cannot establish stable housing, she says, they become disconnected from the civic life that underpins democratic participation. “They don’t engage because they can’t. There is too much going on, too many moving parts.”

Other consequences of this shift not exclusive to the young but which also certainly impact them are more health issues (including, not surprisingly, mental health issues) and diminished creativity, economic activity, business innovation and much more. “On one level, the fact that someone can’t host their friends at home doesn’t seem so serious, but it is part

of a wider loss of connection. If you can’t do that you likely also can’t engage in local or national issues, or make the long-term investments in a place that democracy requires.”

### A matter of rights

While at the UN, Farha began the work that, in 2019, would establish The Shift, an organisation that challenges global financialisation to treat housing as a human right, not a commodity or an extractive industry. Much of the organisation’s time is spent trying to persuade local and national governments and decision makers to leverage as much social value from housing finance as possible. Farha says governments should ask “Am I getting public value for public dollars?” and they should ensure that any public subsidies or tax benefits to investors result in keeping people housed and secure.

But how does this approach fare in a world in which the philosophy of ‘might is right’ seems to be in the ascendancy?

“What has been on display, certainly recently in the most flagrant of ways, is a complete disregard for the universality of human rights,” Farha acknowledges. “‘Might is right’ has infected housing policy, where those with capital can displace those without, regardless of human rights obligations and no government at any level anywhere is doing enough.” She also draws explicit connections between local housing injustices and international failures: “If we don’t understand that what’s happening in housing with respect to rights is the same lack of universality of human rights playing out in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, Congo and elsewhere, then we’re missing something fundamental.”

But there are also examples of hope at the grassroots level.

Below:  
**Linked:**  
acrylic  
painting  
on panel  
(2010)

She cites her work judging the World Habitat Awards, where she has encountered an inspiring diverse variety of projects from all over the world. A female construction training project in rural Tanzania, for example, that provides eco-friendly and dignified homes for the elderly while promoting gender equality, poverty reduction and low carbon construction. Or, in Beirut, amid near economic collapse, a safe and secure database for people to report housing rights violations.

And as for human rights, she points to their enshrinement in 1948 by the United Nations General Assembly in the form of the Universal Declaration. “Human rights aren’t just something quaint. They are law. And there are standards that flow from that in housing, as in everything else. And so, if you’re in the business of housing, you must abide by those laws and standards. Equally, governments should

ensure that these rights are upheld: that housing is adequate, affordable, secure.”

Farha recently revisited the Universal Declaration, she says, finding renewed purpose in its vision of the human family.

“Even after all these years, that really moved me. I do want to live in a world where I’m part of something called the human family. So I go back to what my former UN colleague and friend and head of Amnesty International, Agnès Callamard, once said. Of course we can criticise the international system and international law, but what is Plan B? There is no Plan B. I cannot agree with her more.” ■

**Nicholas Wroe** is a freelance writer and former Assistant Editor of *Guardian Review*.

**Amy Casey**’s paintings of cities explore the work and organisation that goes into their creation and evolution; the constant shifting and adaptations and layers of changes. She is currently a resident artist at Zygot Press in Cleveland.



Photos: “Corralled”, “Linked” © Amy Casey, 2010





IN CONVERSATION

# “If people are excluded, they will make extreme choices. And you address that by listening to them and creating solutions for the things they need”

Writer, broadcaster and best-selling author **Afua Hirsch** speaks with *RSA Journal* Editor **Leah Clarkson** about assimilation and experience, the enduring power of race in shaping British identity and why confronting uncomfortable history is key to meaningful inclusion

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Photos: Kate Peters

**Leah Clarkson:** Welcome to the RSA, Afua. Often in your work you draw attention to the toll of exclusion, which is the theme of this edition of the *Journal*. I want to go back to your upbringing in a very white Wimbledon of the 1980s and early 1990s. Can you tell us a little bit about the duality of your upbringing?

**Afua Hirsch:** I think there are two concurrent stories of duality. The first is being visibly ‘other’ in a very white environment. Where I lived was particularly homogenous, especially for London. My world was not diverse, and I experienced the reality of being othered and having a name that made people ask questions, and a hair texture and a type of food that we would eat at home and a cultural background that drew negative attention. ►



But I also experienced a world in which people kept telling me they didn't see race – that we'd moved past race. So there was a kind of gaslighting that I was living, without really any tools with which to even articulate it, let alone make sense of it.

The second stream was my own personal heritage. My mother's family came from Ghana and have very deep ties to Britain over centuries. Ghana was one of Britain's so-called 'model' colonies in Africa. They had been colonially conquering and extracting from Ghana for centuries. I had generations of ancestors who came to school in Britain, who spoke English, who worked with British administrators. So, when my family came to the UK in the 1960s, they very much felt part of the British imperial story. And yet, when they came here, they were immediately othered.

My grandfather was a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany who came to the UK in 1938. He did not have a history of connection to Britain. He came here with no English, no money, no relatives in the UK. And within a generation – by learning English, by working hard, through his talent – he was able to establish himself and assimilate into Britishness.

I've never heard anyone ask my father about his immigration status, why he's in the country, why he has a German surname. I've never noticed anyone ask my father's side of the family, who've all been racialised as white, what the impact of their immigration background is. And so, I grew up really perceiving that although both sides of my family came from somewhere else, one side was allowed to be here without having to explain their presence. Whereas the other side, who ironically have this long history of feeling part of Britain, were completely othered and were regarded as a problem.

That duality was something that made me, from an early age, sceptical of the idea that this was just about immigration, because it was clearly also about race. It was clearly about who is allowed to assimilate, who is allowed to be here unconditionally, and who represents some kind of threat to the idea of Britishness, who's excluded from the identity. And for me, that seemed very clearly based on my Blackness.

Recommended reading

“The most influential book I ever read about the history of race in Britain was probably *Staying Power* by Peter Fryer. It's the author's lifetime work documenting the millennia-long history of black people in Britain and it blew my mind both that it existed, and that, until I was almost 30, I had never heard of it.” Afua Hirsch

**Clarkson:** There is, in *Brit(ish)*, this heartbreaking moment, where you're with your friends, and they're saying, "You're not Black to us." A lot of your work is around the psychological toll that that othering takes. I wonder if you could talk about that feeling of exclusion, which happens in so many different ways, especially for people of colour.

**Hirsch:** It's been funny writing about that, and how people react to it because at the time, I didn't see it as a kind of tragic moment. But it felt problematic. I was sitting under a tree with my school friends in secondary school, and I remember them saying so clearly, "Don't worry, we don't even see you as Black." I could see that that for them was a lifeline they were offering me, like a way out of Blackness.

The privilege that I have is that I didn't want a way out of the Blackness. I was so fortunate to be raised by a Black mother, as part of a Black family that had an identity that was so rich and celebrated. To me, my Blackness wasn't a problem to be erased. It was something that connected me to a story that I felt very proud of, and an ancestry I wanted to know more about.

In that moment, I experienced another duality, which was my sense of my own heritage versus how others perceived it. If you grew up in the 90s and 80s in Britain, Africa was associated with war, famine, disaster, poverty, and Black people were associated with criminality at worst and inconvenient immigration at best.

There was nothing in the way Blackness was being presented to them that made it desirable. So, I can see why, from their perspective, they thought it was advantageous to be offered a way out of it. And that was an early indication for me that I did not want my identity to be assimilated out of existence.

**Clarkson:** The other aspect of that is about how we teach about race. Having also grown up in the 1980s, I think there was this idea that we don't see race, that we just are all colourblind. Hopefully things have changed a little bit in terms of what we're aspiring to. How should we teach people to think about and talk about otherness?

**Hirsch:** It comes down to quite a basic premise for me, which is the idea at the centre of imperialism – that Britain has a monopoly over civilisation, over progress, over ingenuity; that Britain had an empire because it was the best, because it was civilised. And that people who were colonised were lucky to be colonised because it gave them proximity to this superior culture, and that people who came to Britain above all, chose it because they bought into British superiority.



“The privilege that I have is that I didn't want a way out of the Blackness”

My education very much promoted that idea. The people who invented things were white and tended to be British because I was growing up in Britain. The people who advanced culture, science, art, the progress of humanity – were white. The people who created desirable ideals, institutions, the rule of law, democracy, were white. And we should all aspire to those ideals. It's becoming easier to see how destructive these ideas are.

And that's part of the reason for so much of my work. Because they're not true as a matter of fact, as well as a matter of narrative. They're motivated by a basically white supremacist project. I don't really see how you can expect Black people growing up now to choose a different identity or heritage if it's presented to them as inferior. Why would you do that?

I had this living example of an African identity that was so desirable, and in so many ways aspirational, and in ways I could tangibly see offered an alternative to many of the problems that

Britishness was facing, especially social alienation and loneliness and the emptiness of consumption.

I could see that there were alternatives in my heritage that were being ignored or erased or degraded by that mainstream narrative. But if people don't have access to that alternative worldview, then why wouldn't they choose this one? And that's how our education system has worked. It's been really to mould people into this idea that it's the only option.

**Clarkson:** I was quite surprised to read in *Brit(ish)* that Emmeline Pankhurst was a racist and a big supporter of empire. I thought to myself, 'This is the excluded also excluding.' And there are people in our society right now who are also being excluded, who feel that. How do you see that playing out over time?

**Hirsch:** History really does repeat itself. The co-option of people who have the most to lose into the system that's destroying them is a very familiar pattern. And that's exactly how I see current politics playing out. The people who are voting for extreme right-wing policies stand to lose the most from those policies. It's not rational, but it is emotional.

So, it doesn't give me any pleasure to look back at *Brit(ish)* and see how much of what I saw 10 years ago, when I was writing that book, has become true; has played out in a way that I was cautioning. The core of the message of my book was that if people are excluded, they will make extreme choices. And you address that by listening to them and creating solutions for the things they need.

Britain can't compete in this globalised world if it alienates and excludes so many of its most innovative and talented and energetic members. You're competing with countries that have narratives of inclusion, that are able to mobilise all of their talent in service of winning. And this country was doing the opposite. I could see that we would pay a cost for that. The cost turned out to be even worse than I thought. Instead of starting to address that now, in many ways, we're doubling down and leaning even more into extreme forms of alienation.

**Clarkson:** Is there anything that could reverse that process? What might start to put us on a better path?

**Hirsch:** I do think it has to exhaust itself because, ultimately, people need solutions, and we don't have any from this current generation of politicians. For me, the erosion of gatekeepers in the media is something that I personally welcome. We're seeing a decentralisation of



who gets to tell the story, shape the narrative and share the facts and who gets to do the investigation.

If you're a young Black person growing up in Britain, your idea of your Britishness and your culture and your creativity is not coming from three big media organisations. It's coming from all of these creators who are navigating it in their own way.

The energy around that is phenomenal; it's creating, if not the meaningful changes and solutions we need, at least a vibe shift that is disrupting the status quo. That is something that I feel really positive about.

**Clarkson:** I feel like there's this tension between that energy that you're speaking about, especially with younger generations, and how they're embracing representations of themselves that they're able to create. But also the toxicity, the ability of people to get at you... do you think we are breaking more towards the positive in our social media and our ability to harness narratives?

**Hirsch:** It's hard to create a cost-benefit analysis because it's quite chaotic. If you take an optimistic view of humanity, that we have the capacity to use information to make rational choices, then that's a good thing. The flip side, of course, is that everybody is under a level of scrutiny and faces personal attack in a way that's deeply uncomfortable.

In my case, I'm educated, I'm a lawyer, I'm a professional journalist. I'm in so many ways equipped to know how to curate my content in a way that makes it pretty resilient. I am equipped at combative adversarial interaction. Trained, even. There's a flip side to that, which is I often felt a burden that I have to take those conversations on, because I can.

Over time, I've become a little bit less tolerant of doing that for myself. Not necessarily because of how toxic it is, but just because I've stopped believing that it's useful. I think that the kind of performative conflict that just generates clicks... is not educational. It's reductive. People aren't really seeking to learn. They're just enjoying the show. So, I step back from a lot of those conversations.

**Clarkson:** You've highlighted the role of cultural institutions in shaping collective memory. And the RSA itself has a narrative that's consistent with many of the cultural institutions in Britain in the sense that, for example, it's very proud to have William Wilberforce among its Fellows, and yet it also has this history of members having supported the transatlantic slave trade. When you think about organisations like the RSA and other cultural and arts organisations, how should we be talking about that?



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**Hirsch:** I think that if you lean into how racially problematic your past is as an organisation, you make it a more inclusive place. It has to start with acknowledging the cultural backdrop, and all organisations have a culture. I can't overstate the importance of leaning into the hardest and most uncomfortable parts of the history.

For me, there are two additional reasons for that. One is to understand [that] every generation is a generation that will become future history. And we're all right now asking ourselves a lot of questions of how you navigate things where there seem to be really thorny historical issues. How do you take a stand on allegations of atrocities and genocide? Previous generations were facing the same problems. It's easy to look back and agree that everyone should have been against something. But at the time, it seemed equally complex and thorny.

We don't get to understand how those choices get made and how moral stances

## “Britain can’t compete in this globalised world if it alienates and excludes so many of its most innovative and talented and energetic members”

get clarified if we don't look honestly at the previous conflicts and dilemmas that people have faced. By glossing over those and making it seem obvious, we dumb ourselves down. That has real implications for the present.

The second reason is that resistance is something that we just don't understand well enough. At points in the history of this organisation, for example, there would have been people resisting those who were using power to advance things that were oppressive.

I'm interested in what that resistance looked like and what was effective and what wasn't. How did the organisation evolve and get to the place where now we're sitting here doing this interview and Fellows are interested in what I have to say? That clearly represents a change from the past. How did we get here and what worked?

**Clarkson:** Thinking ahead to future generations, are there certain movements, ideas, actions that are happening right now that give you hope, that make you excited, that make you feel like these shifts are really happening or could be happening in a new way?

**Hirsch:** I'm energised by the ways in which people are becoming very difficult to control. They're resisting groupthink. They are being critically aware. And that sometimes can be very messy. Sometimes it involves things I really disagree with. But, in general, I grew up at a time when people were more likely to follow, more likely to believe in their institutions, more likely to accept the way things are done. I think that being critical is a force for good.

I also think a lot about the bifurcation between the way we perform ideas and activism, especially on social media and what we actually do in the real world. It's easy to think of a high-tech future where everyone's on universal basic income, plugged into a virtual reality system – just spends all their time viewing in cyberspace. But I think we're closer to that than we realise.

We have an idea about what we're doing and how much impact it has based on what we say in virtual spaces. But that's often disconnected from what we do in the real world. Whether we show up at protests, whether we write to our MPs, whether we vote in a way that disrupts power, whether we form new political parties, whether we form grassroots movements, whether we are active in our grassroots and our community, even on a micro scale, that's how actual change starts. ■

**With thanks to Two Temple Place for providing the photoshoot location: [www.twotempleplace.org](http://www.twotempleplace.org)**

**Afua Hirsch** is a writer and broadcaster, and the best-selling author of *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* and *Decolonising My Body*. She is a former barrister and West Africa correspondent for the *Guardian*, and has presented several documentary series (including *Enslaved* with Samuel L Jackson in 2020 and the three-part BBC series *Africa Rising with Afua Hirsch*); she currently holds the Wallis Annenberg Chair in Journalism and Communications at UCLA.

**Leah Clarkson** is Editor of *RSA Journal*.

**Kate Peters** is a photographer based in London, with a selection of portraits on permanent display at the National Portrait Gallery, London. She has worked with *British Journal of Photography*, *Guardian Weekend*, *TIME*, *The Telegraph Magazine* and *RPS Journal*.



# BAKED IN, NOT BOLTED ON

The evidence is clear – digital inclusion can boost Britain’s economy and improve lives, but only if we invest like we mean it

**Words:**  
Helen Milner OBE, FRSA

**Illustrations:**  
John Holcroft

Digital inclusion cannot be achieved with a quick fix – it requires long-term investment to help tackle some of our biggest challenges. At the national level, it can strengthen the economy and help public services meet people’s needs. At the individual level, it can change lives.

I recently met a young man who, after being given free connectivity, found a job and felt much less lonely as a result. An older woman was helped to develop skills and confidence, and provided with free access that stopped unnecessary visits to her GP. And a mother described receiving a free refurbished laptop for her son’s homework as ‘winning the lottery’.

These stories are snapshots of a bigger truth: digital

inclusion benefits everyone, not just those currently excluded.

**Political will, economic reality**

In February 2025, the UK government launched its Digital Inclusion Action Plan (First Steps), defining digital inclusion as “ensuring that everyone has the access, skills, support and confidence to participate in and benefit from our modern digital society, whatever their circumstances”.

It is encouraging to see this commitment. But I fear that ambition without serious investment will see us falling short. Since Labour took office in July last year, the £22bn ‘black hole’ in public finances has dominated headlines. A spiralling welfare bill, persistent NHS crises, and global political instability have increased fiscal uncertainty.

While digital inclusion aligns with the government’s social justice values, making it a priority in an agenda focused on economic growth is harder. Funding is tight, yet the opportunity is too big to ignore.

**The economic and human case**

According to 2022 research from the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR), £13.7bn is the benefit to the economy if five million more people have the digital basics, with £9.48 back for every £1 invested. CEBR research from 2025 further shows that, if every worker could master the 20 basic digital tasks deemed essential for the modern workplace, it could lead to a £23.1bn Gross Value Add increase each year. That, in turn, could fuel a £10.3bn annual uplift in earnings.

The human opportunity is also clear. We know that investing in digital inclusion transforms lives, opening up jobs, health and connections for people who are otherwise shut out. Our Good Things Foundation Digital Nation 2025 research found that 7.9 million people lack the digital skills needed to participate in basic online tasks, and 1.9 million people struggle to afford even mobile connectivity.

In a fair society, everyone should be able to participate in the modern online world.

**Scaling up digital inclusion**

To deliver digital inclusion at scale, we need sustained investment and cross-government collaboration. Good Things Foundation is calling on the government to think innovatively about ways to increase investment in digital inclusion and ensure inclusive economic growth. This could give teeth to the new Government Ministerial Group on Digital Inclusion, chaired by Minister Sir Chris Bryant.







One initial idea involves embedding digital inclusion into government procurement, meaning businesses would be asked to outline ‘social value’ within a winning contract.

The government also has a new Office for Investment that works across departments and includes ‘impact capital’ – a mix of conventional investment, social investment and philanthropy. Could impact capital be available to deliver key outcomes such as (good old-fashioned) channel shift for big public services such as the NHS? Or could the government invest 1% (or more) of the Digital Services Tax income annually in building a more inclusive digital society? In the UK, this tax is expected to bring in £800m in 2025.

#### Spending better, not just more

We should weave digital inclusion into all policies that affect people on low incomes, are out of work or under-employed, have low education attainment or are in poor health. The evidence in our Digital Nation research is clear: significant proportions of people in these groups are digitally excluded.

People have complicated lives, and those with multiple social challenges tend to have even more complicated circumstances. Digital inclusion is not a silver bullet. It won’t help all unemployed people get a job immediately. But if one in four unemployed people is also digitally excluded, then supporting them with free connectivity and skills training will remove a key barrier to work.

Public servants need incentives too. The UK Treasury could create an ‘embedding fund’, allowing government departments to competitively bid for money to spend on digital inclusion initiatives. If funding were available to

**“Digital inclusion is not a silver bullet. It won’t help all unemployed people get a job immediately. But if one in four unemployed people is also digitally excluded, then supporting them with free connectivity and skills training will remove a key barrier to work”**



Scan the QR code to learn more about Good Things Foundation

departments, it would make them accountable for pursuing digital inclusion and, even better, the bidding process would inspire departments to work together.

Real change can also be unlocked by spending money already allocated, and spending it smarter. There’s no money – except there is: £240m will be spent on the Get Britain Working policy for the long-term unemployed. AI exemplars for public services will receive £42m in funding. There remains £2bn still to be commissioned for the government’s Project Gigabit programme, which aims to ensure 99% of the country has superfast fixed-line infrastructure.

The government has announced just £9.5m in funding for digital inclusion for 2025, and this includes a competitive grant programme (the Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund).

But this is a drop in the ocean compared to what is needed.

#### Everyone has a role

Government cannot close the digital divide alone. Many businesses have stepped up since the pandemic (including those who have collaborated as strategic partners with Good Things, such as Vodafone Three, Virgin Media O2 and Accenture), and more and more are realising that they have a role to play. Civil society can

embed digital inclusion further into its activities, and more than 7,000 local cross-sector organisations are already working on digital inclusion as members of the UK’s National Digital Inclusion Network.

Good Things Foundation and the network are supporting thousands of people every week. We help them to access essential health services, apply for benefits, manage their money or communicate with family who live far away. These are people who, without that free connectivity, that refurbished phone or laptop, or that extra confidence, would be cut off and left behind as the digital world grows without them.

The UK is the sixth richest country in the world. We can afford this. Let’s use our resources, creativity and determination to ensure our digital future includes everyone. ■

**Helen Milner** is the Founder and Chief Executive of Good Things Foundation, the UK’s leading digital inclusion charity; she has worked for almost 40 years supporting education about using the internet and eradicating digital exclusion. She was named 9th on *Computer Weekly’s* UKtech50 2025: The most influential people in UK technology, and number one on the publication’s list of ‘Top five female tech founders’.

**John Holcroft** is an editorial illustrator who has worked for publications such as *BBC Reader’s Digest*, *Financial Times*, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. ►





# GUERRILLA DEMOCRACY

From intervention to policy, Hive Mind Speaks strives to bridge the gap for excluded voices, transforming art into influence, conversation into consensus and consensus into change

Words: Joshua Oliver

**I**n the UK, 650 Members of Parliament make decisions affecting almost 70 million people. While we elect these MPs, most of us have little influence over their policies that shape our daily lives. Hive Mind Speaks aims to address this lack of agency, which we see in how public services are delivered, how taxes are spent and in the absence of a meaningful political voice for citizens.

Our new civic arts model blends art with deliberation. When introducing our work, I often ask: “What if artists like Banksy, Ai Weiwei or Led by Donkeys gave the public the tools to respond to their work and influence future policy?”

At Hive Mind Speaks, we believe that art can provoke, but art alone is not enough. For lasting, real-world change, it must connect with democratic processes. Through artistic interventions, we can make participatory democracy more accessible. They draw in those already willing to engage in civic forums while also motivating people who might not otherwise take part. A well-designed guerrilla art/participatory democracy cycle can be worn like a badge of honour, sparking conversation and driving action.

## NHS65: testing the model

My bond with the NHS is deeply personal. Born with a rare musculoskeletal condition, I had multiple surgeries in infancy to ensure I would have the ability to walk. Later, facial reconstruction surgery gave me ownership over my body and image. But when a concerning potentially degenerative neurological diagnosis left me facing a year-long wait to see a specialist, it revealed how far the service is now buckling under strain, a reality that inspired me to launch NHS65.

Upon the 65th anniversary of the death of ‘father of the NHS’ Aneurin Bevan, we launched a 65-location guerrilla art tour. This project depicted a dystopian NHS via an LED video truck, which was driven into high-visibility areas to spark public attention and conversation. We combined this with on-the-ground vox pops, a targeted social media campaign

Photos: Bill Gidda, Terry Oliver, Fabio De Felice



Far left:  
Oliver in Red Jay mask

Left:  
Oliver with plaster cast he wore for first two years of his life

Below:  
Canvassing public opinion at St Thomas' Hospital, London







**“We launched a 65-location guerrilla art tour. This project depicted a dystopian NHS via an LED video truck, which was driven into high-visibility areas to spark public attention”**

and online polls posing questions on the main themes that arose from the Lord Darzi report, commissioned as an independent investigation of the NHS. Together, these formed the basis for distilling the key talking points that became the foundation for a citizens' jury. My conviction to combine art with participatory deliberation was strengthened by hearing Rory Stewart's passionate advocacy for citizens' assemblies on his Rest is Politics podcast and his personal encouragement helped shape the early stages of our approach.

After the tour, Hive Mind Speaks convened that citizens' jury. Participants debated key issues raised during the tour and voted on priorities. These included questions such as: 'Should regional areas be responsible for their own NHS decisions? And 'Should the

NHS become a national wellbeing service that looks at housing, food and access to jobs?' We then submitted their recommendations to the government's NHS Change Initiative, which has now published its 10-year plan informed by public feedback. The NHS65 project received praise from figures such as writer/campaigner Dr Adam Kay (*This is Going to Hurt*) and Ben Stewart of Led by Donkeys, recognising our model of democratic participation as vital work.

**From performance to accountability**  
Government-led citizen-input initiatives (both central and local) often feel performative, with little clarity on whether recommendations have been implemented. Our approach is different. We embed what we call 'galvanised accountability'.

The ITV drama about the Post Office Horizon scandal showed how public outrage, channelled via media pressure, can force institutions to act. This approach forms part of the model we are adopting as one component of our 'Theory of Change', which identifies the lever for change as the dilemma faced by decision-makers when confronted with clear public consensus. Guerrilla art and deliberation generate policy solutions, referendums confirm them and galvanised accountability ensures that ignoring the outcome risks escalating media and public pressure.

Our theory was put to the test with NHS65. I feel a genuine sense that the public's voice was heard in the government's Change NHS 10-year plan. The next challenge is ensuring their proposals are acted upon and that is where media pressure and galvanised accountability come in.

**Scaling up**  
Building on NHS65, we are developing a more structured deliberation system. This is inspired by Audrey Tang's vTaiwan process, which was highlighted in *RSA Journal* Issue 2 2024. As Taiwan's first digital affairs minister, Tang used open-source software to facilitate large-scale consensus building, allowing public input to directly shape national policy.

While the UK government is unlikely to use such direct public-to-policy mechanisms anytime soon, Hive Mind Speaks intends to lead by example. If we can demonstrate the value of this approach, our guiding ambition is one day to see a Citizens' Participation Bill mandating public involvement in policymaking.

Our next step is 'Hive Mind Votes', which creates referendums that follow artistic interventions and online deliberation. Using AI, we will surface common ground while downplaying extremist positions, distilling discussions into clear recommendations to put to a referendum. CrownShy, our tech partner (whose head of design, Shu Yang Lin, collaborated with Audrey Tang), is building the platform. We are also in discussions to integrate this process

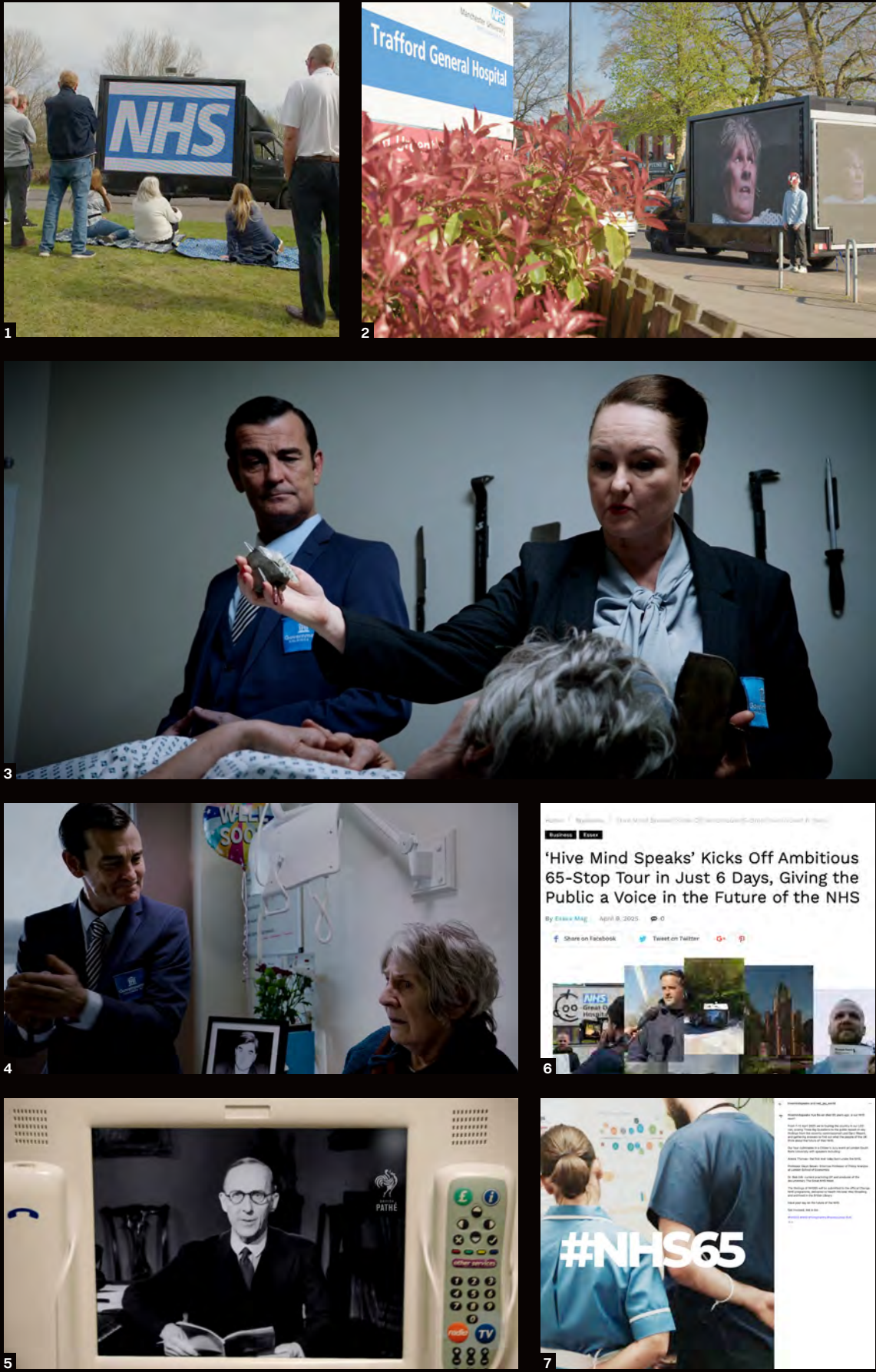
Left:  
Red Jay outside his birth hospital

1. Public screening of NHS65 video

2. Red Jay outside the first ever NHS hospital, Trafford General Hospital

3-5. NHS65 video

6-7. NHS65 in the media



Photos: Caitlin Lock, Fabio De Felice, Red Jay World Productions



Hive Mind Speaks seeks allies who share our belief that art and democracy must grow together. To find out more about the work of Hive Mind Speaks, scan the QR code or email hello@hivemindspeaks.com



design into a research consortium we are building with the universities of Strathclyde and Edinburgh.

Initially, these referendums will be online, but our goal is to hold in-person events in key locations once engagement reaches critical mass, creating the same buzz as a national referendum.

After each referendum, we will disseminate the results to the media. An advocacy department at Hive Mind Speaks will engage with policy and legislation decision-makers to fight for the change people voted for. To prevent any appearance of political bias, we will let the general public choose the critical issues we prioritise in future cycles.

**A new civic arts model**

The passing of my father significantly accelerated my path into guerrilla art, shaped by his values of activism, creativity and environmentalism. Thanks to his support, I have been able to pursue this work in a space where funding is scarce.

As the term 'guerrilla' can deter funders wary of political association, we are developing a circular funding model. Each intervention will produce artworks for later sale, funding the next cycle of civic action.

At Hive Mind Speaks, each cycle is intended to leave more than just recommendations. If we do our job right, investors won't just be buying art. They'll be buying cultural moments, perhaps even fragments of legislative history. Each sale will seed the next intervention, fuelling a cycle where art, democracy and accountability meet to improve the lives of everyone taking part.

**Planting seeds**

At this year's Edinburgh Fringe, I saw Pussy Riot's *Riot Days*. One line struck me profoundly: "If you start your schoolwork on the first page and do your sketches in the back, sooner or later the two will meet in the middle. And, next to your history notes, graffiti appears. Which turns history into a different story." Hive Mind Speaks sits at this point of collision.

This perspective reminds me of the black-and-white photograph of Greta



Above left:  
NHS65 – citizens  
jury voting

Left:  
Red Jay at The  
Kelpies, Scotland

Below:  
Greta Thunberg  
during her first school  
climate strike

**“Our next step is ‘Hive Mind Votes’, which creates referendums that follow artistic interventions and online deliberation”**

Thunberg during her first school climate strike. Sitting alone with her sign, she symbolised an entire generation excluded from the world they will inherit. Who could have foreseen the profound impact she would have?






















Exclusion can be the catalyst for transformation. Every movement starts somewhere, and ours is only beginning. ■

Joshua Oliver, aka Red Jay, is an activist and Founder of Hive Mind Speaks.



Photos: Caitlin Lock, Fabio De Felice, Adam Karls Johansson

# We would like to thank our corporate and strategic partners for their support across the RSA's work

We would also like to express our thanks to the Chacegrove Family Foundation

If you are interested in becoming a corporate partner, please contact [partnerships@rsa.org.uk](mailto:partnerships@rsa.org.uk)





SOCIAL POLICY

# Good council

Ealing Council is putting social connection at its core, transforming everyday services into powerful opportunities to build community, tackle isolation and put the heart back into public services

Words: Tony Clements

**T**he centrality of social connection has been hiding in plain sight. Running for over 75 years, the Harvard Study of Human Development has long concluded that our connections with one another “keep us happier and healthier. Period.” More recently,

psychologist Julianne Holt-Lunstad has demonstrated that social connection is the most important determinant of our overall health, finding that those with stronger social relationships are 50% less likely to die over a given period of time than those with fewer social relationships.

Above:  
King’s Coronation  
weekend event in  
Southall (2023)

The RSA’s recent elevation of social capital in the public debate has also been important and energising, as evidenced by the number of people and organisations who have taken social connection, relationships or tackling loneliness as a guiding purpose. The World Health Organization identified social connection as a global health priority and the US Surgeon General described social isolation as an epidemic. And, on a smaller scale, organisations in Britain such as the Relationships Project and Neighbourly Lab have been advocates and innovators in this area – as has Ealing Council.

Photos: Ealing Council

## Everyday connections

When I applied to join the council as chief executive, I argued that social connection should be at the heart of our purpose. This chimed with the vision and philosophy of a political administration determined to do something different with their time in office. But Ealing Council is not an academic institution or a research institute. Our residents expect us to act to make their places, spaces and lives better. So what does social connection mean for our council in practice?

The work the RSA has done with partners on Revealing Social Capital, funded by Nuffield Foundation, and recently launched at the Patron’s Lecture, shows that social capital is the most important factor in social mobility. Most excitingly, it provides the best evidence for where some of the most valuable social capital is built – across social and economic differences. It shows that the places that count are the informal spaces in civil society – the clubs, hobby groups and interest groups. For anyone who works in a council, this is something that we intuitively know and see, and this is where our organisations can have a big influence.

Right:  
Let’s Go Southall  
Cycling Club

Below:  
Tony Clements,  
Ealing Council  
Chief Executive

Below  
bottom:  
Opening of the  
Southall Cycle  
Hub (2022)

It’s not straightforward. There are a lot of hopeful but ineffective interventions, and lots of the go-to of community work has little evidence behind it. So, we’ve experimented and generated an abundance of initiatives to see where that connection can be nurtured.

One key insight is that we don’t need to do a lot of new things – we already have thousands of touch points with our residents across the 80+ local services we run, from parks to leisure centres, social care to housing. What is most important is how we do things. Every one of these is an opportunity to build social connection.

So what has worked, and what hasn’t?



## Positive actions

Health inequalities in Ealing are stark and, in some of our communities, physical activity is low. We’ve established an intervention in Southall called ‘Let’s Go Southall’, where trained members

**“Social connection is the most important determinant of our overall health”**



of the community run activities for their neighbours. Now, 110 local people run 80 different activities a week for over 1,000 people – activities such as cycling, aerobics in the park and walking clubs. The magic is that, when classes finish, people don’t immediately disperse. They hang around and chat, head off for lunch or drift towards tea together, creating the opportunities to build deeper connections.

We also believe it’s important to add some science to the art of community, so the impact of ‘Let’s Go Southall’ was independently assessed by Brunel University. The assessment found that our underserved communities benefit most, where services often fail, affirming its uniquely positive effects.

A related initiative is our ‘Community Champions’ – a network of volunteers who





receive support and training from the council to spread advice and guidance throughout their neighbourhoods. Champions are typically those trusted individuals in communities who ‘everybody knows’, and they often join up those who have a need with whoever can support – whether this is another person, faith or community group, or the council.

Sometimes it is just making connections across people with similar interests. Just this week, a champion was inviting others to trips she had organised for carers and NHS staff to the London Transport Museum and Tower of London.

**Listening culture**

Leisure, sports, advice and networks are hardly new activities for a council, but these interventions rely on a different culture of listening and engagement. One that starts with what’s already strong in a community and builds on it, not a deficit mindset of problems that need ‘fixing’ by public sector professionals. It requires humility and new types of subtle statecraft.

And it’s important to acknowledge that we sometimes get it wrong, even as we try to change.

We recently worked with our foster carers to redesign our foster care service. Thirty of them spent a week with us building relationships and revamping a service that had lost touch with some of their needs. But our feedback loop was too slow, and the continuity of the work and relationships was broken by staff turnover. After the foster carers’ effort with us, we didn’t keep our side of the bargain and we let the progress drift. Some months later, I had a dispiriting conversation with a foster carer who felt we had only done it to impress Ofsted. It was a clear reminder that sustaining a new culture in a financially pressured sector on

Right: Windrush Day event

Below St George’s Church warm space Zumba class



**“Even if our councils were fully funded, would they be doing the right work in the right way?”**

the front line of many social crises requires more than just ideas.

Councils rarely make the headlines until things go wrong. Most recently the financial challenges have been cutting through to the national conversation with frequent reports of dozens of councils now on financial life support to even provide services at the legal minimum level.

But even if our councils were fully funded, would

they be doing the right work, in the right way? Has the practice of councils and the policy expectations of central government kept up with the needs and aspirations of citizens today? I’d argue no – and our job as public servants is to be restless in the search for the responses that meet the challenges of the day.

Our response at Ealing Council, in our patch of West London, is to put social capital and social connection at the heart of all we do. ■

**Tony Clements** is Chief Executive of Ealing Council.



Photos: Ealing Council

# LIVING UNIVERSITY

Can the collective power of universities – the great knowledge creators and early adopters – be channelled into creating a regenerative future?

**Words: Andrea Siodmok**

As I dipped my toes into the emerald Pacific waters, I knew this moment would change me. The sound of women singing a Fijian farewell song was all around as I boarded the Drua ‘Vola Siga’. Druas – double-hulled canoes built by the Indigenous people of Oceania,

the Tawa-vanua – move with the ocean currents, sharing different island cultures and their stories. Many of these stories have been lost in time, but some endure.

In Oceania – where rising seas threaten not just land but entire ways of life – this legacy feels urgent. Oceania is

Below: Images from the University of Fiji documentary *Drua: A Beacon of Discovery*

on the edge, at the front line of the ecological crisis, grappling with the erosion of culture, sovereignty and place. As part of the University of Fiji’s Drua Project, the Vola Siga sails between Fiji’s archipelago of islands, helping to preserve and revive the knowledge and language of Fiji’s Indigenous peoples. It is just one of many projects that epitomise the ‘Living University’ – recognising the vital role that universities can play in supporting human and planetary flourishing.

**The university of the future**

Universities are crucibles of new knowledge and innovation: dynamic hubs of learning, research and engagement. As institutions with long histories, they provide an anchor to hold steady among the changing tides of everyday politics and the 24-hour news cycle. They help us to recognise the challenges and opportunities of our time and see the value of the long view. ►



Photos: University of Fiji





# “The Vola Siga sails between Fiji’s archipelago of islands, helping to preserve and revive the knowledge and language of Fiji’s Indigenous peoples”

I am a professor at RMIT University in Melbourne and was previously chief impact officer at the RSA. I have been part of a small group of academics working with RSA Oceania to explore how universities can support the transition to a more just and sustainable economy – a regenerative future. In doing so,

we look to meet the challenge of climate change in ways that foster community, nurture life and build resilience.

At the heart of this inquiry has been the acknowledgement that Indigenous peoples have been living in harmony with nature, and regenerating its potential, for thousands of generations. There is much that we can all learn from the plurality of views across the Eastern, Western, Northern and Southern hemispheres. Like the oceans, our global academic community is interconnected and without boundaries.

The RSA has long championed the value of regeneration in all its forms, both environmentally and socially. Across the RSA’s 271-year history the names might have changed, from preservation to conservation and from sustainability to regeneration; however, the core principles remain relatively constant – finding imaginative ways to live in balance with

natural systems while also taking action as the world around us changes. Put simply, living in ways that give and not just take.

So, we ask in our new report ‘The Living University’: what does a university give back? How can a university be a force for positive change and a platform for accelerating regenerative approaches and practices? Universities have grown considerably over the last 40 years as the number of students has expanded. They have become unique places of cultural diversity – a microcosm of the world itself.

As sites of knowledge creation and exchange, they provide a space to critically reflect on cultural norms and explore ideas that have the potential to change the world. As early adopters, their power as thought-leaders is significant, particularly given the vast public monies invested in universities by governments to shape R&D agendas and

support their social purpose. As place-based institutions with a localised social contract, universities have obligations to share their knowledge for the betterment of all.

## Network of networks

Our report finds that universities have a critical role to play in facilitating a shift towards more regenerative, life-affirming cultures. In particular, it advocates for: building ecological and place-based knowledge, so that learners understand the interdependent relationship between humans and our planet; greater investment in bioregional infrastructure and living learning labs to support local collaboration and innovation; and support for international coalition building, for example through R&D tax credits as well as by encouraging cross-border collaborations.

The collective power of universities is immense and could be better deployed at a planetary governance level for systemic impact. We might think of this as the ‘network of networks’ effect.

We are at a pivotal moment. As we sit on the edge, peering towards the future, it is easy to become disorientated and lose sense of direction. However, while the belief in human progress as a uniting force behind globalisation may have faltered, our understanding of the power of new ideas and of individual agency to shape wide cultural change is more necessary now than ever.

## Future inspiration

In 2026, RMIT will launch the Regenerative Futures Institute (RFI), inspired by the work of the RSA. The RFI is looking to create new knowledge and practice that can have a sustained and positive impact on people, places and the planet. RMIT, like the University



The documentary of the launch of the Drua was screened at the Pacific Arts Festival (FestPAC) in Hawaii, charting the University’s research journey in adapting to climate change



# “The collective power of universities is immense and could be better deployed”

of Fiji, is exploring what regeneration means in their context. Our report references many more. If we can join up this thinking and accelerate it through investment, we have the potential to transform our world for the better.

Since that moment on the drua, I have begun to understand more clearly the role universities can play in lifting the aspirations of students to make a difference on the things that matter. The power to change whole systems starts with individuals and, like all change, it can begin as

a ripple but create great waves over time. I invite others to read the report and join the Living University inquiry to consider the role of universities in delivering human prosperity within planetary boundaries. ■

**Professor Naomi Stead, Professor Wendy Steele and Professor Chris Speed from RMIT also contributed to the article, along with RSA Oceania Director, Philipa Duthie.**

**Andrea Siodmok** is Dean of the School of Design at RMIT, recipient of the RSA Bicentenary Medal (2015) and former Chief Impact Officer at the RSA.



Photos: University of Fiji





# Healing arts



The transformative power of creativity to promote neuroplasticity and overcome isolation through connection

**A**fter being diagnosed with dystonia following an accident 21 years ago, I didn't know if I would ever return to work. Cervical dystonia is a neuromuscular condition which causes muscle spasms and chronic pain, making it very difficult to work comfortably with focus.

Prior to my accident, I had a fulfilling career as an interior designer working on residential and commercial interiors across the UK and as far away as Australia. The physical limitations of dystonia meant I lost my independence and had to give up my career. Dystonia continues to affect my ability to be mobile and independent of others, and has led to numerous challenges, not least the pain of exclusion and isolation.

Several years after my accident, I was encouraged by a friend to join a painting class at the local college; this helped to reignite my love of colour and pattern. Using my previous design experience, I began to explore how to use my paintings to create patterns printed on a range of homeware, from cushions to trays to ceramics.

The stimulation of this success helped enormously in lifting my mood – when painting I always play music and have a little dance with my paints! – and enabled me to break down the barriers of isolation. I am unable to sit at a computer to work, so Instagram and LinkedIn have significantly improved my ability to communicate and network, helping me to coordinate events and pop-ups, which a few years ago I would have



Left:  
Lisa Todd  
surrounded  
by some of  
her prints



Scan the QR code  
to learn more  
about Lisa's work  
and opportunities  
for collaboration

thought of as impossible.

Neuroplasticity is the formal name for an area of research which is revealing the power of the arts in calming the brain, minimising the uncontrollable dystonic movements and the resulting chronic pain. The impact of art, music and dance on neuroplasticity is an area being researched globally, including at the world-leading Institute of Neurology, Queen Square, London, where researchers are making the effects of neuroplasticity visible via the development of innovative headsets which instantly display the brain's response to viewing or making art.

My own 'healing response' from creating colourful, dynamic prints and patterns (inspired by my childhood in South Africa as well as my father's Australian heritage) has been enormously powerful. I am currently working on plans for an immersive installation that would use my 'Joy' pattern and artwork collection to explore how the brain responds to art by displaying brain activity during viewing and creation of art while raising awareness of dystonia.

It's clear to me that these improvements in my own mood are not a coincidence. Bringing people together in a creative environment is a sure way to not only promote healing and wellbeing to those suffering from chronic pain or dystonia, but to break down broader barriers of exclusion and isolation. ■

**Lisa Todd** is an award-winning print and pattern designer. Her recent exhibition *Ubuntu* was hosted by the Sunbury Embroidery Gallery between June and August 2025.



# CELEBRATE THE SEASON IN STYLE



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# Fellowship

RSA SPARK

## Igniting a new generation of designers

*"RSA Spark has changed how I think about design, not just as a way to shape physical spaces, but as a tool to build connections, support communities and create positive change."*

These words come from one of the students who put forward a submission to RSA Spark – an education programme building on 100 years of the Student Design Awards (SDAs). RSA Spark is taking the RSA's SDAs to new heights, inspiring students aged 18 and above to apply their skills and creativity to real-world briefs for positive impact.

Through the SDAs – and now RSA Spark – the RSA has continually changed perceptions about design. It has created new generations of designers, many of whom have gone on to become leaders in their field and been invited to join the Faculty of Royal Designers for Industry (RDI).

Between April and June this year, RSA Spark attracted a wide range of innovative submissions – 100 in total from 43 universities across the globe. They responded to one of four briefs, each co-developed with an industry partner.

- **Where People Meet** (Rayne Trust) – how might we reimagine and create community spaces of the future where people are connected, places are healthy and everyone is leading a good life?
- **Creative Communities** (Marketing Trust) – how might we make creative education and careers accessible to everyone, everywhere?



Visit the RSA Spark Showcase at RSA House (or on the RSA website) between 24 September and 23 October 2025

- **Railway 200 and Beyond** (Network Rail) – how might we take inspiration from 200 years of railway success while innovating for an even brighter future?
- **Urban Cool** (RMIT University and Hammersmith and Fulham Council) – how might we support citizens and organisations to create cooler, greener and fairer cities that bring joy and health to everyone?

Students who submitted the most outstanding ideas will be celebrated in a showcase at RSA House, beginning with a private viewing on 23 September. The showcase – a month-long exhibition – will be open to Fellows and shared online through the RSA's website and social media.

As the *Journal* went to press, submissions were still being reviewed (across the four briefs), to award the Anjool Malde Young Innovator Prize and the Chacegrove Family Foundation Entrepreneurs Grants. Look out for details of the showcase participants on the RSA's website, and come to the House to view their work and support their ideas between 24 September and 23 October 2025.

These students are shaping how we change the world through innovative design – keep your eyes on them, as their work is just beginning. ■

**Joanna Choukeir is the RSA's Director of Design and Innovation**

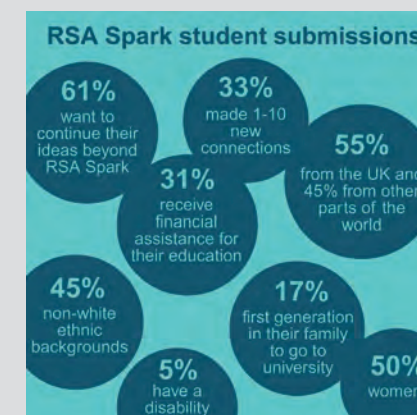


Photo: Chiara Luxardo

[www.thersa.org](https://www.thersa.org)





COMMUNITY LEADERS

# Creating connection through local leadership

The RSA has introduced a new community leader role for Fellows, supporting the development of place-based communities. Community leaders work with Fellowship councillors and local engagement managers to organise activity in their area, while championing the RSA's programmes and interventions.

Alan Milliken, FRSA has recently taken up the role in Glasgow, building on his long-standing commitment to the city's Fellowship. He hosts the monthly Glasgow Gathering at the historic Glasgow Art Club – a space where Fellows come together to share ideas, collaborate on projects and grow their collective impact.

“The Glasgow Gathering provides Fellows with an opportunity to connect, learn, and contribute. Most of all, we are now looking towards having a wider impact,” Milliken said. “Creating the conditions for Fellows to meet and connect was important to me. Equally important was finding our purpose. People become Fellows to make a difference, to have an impact, and we allowed time for this to grow at its own pace.”

Brainstorming at the gathering led to the idea of the RSA celebrating the 850th anniversary of Glasgow becoming a city. The theme of Glasgow City of Cultures emerged, which energised the group and generated enthusiasm.

As a result of the group's efforts, there will be a civic reception at Glasgow City Chambers this autumn, hosted by the Lord Provost of Glasgow, exploring the history, diversity and resilience of Glasgow. Other potential events are also being discussed.

“The energy and commitment of Fellows are palpable, and this has led us to map out longer-term plans to explore a range of topical and potentially challenging issues, including dementia. The key to our success has been focusing on creating the right conditions and allowing Fellows to lead,” explained Milliken.

We are looking for Fellows to take on a local lead in all our areas. Fellows interested in becoming a community leader should speak with their local Fellowship engagement manager to find out more (see table on page 49). ■

**Amy McPherson is the RSA's Fellowship Engagement Manager for Scotland**

RSA SCOTLAND

# Princess Royal to attend Angus Millar Lecture

Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal will be the guest of honour at the RSA's annual Angus Millar Lecture on 22 October in Edinburgh.

The Princess Royal, the RSA's Patron, is scheduled to speak at the lecture and to attend the dinner that follows. She previously attended the RSA Patron's Lecture at RSA House in London in March.

This will be the 26th annual Angus Millar Lecture, a signature event for the RSA in Scotland. The theme for the lecture will be the Power of Connection. ■

**Tickets are available to book through the RSA's website.**



Photos: Jennifer Sophie / iStock, DrAfter123 / iStock

COLLABORATION

# Connecting Fellows: Activity hubs and co-working spaces

The opportunity to connect, meet up and collaborate with other Fellows is a key reason many of us join, and stay with the Fellowship. This is often cited as being easy to do if you live or work near RSA House in London, but less so if you live or work elsewhere.

We want to make it easier for all Fellows to have that opportunity, and so the RSA is in the process of rolling out 25 Fellowship activity hubs across the UK and Ireland. Activity hubs are towns and cities that have a high geographical concentration of Fellows or have an established history of running RSA engagement activities.

By making these locations a focal point for Fellowship meetings, events, projects and collaboration, we hope to create a strong local identity, along with a greater sense of local ownership and momentum.

To make it easier for Fellows to achieve this, the RSA is investing in further co-working spaces. These spaces will allow Fellows to meet up together, work together, socialise together, and run their own events and activities together.

Each activity hub will be overseen by a dedicated engagement manager who will work with local Fellows, RSA

community leaders and Fellowship councillors to ensure there is an appealing programme of relevant and stimulating activity Fellows can engage with.

A list of the activity hubs can be found in the table below, and our co-working spaces are listed on the RSA's website. ■

**David Jones is the RSA's Head of Fellowship Engagement (Areas)**



Scan the QR code for the latest information on co-working locations

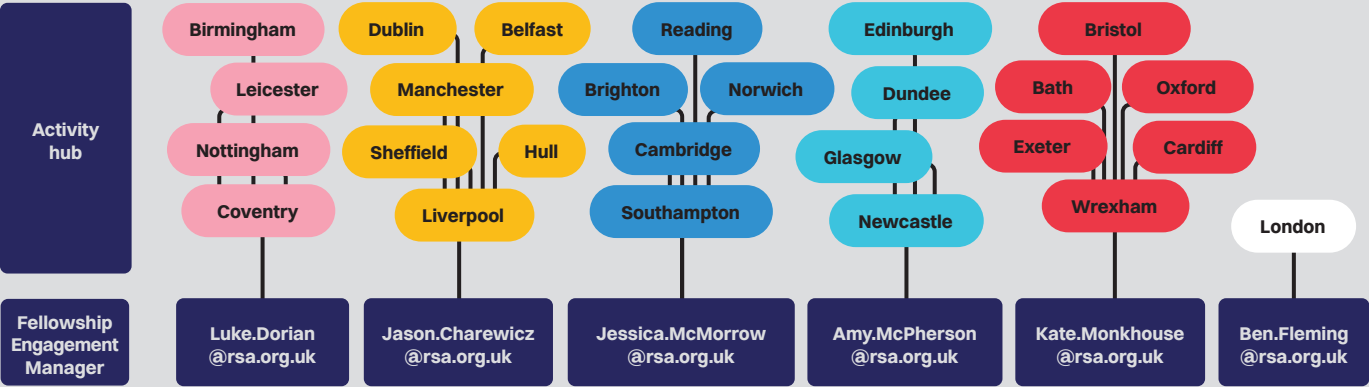


Photo: Drazen\_ / iStock



# From challenge to change: reflections from the Fellowship Council Chair



As I approach the end of my five-year term on the Fellowship Council – and my final months as Chair – I've been reflecting on a period of change, collaboration and challenge. Since becoming chair in January 2024, my focus has been on enhancing the future role and effectiveness of the council, deepening how we work with Fellows, councillors and RSA staff, and helping the council evolve to meet the moment.

The Fellowship Council is the voice of Fellows within the RSA: a diverse and dedicated group who volunteer their time and insights to support and shape the organisation's mission. Together, we have worked to ensure that this forum is representative and forward looking.

We have two types of councillor:

- **Area councillors** are elected by Fellows to represent specific geographic regions. Their core role is to spark and support local activity in partnership with RSA staff.
- **Programmatic councillors** are appointed volunteers who align with our Design for Life mission. They work across themes and topics to drive deeper engagement with Fellows and staff.

Collectively, councillors contribute to the RSA's wider governance. Two trustees are drawn from the Fellowship Council, and we act as a vital conduit for Fellow perspectives.

This has been a defining time for the council. We've navigated the lingering

effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, while laying foundations for the future. I'm proud of what we've achieved, including:

- Proposing key changes to our terms of reference and byelaws, such as extending councillor terms from two to three years and introducing staggered elections for better continuity and knowledge sharing.
- Building stronger partnerships with RSA staff.
- Helping roll out community hubs and leaders in the UK and Ireland, with RSA USA launching new hubs across the US.

Equally encouraging is the nomination of a Fellowship councillor as the next vice-chair of the Trustee Board – a strong signal of the growing impact and recognition of the council.

Elections and interviews are now underway to select 25 new councillors, who will begin in October 2025. I'm excited for what lies ahead and confident the new councillors will continue to strengthen the RSA and its Fellowship community. ■

**Neil Beagrie is Chair of the Fellowship Council**

# A new standard for skills recognition

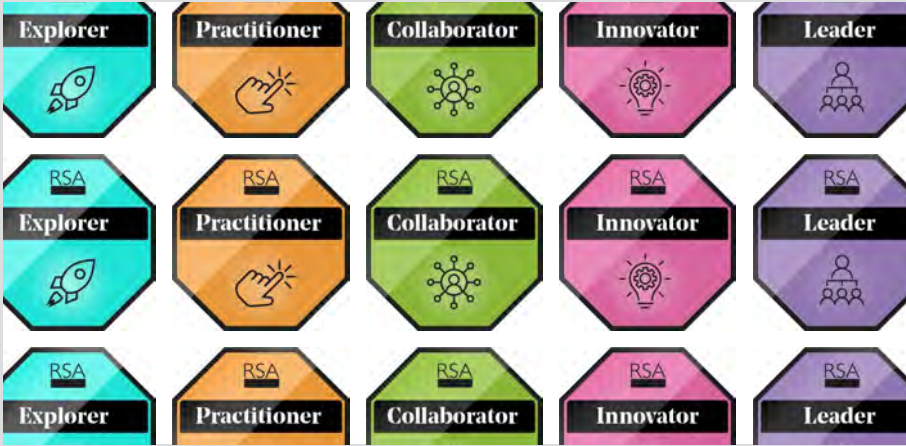
When I first encountered digital badges in 2016, their potential to recognise non-accredited learning was intriguing but largely untested. Almost a decade on, working with the RSA's Digital Badging Commission – a partnership with Ufi VocTech Trust – it is clear that digital badges are no longer niche.

Yet misconceptions linger. Some remain unsure if badges involve complex technology, while others enthusiastically embrace their simplicity and versatility.

The RSA Badge Standard, co-developed in 2019 with City & Guilds for the Cities of Learning programme, was originally designed to help learners clearly articulate skills gained through experiences beyond formal education. However, the sheer growth and diversity of badges today calls for greater clarity in standards and frameworks that underpin their quality and the trust placed in them.

Our recent update to the RSA Badge Standard aims precisely at this challenge, introducing clear progression levels – Explorer, Practitioner, Collaborator, Innovator and Leader – making it easier for educators, employers and policymakers to recognise competencies ranging from foundational skills to strategic leadership.

Alongside this, we have developed a suite of exemplar badge templates that are free to download, simplifying badge-writing creation across sectors. Demystifying the badge-writing process



and encouraging its use will directly benefit anyone seeking trusted skill verification of their employees, students and volunteers.

The RSA has already started putting this new standard into practice, with 326 digital badges issued to RSA Spark students from April to June, to recognise the skills they have gained by participating in the programme.

While researching and convening sector leads, the Digital Badging Commission has seen how badges can unify academic, vocational and

non-formal learning pathways, creating genuine connections between learning and work. We will be launching the commission's final report and recommendations on 13 October – more details to follow soon in RSA channels. ■

**Patrina Law is the RSA's Lifelong Learning Lead**



For more information on digital badging, scan the QR code



best use of a celebrity/influencer, best use of content on social media and best use of animation, and Bronze for best use of print and best long-term use of content. At the ICE awards, also in June, it won Bronze for best internal publication (print).

"We are delighted that these awards cover *Journal* content across print, online and through social media," said Vicky

# Journal wins seven further awards

The *Journal* has been successful at two prestigious awards ceremonies, winning six trophies at the Corporate Content Awards (CCA) and one at the Internal Communications and Engagement (ICE) Awards.

At the CCA ceremony in June, the *Journal* picked up the overall award for best corporate storyteller, Gold for

Kington, RSA Director of Content and Communications. "The *Journal* has been a successful print publication for more than 200 years and continues to evolve – not least with the recent launch of RSAJournal+."


In total, the *Journal* has now won 11 awards at three high-profile ceremonies in 2025. ■

Photo: Mark Lewis

# AGM date confirmed

The RSA's Annual General Meeting (AGM) will take place at 6pm on Wednesday 15 October in the Great Room at RSA House. Fellows will also be able to access the AGM online via Zoom.

This will be the RSA's 271st AGM and will showcase the achievements and impact of RSA Fellows and staff over the past year. It will receive and consider the 2024–25 Impact Report, and Trustees' Annual Report and Financial Statements, which can be accessed on the RSA's website. ■



Scan the QR code to access the RSA's Annual Report and Financial Statements

# FELLOWSHIP CONNECT

Explore opportunities to connect online:

 @thersaorg

 @theRSAorg

 @thersaorg


 Fellows' LinkedIn group linkedin.com/groups/3391

Email the Fellowship Services team at [fellowship@rsa.org.uk](mailto:fellowship@rsa.org.uk) or call +44 (0)207 451 6939

# CIRCLE OF FELLOWSHIP

Join Circle today and get your conversation started:


To activate your Circle account, log in through My RSA via the RSA website. Your global community awaits.



To get started, scan the QR code or visit [thersa.org/fellowship/community-platform](https://thersa.org/fellowship/community-platform)

# FREE CO-WORKING SPACES AVAILABLE

There are 12 co-working locations available across the UK where non-London-based Fellows can work for free – and we regularly add new venues.



For the latest information, please scan the QR code



From a 50-year ban comes a fight for change

Words:  
Karen Dobres

**I**n spring 2017, my husband Charlie – an elected director at the local football club – asked, “What would you say if the club paid the women the same as the men?”

We were in the kitchen; I was making a cup of tea.

“You’re saying there are women there playing football?” I’d always assumed there was only a men’s team in Lewes, where we live. “Wait,” I continued, another thought landing hot on the heels of the first, “Are you saying there are women there, playing football like the men, and you don’t pay them the same?”

So began a five-year crash course in sexism in football, which saw me morph from someone who avoided the world’s most popular sport to a director on a football club board, all via one club’s pioneering quest for gender equality. By July 2017 (when Lewes FC did indeed become the first and only pro or semi-pro club in the world to equally resource and value men and women), I both understood and resented why I’d never heard of Lewes FC Women, or of any females playing football at all.

My ignorance had been rooted in a deliberate and under-reported ban on women playing; a ban I’d never heard of. A ban which creates a very particular type of long-term damage.

When men were sent to fight in World War I, women went to work in munitions factories, making weapons and parachutes for the war effort. Some started to kick a ball around in factory yards, and soon factory challenged factory. Although ridiculed at first, the women’s game became popular. Stars like Lily Parr of the Dick Kerr Ladies emerged, audiences grew, and England even played France – at least five times.

Women’s football became so popular that, post WW1, men couldn’t muster the same crowds. So, in December 1921 the all-male Football Association called a

15-minute meeting in which they solved this ‘problem’ by banning women and girls from playing, claiming the sport was somehow gynaecologically “unsuitable for females and not to be encouraged”.

The ban wasn’t lifted for some 50 years.

As a girl-child of the 1970s, I was used to footballing boys dominating our school playgrounds, and footballing men on TV screens of a Saturday afternoon. As a teen, I learned to avoid male football hooligans on trains and, understandably perhaps, had never imagined a football match to be a place for me. But here’s the thing: I’d never known or questioned why the world’s favourite sport, with some 3.6 billion fans around the globe, was so predominantly male. If I had thought about it (and I didn’t), I’d have assumed that women just didn’t like playing it, or that, again for some obscure reason, weren’t good at it.

But all along it turns out that men had an artificially created monopoly over the game, and so benefited from the lucrative broadcasting rights, the many health gains, and the easy access to role models of leadership, resilience and teamwork.

So, what to do when you find out you’ve been deliberately excluded from something and didn’t know it? That a 100-year-old ban was responsible for shaping the worldview of several generations of young women, making them believe they weren’t properly built for the sport?

Show up that cultural gaslighting for what it is – an inherited and socially sanctioned marginalisation of half the population – and go welcome those unwelcome women in. ■

**Karen Dobres, FRSA**, is the author of *Pitch Invasion*, the story of her time as a director at Lewes FC – the first gender equal football club in the world.

# WELCOME TO MUSE AT RSA HOUSE



Just ring the doorbell for entry...

Tucked inside the historic home of the RSA, Muse is a cocktail bar where craft meets purpose. From regenerative British spirits to foraged ingredients and low-intervention wines, every drink and small plate tells a story of sustainability and traceability.

Whether you’re a Fellow or simply a fan of excellent cocktails, join us for a drink that doesn’t just taste good.

18 Adam Street, WC2N 6EZ | Monday to Friday | 4PM-11PM  
Walk-ins welcome. Reservations recommended.

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