

The great good neighbour: expanding the community role of arts organisations

Lyz Crane

Today I want to share with you some experiences that arts organisations in the US have had in working with communities. However, first I have to establish my credentials by telling you a bit more about myself. I work at an organisation called Partners for Liveable Communities, whose mission is to improve the liveability of communities by promoting quality of life, economic development, and social equity. We are thus an organisation that is focused on community outcomes rather than the arts. However, we do have had a program called Culture Builds Communities for the last decade and a half, and we strongly believe that arts organisations are one of the most underutilised assets communities have for addressing critical social issues.

My own belief in the capacity of the arts to help communities face major social challenges has been reinforced by what I have heard in this conference over the last two days and I wish I could take all your stories and plant them in community and economic development conferences back home in order to strengthen the argument that investment in the arts is critical. I work in an environment in which we just do not have government support for this kind of work; we certainly don't have 'cultural liveability officers' that I have heard about here (and I love that term). So I was beginning to wonder what I had to offer in the context of this conference. I cannot give you examples in which government support has made the difference but I can tell you about 'community art projects' in which arts organisations, working with unique resources, have made a difference. I will tell you about 'neighbourhood projects' in which arts organisations have been heroic. Not all of this will be relevant to the Australian experience. However, some of the values and processes can be translated and made useful by your creative and brilliant minds.

Working in the neighbourhood

Now I want to focus on two examples of the work that might inspire you. The first is ARTS at Marks Garage, which is the key community project

of the Hawai'i Arts Alliance. Located in Honolulu on the seam between Chinatown and the downtown Financial District, the area immediately surrounding Marks Garage has been gathering momentum as an arts and cultural district for Honolulu. This has led to increasing interest by a growing number of people and very rapid change for the area. The primary challenge for the community has been to ensure that the businesses and residents that were in the neighbourhood prior to the rise of the arts and culture district both have a voice in the changes to their community and find ways to benefit directly from those changes. This includes ensuring that neighbourhood businesses are able to tap into the new arts and culture patrons and that neighbourhood residents are able to participate in the new arts and cultural offerings in the community. The latter involves making sure that the arts organisations focus on serving traditionally underserved populations.

To address these goals, ARTS at Marks Garage developed a far-reaching strategy that included the creation of a community organiser position to work full-time on building bridges and increasing awareness of the opportunities that the organisation's art space provides for dialogue involving developers, civic leaders, artists, long-time residents, and other community service organisations. By incorporating new business interests with older ones and helping to negotiate a new and fair process for the downtown/Chinatown re-identification, ARTS at Marks Garage is responding quickly and creatively to the changes facing the community. Examples of their work include their Bright Ideas project, which provided an opportunity for community groups to win \$4,000 mini-grants for arts-community projects, and the Talk Any Kine Festival, which provided people who speak a range of different languages with a venue and a process for more easily involving themselves in the community planning dialogue with civic leaders.

The second example I want to draw your attention to focuses on the work of the International Sonoran Desert Alliance (ISDA), which is located in Ajo, Arizona. Ajo is a former copper mining company town in the heart of the Sonoran Desert. It is about 160 kilometres southwest of Phoenix and 62 kilometres from the US/Mexico border, and nearly adjacent to the Tohono O'odham Indian Nation. Originally Ajo was built as three segregated towns for miners and their families. There was 'Indian Village', where the homes were very small, 'Mexican Town', where the homes were slightly larger, and the Ajo 'Townsite', with the largest homes. While housing is no longer segregated, the three communities have continued to live rather separately and painful memories of the early days were just below the surface for the older Native American and Mexican American residents.

ISDA represents an alliance of the three separate communities. It works primarily to support Ajo's collective economic development through arts-based programming, the development of housing for artists, and branding

Ajo as an arts and cultural destination. However, the organisation has also been working to support the integration of formerly neglected voices into Ajo's narrative. The group's work has resulted in multiple partnerships with arts organisations and youth groups based in Ajo itself, in Mexico, and on the Tohono O'odham Nation. The Alliance has also acquired and developed a large school building which plans to incubate arts-based microbusiness, provide affordable housing for artists and artisans, and house a range of cultural programs. Not long ago the Alliance also purchased the Ajo town square, long ago abandoned by the Phelps Dodge mining company, and it is filling the empty storefronts with much-needed arts businesses, thus bringing jobs, reviving the tax base and providing services to residents.

I do not need to tell you that arts can have a transformative power for communities, or that cultural development and cultural policy should be an integral part of every social, economic and physical development plan. We in this conference take those truths for granted and believe very strongly that what we do as artists can create positive change for the world. However, we are not only artists but also leaders of arts organisations and so we have to ask ourselves if our presence alone, coupled perhaps with standard forms of 'community outreach', is enough or whether we could do more to create unique physical and thinking spaces within our communities. How do we step outside our walls and become not only a beacon for creativity but also a good neighbour and steward of the values of democracy, inclusion, and upward mobility? Or, how can we, as individual members and leaders of communities, challenge our arts organisations to become more engaged in the life and times of their surrounding community? This applies to those organisations that see themselves as 'community arts' organisations as well as those who may have a more 'professional' orientation.

Ford Foundation program

I am here at this conference because of the Ford Foundation's Shifting Sands program, which was established in 2002, not by people involved in Ford Foundation arts programs but by the Asset Building and Community Development department of the Foundation. The founding program officer, Miguel Garcia, was an economist who saw the unique contribution that arts organisations can make to community change processes. The mission of the program was to build common vision, create tolerance and respect, and boost economic prospects in rapidly changing, yet previously neglected neighbourhoods.

Community change is an important focus of this initiative and this helps to explain the 'Shifting Sands' name. Of course, there are many different types of change processes, whether we are talking about urban or rural communities; the United States or Australia. However, the fact of the matter is that when communities change there is always going to be some underlying tension: some section of the community that wants one thing while another wants something different; some group that is driving the

change while others may be resisting it. Furthermore, it is rare that the voices of all affected by the change are actually heard. When significant changes occur, the best champions a community can find are going to be people located in the community who have the capacity and resources to tell all the stories and make sure all voices are heard.

Many arts organisations serve needs within their neighbourhoods by, for example, reaching out to youth with after school programs, or to older residents with programs to prevent isolation, or to residents whose first language is not English. These are often excellent programs and vital to the wellbeing of neighbourhoods. However, it is common, even for enlightened arts organisations, to see neighbours as ‘audiences’, rather than as active participants in creating the cultural vitality of the neighbourhood. Consequently, arts organisations are often turned inward, serving their arts and ‘outreach’ goals without really cultivating relationships with their closest neighbours. So our program at the Ford Foundation asked if organisations with considerable experience in advocating for the needs of ‘marginalised’ artists could benefit by engaging more directly with their local communities, even to increase their audiences. Our assumption was that art and culture can help to organise and empower communities, and, of course, all of you at this conference understand this in a deep way. Our aim was to draw on the creativity and resourcefulness of arts organisations to turn tensions within changing communities into meaningful interactions. Because we are talking about community and economic development we focus on change outcomes rather than just expression or exploration. And we have found that arts organisations have been able to leverage their resources this way to gain new audiences, gain more political support, and gain a better seat as an important stakeholder in development negotiations.

Assessment project

However, it is one thing to espouse certain practices and another thing to demonstrate that they work, so we have conducted an assessment of the work of eight community-based arts organisations – ranging from galleries and museums to community cultural centres – that were all working in neighbourhoods undergoing significant changes. All of these organisations had responded to our call to step outside their walls to become a ‘great good neighbour’. To be more specific, the organisations were all trying to address five important questions related to our adopted themes:

- Neighbourhood identity: Who is this community and what is the common understanding of its assets and values?
- Social integration: How do we all work together despite our differences?
- Upward mobility: How can we improve our prospects as a community by generating new economic opportunities and

increasing the enterprise capacity of businesses and residents?

- Community development: What physically needs to change to make a place consistent with that vision?
- Community empowerment: Who needs to hear our voices to make sure that happens and how do we open the channels between the grassroots and the powerful?

Of course, this kind of orientation challenged some prevailing assumptions of artists and arts organisations, as you have been discussing at this conference. The challenges included:

1. Getting comfortable with the idea that arts and culture is something that can be a tool and not just something that is beneficial solely on its own
2. Recognising that while aesthetic value would always be important (and we never asked our arts organisations to compromise that), double or triple bottom lines that involve community outcomes are even better, and sometimes there are trade-offs and that is also OK
3. The world of community development has a language entirely different to that of the arts and for many of the organisations we worked with we had to teach them a whole new lexicon for them to even be able to understand their own natural inclinations to help others
4. Money, money, money, board wishes, staff capacity, keeping the doors open; the things that all arts organisation have to worry about constantly, meaning that they continue to focus on what is going in inside the walls even as they step out into the neighbourhood.

On the other hand, arts organisations have some unique resources and capacities that enable them to stretch themselves. These include:

- Understanding how to animate public space
- Physical spaces – sometimes seen as ‘neutral’ or even ‘secular’ spaces – in which difficult topics can be addressed
- An existing tendency to delve into complex social issues
- Cultural sensitivity and a sense of ‘cultural democracy’
- Relevant practical expertise in areas such as graphic design and printing
- Access to power structures resulting from past dealings with funding bodies, real estate agencies, and more.

So we challenged the eight selected organisations to consider what they could do to preserve important community assets through processes of change and foster more meaningful dialogue about the direction and management of change. It was important to us that the organisations did

not try to arrive at their own vision for what the neighbourhood should look like nor try to identify the most pressing issues on which to focus. We told them that until you know the community as an insider, you need to listen to other people by going to neighbourhood meetings, hosting local residents in conversation, and getting out onto the street. You should not select the critical issues; they should become apparent to you from what people are talking about. You are a 'steward' or 'curator'; managing things according to the community's wishes in order to attain the best possible results for the community as a whole.

We call this process of engagement a 'social sculpture' because it might be analogous to looking at a piece of wood or marble, seeing the assets within, and helping to carve it into what it 'wants to be.' As any sculptor knows, trying to carve something that was not already contained within the starting material will result in frustration and failure.

After many fits and starts in working with the eight organisations we came up with what we call the 'triangulation paradigm' to help people think about processes of community change. The first step in this is to create some sort of art project that can generate dialogue on community topics; something like a digital mural purporting to capture the diverse faces of the neighbourhood, or an arts festival with themes related to health and local health services. The second step is to involve as many local entities as possible, from local businesses to government agencies, social services and schools. Three of the participating organisations hired dedicated community organisers – practically unheard of in the arts world – and all of them employed community organising techniques. By engaging entities from the very powerful to the practically powerless they opened up new channels of communication on topics of critical importance to the community. The third step is to get involved in the change process by bringing local organisations together, ensuring that all voices are heard, and by providing training or resources for the development of 'micro-enterprises' that can help to generate change.

By the way, the organisations found that when they were 'pounding the pavement' in this kind of activity they were actually gaining new audience members because people who had never stepped through their doors in the past were now seeing that these organisations were doing things that were relevant to them. The more you do, the more momentum you gain, the more community 'ownership' you can generate, the more your 'social sculpture' comes to life.

Testing assumptions

So what did we find out from this process of engagement about our own starting assumptions? Let me illustrate with some examples.

Our first assumption is that arts and culture organisations can act as curators of neighbourhood identity; that they can help protect the 'soul' of

the community, and broker and celebrate an identity as it evolves. Well, this assumption was supported by the work of the Ashé Cultural Arts Center, located in the centre of the city of New Orleans, which faced the situation in which Hurricane Katrina had decimated local neighbourhoods, leaving many of them relatively empty and with little or no community services, gathering places, leadership structures, etcetera, etcetera. Prior to the hurricane, Ashé had already committed itself to working within its surrounding community, and after the storm it was one of the few organisations that kept its doors open. As a result, it offered space that became a 'kitchen table' of the community, where meetings were held and gatherings organised to build hope among those who remained in the neighbourhood. The organisation served as a central contact point for former residents who had fled the city, to ensure that their voices would be heard when the rebuilding began. It was important, of course, that the city centre did not just become what the developers wanted, so Ashé led an initiative to research the history of empty properties in the black-dominated neighbourhood in order to create a 'cultural corridor' that reflected the values of those who had been living there before the hurricane hit. They aimed to preserve a cultural heritage that many feared would be lost in the redevelopment.

Our second assumption is that arts and culture organisations can encourage meaningful social integration, not just by mixing people together through events but also by promoting dialogue between disparate forces. I have already mentioned the work of the International Sonoran Desert Alliance in this regard. However, let me dwell on that example a bit more because it was no easy matter to overcome a mistrust and segregation in the old mining company town. As mentioned, ISDA created an important arts hub in an old school building and it also revitalised the old town square as an arts and cultural precinct. It also reclaimed an historic church that had once been the centre for Native Americans and was then turned into a museum that did not reflect the heritage of its previous owners. The museum has now been returned to the community that had once gathered around the church. At the same time ISDA set up a Memory Project, which has brought together the Native American population, the Mexican-American population and the Anglo population to help preserve the history of Ajo in a way that acknowledges past separations but also seeks a new solidarity within common experiences.

Our third assumption is that arts and culture organisations can help promote upward mobility for all people. They can do this, in part, by helping to provide workforce training and by providing access to financial and political capital to get things done within the community. One good example of this is Nuestras Raíces organisation that is based in the small town of Holyoke, Massachusetts, which has both long-term Anglo and long-term Puerto Rican communities that were often at odds with each other. The Puerto Ricans were often excluded from the economic sphere of the community.

A man called Daniel Ross created *Nuestras Raíces* to help the Puerto Rican community in Holyoke reconnect with its agricultural roots and take leadership within the broader community in regard to 'community farming'. The organisation's *Tierra de Oportunidades* program is a business incubator for teaching farming skills and for enabling small farm-related businesses to begin and flourish. Farms that have been supported by this program have now become an important economic asset to the community and the program has the support of many sectors of the wider community; the young and the old; Anglo and Puerto Rican, residents and politicians.

Our fourth assumption is that the creative methods of the artist can be applied to community development; that these organisations can inject their creativity into solving problems between competing development agendas by focusing on shared community assets. A good example of this is Project Row Houses, in the 'third ward' of Houston, Texas. This community was considered to be 'blighted' and was largely left out of the social and political world of one of the largest cities in the US. In the late 1990s local artist Rick Lowe began renovating 'shotgun houses' into artist studios, thus cleaning up the neighbourhood and bringing in new audiences. As an arts organisation, Project Row Houses eventually spun off its own community development corporation to help preserve local heritage and ensure the availability of affordable housing within the changing neighbourhood.

Our fifth and final assumption is that arts and culture organisations can help all voices to have a say in the shaping of neighbourhood change. A good example of this is the *Talk Any Kine* festival run by ARTS at Marks Garage in Honolulu, which I discussed earlier. Another good example is the *Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana* (MACLA) which has advocated on behalf of both Latino and Vietnamese 'renting' communities to enable them to join neighbourhood associations set up by Anglo land-owners. A third and important example is provided by the Queens Museum of Art in New York. The Queens Museum has focused on a neighbourhood called Corona, which is home to a staggering diversity of peoples, and is a 'majority minority' neighbourhood with Latino immigrants (the biggest proportion) mixing with South Asian immigrants and the African American and white European homeowners who represent Corona's recent past. The biggest challenges in this area are the lack of services for immigrants within the community; a lack of safe, usable and attractive public space; poor health; and a crime rate higher than in most part of Queens and New York City. It is important to note that Queens Museum located in the middle of the old World's Fair site, with major highways keeping it disconnected from the nearby Corona neighbourhood. However, the large and respected cultural institution has taken a bold step with its *Heart of Corona* initiative, in which the museum works with community partners to improve the health of community residents, beautify the neighbourhood and activate the public spaces in the area.

After programming numerous health fairs, 'clean up' days and public art projects around the area, Queens Museum was recently asked by the New York City Department of Transportation to become the managing partner of Corona Plaza, the central square. It has released cookbooks of healthy recipes from local restaurants, signed up over 1000 people for health insurance through a partnership with a local insurer, and taught English to hundreds of people through arts-based curricula. The museum has become a trusted voice in a neighbourhood in which many people who qualify for government services were not using them. The Heart of Corona initiative has not detracted from artistic excellence of the museum; indeed it has been able to attract more resources and funding for its other programs, and more people are coming through its doors than ever before. The commitment to working in the neighbourhood has permeated Queens Museum – from the most junior staff up to the chair of the board – and, importantly, the institution found it could now access non-traditional 'pots of money' for arts activities. As well as having more people coming through the door they gained more volunteers and more attention. Furthermore, when development decisions are likely to affect the museum itself, the organisation no longer has to scream to be heard; rather it is invited to the negotiating table without having to ask.

Determining the benefits of neighbourhood engagement

An important question is how can you measure the benefits of this kind of neighbourhood engagement? We have worked with the Center for Creative Community Development at William's College to come up with economic impact quantifiers for this kind of work. I am not going to go into all that here because there is a relevant toolkit available through a website set up William's College at www.c-3-d.org. I just want to mention that it includes a unique 'social network analysis' which can be used to estimate how enmeshed an arts organisation is within its surrounding community.

I think the Executive Director of MACLA, Anjee Helstrup-Alvarez, has put it well when she said:

Why do all this work? Why invest staff time, resources and money into a neighbourhood? Most arts organisations do not leave the confines of their four walls. We did it and continue to do so because we now have the trust and history with our neighbours, residents and businesses alike to initiate the tough conversations. We are doing a better job of bringing artists, business owners and renters to the table in order to continue to round out the discussions. However, we will continue to push ourselves to do so. This is creating, much to our surprise, a more unified ... voice that influences development in and around our neighbourhood in a manner that brings the best outcomes for residents and business owners.

For many arts organisations – kind of work is a tall order, and, frankly, not all arts organisations *should* be doing this work. The power of arts on their

own is astounding and this should not be forgotten. However, there are plenty of organisations on the tipping point. They might have extensive outreach programs and they already incorporate community outcomes into their missions. For them there are great and positive lessons coming from our experience, and we encourage such organisations to continue to strive to be a 'great good neighbour'.

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