

## Art, governance and the turn to community: key findings from the research on the Generations Project

*Martin Mulligan and Pia Smith*

*'... community is not simply the territory of government  
but a means of government'*

Nikolas Rose, 2008

As an 'action research' project over a period of more than three years, the Generations Project was remarkably successful in finding out what it takes to ensure that community art practices can enrich the practice of local government in Australia. This comes at a time when the building of resilient and inclusive local communities has become even more clearly part of the 'core business' of local government internationally. Indeed, local government authorities that do not find creative ways to constantly build more inclusive communities will pay a considerable 'price' in having to deal with growing social division and conflict, often reflecting much broader, global developments and tensions. While sociologists from Emile Durkheim onwards have long been predicting that notions of 'community' would be replaced by a broader sense of belonging to society in the conditions of modernity, writers such as Zygmunt Bauman, Gerard Delanty, and Nikolas Rose have more recently noted that the desire for community has actually been increasing in global conditions of flux and uncertainty; conditions that Bauman has called 'liquid modernity'. Delanty and Rose, in particular, have provided valuable explanations for why there has been a 'turn to community' in the context of globalisation. It has long been understood that community art projects and programs can help to create a sense of community and for this reason they can enhance the 'core business' of local government provided local government leaders understand that good practice in community art involves considerable skill and a deep understanding of artistic processes.

The national Generations Project was first conceived in 2004 by Cultural Development Network Director Judy Spokes and the former CEO of the City of Port Philip Council (in Melbourne) Anne Dunn. By that time a wide range of local government authorities (LGAs) across Australia had sponsored significant community art and cultural development projects and events and it was evident that successful artistic and cultural activities could build a stronger sense of community at a local level. Indeed, many people in local government could see that the arts had a vital role to play in creating more coherent and dynamic local communities and yet this kind of work remained marginal in local government structures and processes. Spokes and Dunn came up with a proposal for an action learning project that could address questions such as: What would it take to convince LGA leaders to take community art and cultural development much more seriously? and Where should this kind of work be situated within LGA structures and processes?

A wide range of LGAs were invited to participate in designing and implementing – over a period of three years – a program of artistic activities that could help the LGA address a significant and pressing social challenge and the project was implemented in the following LGAs: City of Greater Geelong, Latrobe City, Rural City of Wangaratta (Victoria), Liverpool City (in Sydney) and the Charters Towers Regional Council (Queensland). Although the project was initiated before the Australia Council established its Community Partnerships program it was suspended until that program was put in place and so the action learning project was ideally placed to inform the Community Partnerships committee on ways of working with LGAs for enhancing community cultural and artistic development.

### **Research aims and methods**

The Globalism Research Centre at RMIT University in Melbourne was commissioned to conduct research on the benefits for local government of projects in the five participating LGAs, which were to be funded by the Australia Council itself, Arts Victoria, Arts NSW and Arts Queensland. This research was undertaken by the current authors and we used a range of quantitative and qualitative research methods, including surveys of Council staff, observation of the unfolding projects, extended interviews with project designers and participants, interviews with senior staff within the participating LGAs, and interviews with those who had helped to fund the projects and who watched them unfold. This resulted in a lengthy research report which can be accessed through the Globalism Research Centre website ([www.rmit.edu.au/globalism/publications](http://www.rmit.edu.au/globalism/publications)). Recognising that few people will read the full report, the authors have picked out a concise set of 'key findings' listed below. Of course such a concise summary can hardly do justice to the diverse experiences that unfolded within the five locales and regions over a period of more than three years and we recommend a reading of the full report. This 'introductory' paper also includes the

recommendations made to the Australia Council as a result of the research, because these suggest what could be done to strengthen the community cultural development sector in Australia. At this point in time the sector hardly has a sense of being a sector, with most practitioners feeling isolated and under-valued. We hope that research such as ours can play a role in promoting the sector and in making the argument for a bigger 'investment' in the development of bigger pool of skilled practitioners.

In some ways the research was able to go beyond the particular focus envisaged by Generations Project initiators Judy Spokes and Anne Dunn. However, the emphasis on local government was fundamentally important and the research was designed to respond to the following three key research questions:

- What can be learnt from the Generations Project about what it takes to encourage LGAs to place more strategic importance on cultural development as a praxis across diverse sections and operations of Council?
- What can be learnt from the Generations Project about forging more effective partnerships between artists, arts organisations, community groups, and LGAs?
- What can be learnt from the Generations Project about ways in which arts-based projects and initiatives can enhance the capacity of LGAs to engage with their communities across diverse areas of Council work and responsibility?

### **Comparative research**

The opportunity to compare experiences across five diverse LGAs made it possible to respond in a meaningful way to these questions those responses make up three chapters of the full report. The comparison worked out well because the projects across the five LGA areas certainly unfolded differently and had different levels of success in relation to the overall aims of the national project. While the leaders in each of the LGAs reported to Anne Dunn, near the end of the project cycle, that their projects had significant local outcomes, it is the comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of the five local projects which makes the investment of time and money in the overall national project worthwhile.

The research report drew on international literature to make the point that the constant creation of strong and inclusive local communities has become a key responsibility of local government in the contemporary world. Indeed, at a time of great flux and uncertainty, as mentioned earlier, there has been a 'turn to community' at the level of public sentiment and the English social and political theorist Nikolas Rose has suggested that 'community is not simply the territory of government but a means of government'.<sup>1</sup> A sense of

belonging to community cannot be taken as a 'given' in the contemporary world and there is a vital role for artistic explorations of place and identity in forging a more conscious and inclusive sense of belonging to community. Conversely, as mentioned earlier, a failure to attend to the creation of inclusive local communities can lead to a rise in social tension and conflict in a world in which local and global influences can no longer be disentangled. It should be noted that the review of international literature helped to frame the analysis of experiences in the five LGAs participating in the Generations Project and the key findings reflect that 'local-global framework' as well as the analysis of the research data.

Of the five local Generations projects the most successful were those which employed skilled and experienced community cultural development (CCD) workers in key artistic direction roles. A key learning for the LGAs that hosted the most successful projects was how to strike the balance between giving the artists enough 'space' in which to work creatively while, at the same time, ensuring that the work was fully embedded in relevant structures and processes of Council. Our report concludes that Australia has acquired rich resources in regard to community art practice and that LGAs are well placed to support the further development of the field of practice at both local and regional levels. However, it is critical for LGA leaders to have a good understanding of what good practice really looks like, and this is the subject for discussion in the final chapter of the report.

Good practice in this field requires a set of diverse skills, which must include a good grounding in forms of artistic expression and representation. The work should not be taken lightly and there is no easy 'recipe' for success. The Generations Project confirms that while project outcomes are not always easy to 'measure' – certainly not in the short-term – there can be a wide range of short-term and more 'slow-burning' outcomes that can help LGAs address some difficult and even entrenched social challenges.

### **Key findings**

1. The constant creation of inclusive communities has become a core 'means of government' in the contemporary world and this is especially the case for local government.
2. In a world of flux and uncertainty a lack of attention to the creation of inclusive local communities will result in a rise in social tensions and conflict.
3. In the era of 'network government'<sup>2</sup> LGAs must enhance their capacity to work with individuals and organisations who have very different assumptions and ways of working (in other words, different cultures).
4. Creative projects that can capture and celebrate a diversity of stories related to life in communities will build a more inclusive sense of community identity and also allow for many more voices to be heard.

5. Artistic projects can only shift perceptions and attitudes in a meaningful way if they have a 'wow factor' related to an inspirational artistic vision and/or the clever crafting of diverse and well-targeted activities.
6. Australia now has an extraordinary artistic resource in terms of local artists, travelling artists and new technologies. However, this makes it even more important to make clear and effective use of such diverse resources.
7. LGAs should ensure they retain a capacity to carry through effective and ambitious community art projects by: documenting experiences; ensuring skill development for relevant staff; employing staff with relevant skills and experience; and writing a commitment to such work into strategic documents with associated Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).
8. LGAs should constantly evaluate their community cultural development work to ensure improved performance and organisational learning but such evaluation must be based on a good understanding of creative processes and the use of a range of empathetic evaluation tools.
9. The Generations Project was artificially constructed (as in the selection of participating LGAs and issues to be addressed), however, LGA leadership 'buy-in', significant time for creative development, and national framing and co-ordination have ensured that the 'experiment' created a very valuable educational resource which should be widely disseminated.
10. Of course, it makes sense to provide experience and training for local people interested in CCD practice. However, there is no guarantee that such practitioners will stay within the local community and there can be a useful role for skilled 'outsiders' in enhancing local projects. The aim should be to nurture the development of a much bigger pool of skilled CCD practitioners who are available to work in or with LGAs right across the country. In particular, there is a need to support the emergence of more practitioners who have the skill and knowledge to work effectively in remote rural communities. It is important to draw a distinction between local artists and skilled CCD practitioners (who may or may not be based locally). Good CCD practitioners will have the ability to work with a wide range of local artists.

## **Recommendations to the Australia Council for the Arts**

As mentioned earlier, the Generations Project was conceived at a time when the Australia Council for the Arts abolished its old CCD Board and eventually set up its new Community Partnerships program. This involved a shift of emphasis from funding specific projects to forging partnerships with LGAs and other community-based organisations that could nurture the growth of community and regional art in Australia. Our research certainly confirms the strategic importance of LGAs for fostering the development of community and regional art, particularly when LGA leaders see that support for the arts can also enable them to pursue some of their strategic objectives in creating more effective local governance. Obviously, the state arts funding agencies, under the direction of state governments, have an important role to play in enhancing the nexus between local government and art development, as seen in the New South Wales government's strategy for art development in Western Sydney. However, the Australia Council is best placed to provide national leadership in this area and to ensure that federal funding for the arts is used effectively to build local capacity.

### Recommendation 1:

The Australia Council Community Partnerships program should further emphasise the importance of LGAs and local government representative bodies in building stronger community and regional art sectors in Australia and in enabling the growth of a bigger and stronger network of skilled community cultural development practitioners.

### Recommendation 2:

In the field of community cultural development, Australia Council should continue to emphasise the creation of strategic partnerships, however the word 'partnership' is much abused in the contemporary world and the emphasis should be on partnerships which are clear about the common ground, result in common work, and are sustained through human relationships.

### Recommendation 3:

Australia Council grants directed through LGAs should specify the need to employ appropriately skilled CCD practitioners in artistic director or creative director roles.

### Recommendation 4:

Australia Council should give preference to funding arrangements that allow for two to three years of project development and implementation.

### Recommendation 5:

Australia Council should actively support initiatives aimed at developing a stronger network of CCD practitioners in Australia to ensure that individual practitioners have access to better knowledge, resources and infrastructure.

### Recommendation 6:

Despite the existence of the Ros Bower Award and the Kirk Robson Award, Australia Council should review its practice for rewarding good practice in community cultural development and consider an annual awards ceremony to better promote good practice.

### Recommendation 7:

Australia Council should build on its investment in the Generations Project experiment by ensuring that the research findings are widely disseminated.

### Recommendation 8:

Australia Council should fund a follow-up study in the five participating local government areas to investigate the longer term legacy of the five local projects.

### **Creating a stronger CCD sector in Australia**

Our research makes it clear that Australia has acquired impressive expertise in regard to diverse and effective CCD practice and yet many practitioners—especially outside urban areas—still work in isolation and without much acknowledgement of their important work. There are probably three generations of CCD practitioners who are still active: those who began their work in the 1970s or who are heavily influenced by social and political movement theory that emerged in the 1970s; those who were able to take advantage of new professional opportunities for CCD practice that emerged in the latter part of the 1980s and early 1990s; and those who have taken advantage of new media and new technologies that have emerged within the last decade. While it is encouraging to see that the practice is being renewed and reconceived by a younger generation of practitioners, it is important that the hard won knowledge and experience of CCD ‘elders’ is not neglected in the training and development of new practitioners.

More should be done to foster inter-generational dialogue about good practice and more can be done to ensure that all practitioners have access to the best knowledge and resources, reflecting both Australian and international experience. There is room for networks, associations, conferences, and publications to share and discuss experience. It is in everyone’s interest to nurture the development of the sector as a whole rather than rely heavily on the work of a relatively small number of rather isolated practitioners.

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*Pia Smith worked closely with Martin Mulligan in conducting fieldwork for the study of community arts and 'wellbeing' for VicHealth that was completed in 2006. She conducted the fieldwork for the evaluation of Regional Arts Victoria's Regional Cultural Partnerships Program in 2007 and she conducted the fieldwork for the research on the Generations Project in the five participating LGAs.*

## **Endnotes**

1. N. Rose, 'The death of the social? Re-figuring the territory of government' in P. Miller and N. Rose, eds, *Governing the present: administering economic, social and personal life*, Polity Press, Cambridge UK, 2008, pp 84-113.
2. For discussion of the concept of 'network government' see M. Haus, H. Heinelt and M. Steward, eds, *Urban governance and democracy: leadership and community involvement*, Routledge, New York.