

Excellence in civic engagement

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I am pleased to present the foreword of this special edition of *Local- Global*. The articles in this volume evolved from the ReGenerating Community Conference held in Melbourne in September 2009. This conference featured presentations from the landmark Generations project, a three-year initiative supported by the Australia Council for the Arts that involved five councils from three Australian states. Martin Mulligan and Pia Smith's article presents findings from their research on this complex and far-reaching project. The other articles, keynote presentations, research papers and articles from practitioners are developed from presentations at the conference on topics relevant to local government and the empowering of local communities in and through the arts.

A key question at the ReGenerating Community Conference, and one which local governments and the Australia Council are working to answer, was: how can community relationships be built across the divide of those who govern and those who are governed?

Throughout Australia's history local governments have played a vital role in supporting Australia's arts and cultural infrastructure. From the local library to the neighbourhood centre, to galleries and performing arts venues, local governments are those best placed to understand the needs of their communities. They know best the types of cultural assets and programs needed to develop and express that community's cultural and artistic life.

The Australia Council has a long and rewarding history of working with local governments. Since the early seventies we have been funding cultural development officer positions in councils across the country. In the 1980s we took the different approach of funding policy and projects through the Australian Local Government Association and other federal agencies. Both approaches brought degrees of success. It's hard nowadays to find a local government which doesn't at least talk about the need to develop local arts and culture.

In 2006 a scoping study for the Australia Council's new Community Partnership section identified the need for our council to work more closely with local governments if we were to achieve our aim of building culturally vibrant communities.

As a result, Community Partnerships is now highly-attuned to the opportunities of working partnerships with state, territory and local governments. This truly is 'co-operative federalism'. It is all three spheres of government pooling its limited resources to support excellence in the arts, to strengthen culturally vibrant communities and to allow more people to explore the intrinsic benefits of being involved in cultural activities.

In the three-and-a-half years I have been at the Australia Council I have witnessed the growing commitment with which the organisation has embraced the role arts and culture play in community wellbeing.

It is a myth to suggest that this commitment is incompatible with council's other commitment: to support excellent art. Artistic excellence can be delivered by artists working with communities as well, and there are countless examples.

What's more, artistic excellence can be actually enriched by facilitating this community process of art-making. The exciting thing about community partnerships is that it can open our eyes to new notions of excellence. They can create new Australian narratives around individual and community relations.

The Australia Council's engagement with civic wellbeing, and the use of art-making to achieve it, is built on research which in turn shapes our strategic priorities.

The five local councils involved in this conference identified key issues that continue to challenge the governed and the governing. How can we increase a sense of belonging for Australia's ageing population? How can we engage marginalised and culturally diverse youth, or empower Indigenous communities? How can we give regional Australians the opportunity to participate more fully in the arts? How, for example, in a polarised community, can we create a space for debate about climate change or identity?

As one of the conference's keynote speakers, Anmol Vellani, writes, 'The arts make it possible to stimulate development from within cultural contexts, and integrate processes of development with processes of cultural change'.

The arts do provide communities with the tools to challenge established values, beliefs and perceptions. It is the place where authority and its established meanings are often contested, the place where a culture is tested, stretched and reworked.

The arts are a means of animating democracy to get everyone participating in our national life.