

# **INSPIRING COMMUNITY AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION**

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**THE ARTS RIPPLE EFFECT**  
VALUING THE ARTS IN COMMUNITIES



# INSPIRING COMMUNITY AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

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A combination of our increasingly fast-paced lives and a highly competitive leisure market has meant that governments and organisations are looking for more dynamic ways to engage people in public debate, and to address the issues that their communities face.

Older style consultation approaches such as town hall meetings don't always capture public imagination across the community and there is a growing evidence base that supports the arts as a driving force for civic renewal.<sup>18</sup> This is because arts-based engagement has an inherent ability to inspire peoples' imagination, to draw out new perspectives, and to act as a vehicle for a diversity of opinions.<sup>19</sup>

Arts-based approaches to community engagement can be a powerful mechanism to produce new forms of knowledge by encouraging participation from people of all walks of life.<sup>20</sup>

*“The arts also support a strong democracy, engaging citizens in civic discourse, dramatizing important issues and encouraging collective problem solving.”<sup>21</sup>*

The arts can draw people to a common narrative that inspires participation, empowers residents to come together and build relationships and the trust that is necessary to overcome major challenges within a community.

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<sup>18</sup> O'Shea M. (2011). 'Arts Engagement with Sustainable Communities: Informing New Governance Styles for Sustainable Futures.' *Culture and Local Governance*, Vol 3 (1–2). Canada: University of British Columbia, p 29–41.

<sup>19</sup> McCarthy K [et al]. (2004). *Gifts of the muse: reframing the debate about the benefits of the arts*. USA: RAND Corporation.

<sup>20</sup> National Assembly of State Arts Agencies. (2010). *Tools for Arts Decision Making – Why Should Government Support the Arts*. USA: State Policy Briefs: NASAA.

<sup>21</sup> Stern M J & Seifert S C. (2008). *From Creative Economy to Creative Society: A Social Policy Paradigm for the Creative Sector has the Potential to Address Urban Poverty As Well As Urban Vitality*. USA: Social Impact of the Arts Project & The Reinvestment Fund, University of Pennsylvania.

## CREATING COMMUNITY: ARTS RECOVERY QUICK RESPONSE FUND

The **Arts Recovery Quick Response Fund** was established by Arts Victoria in response to the community devastation that followed the 2009 Victorian bushfires. The fund which was delivered by Regional Arts Victoria, supported local artists to work with their communities, encouraging participation in a range of arts projects which contributed to the recovery effort. Local artists created initiatives that were inspired by the difficult circumstances communities were facing, and successfully brought together those people affected by the bushfires to express through art what could often not be expressed in words. It helped to galvanise community support and trust.<sup>22</sup>



BMW Edge, Federation Square for the 2009 Bushfires memorial concert (2011) Source: *Pans on Fire*

<http://www.trianglesteelbands.com/the-bands/pans-on-fire.html>

47 projects received funding through the program, representing a broad range of art forms. 45% were in the visual arts, 30% featured music, 19% were photography, 17% were classified as craft, literature, multi-arts, sculpture and new media projects each comprised 15%, 11% were theatre and 4% were dance.

The program resulted in new connections and communities being formed with over 2,500 participants involved and nearly 20,000 audience members. A key driver to the success of the program was that projects were community driven.

*"It was crucial to involve communities in all aspects of decision making. The initiatives achieved this ... and people planned and implemented their own projects."*<sup>23</sup>

Benefits reported from the projects included skills development, improved confidence and increased social connections. The initiatives:

*"[provided] art as healer, increased people's self-confidence, contributed to new communities, brought order to people's lives, created living memorials to the bushfires, and allowed people to give to others."*<sup>24</sup>

The Triangle Steel Pan Band have sustained their activity and expanded to several community bands that perform regularly.

<sup>22</sup> NSF Consulting. (2011). *The Role of the Arts in Rebuilding Community – An Evaluation of Arts Victoria's and Regional Arts Victoria's Bushfire Initiatives*. Sydney, p 4. Available at [www.arts.vic.gov.au/Research\\_and\\_Resources/Evaluation\\_Reports](http://www.arts.vic.gov.au/Research_and_Resources/Evaluation_Reports)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p 38.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p 51.

## CASE STUDY: MARYBOROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT

The **Maryborough Photography Project** was driven by a local interest in photography and funded through the Neighbourhood Renewal program and Castanet. Neighbourhood Renewal aims to narrow the gap between disadvantaged

communities and the rest of the State. It is an approach that brings together the resources and ideas of residents, governments, businesses and community groups to tackle disadvantage in areas with concentrations of public housing.



Photography workshop in progress with Maryborough residents (2011) Photo: Angela Bailey

### The **Maryborough Photography Project**

involved a series of workshops with a professional photographer, culminating in a group exhibition in a shop-front held in late 2011 in the main street of Maryborough. The photography group, who named themselves the Shutterbugs, volunteered in preparing, installing and staffing the exhibition, enabling greater access for the community.

The confidence gained by participants through the photography project – the training in photography and the recognition they received for their public exhibition – was vital in encouraging two members of the Shutterbugs to join the Neighbourhood Renewal Steering Committee.<sup>25</sup> This group aims to enable improved and more meaningful input directly from the community into government decision making.

*“Twelve months ago I didn’t think I’d be on a first name basis with the Mayor. It’s the photography that has brought it through.”* (Photography project participant)<sup>26</sup>

The photography project was the catalyst which motivated participants to become active citizens, encouraging them to work alongside government agencies on the Maryborough Neighbourhood Renewal project, and shaping the future direction of their community by ensuring their voices were heard by local decision makers.

*“There is a lot of energy around it, people are loving it, just loving it...we’ve discovered some residents who’ve got real skill, have a real creative flair and they’re aware of that and that’s great, it’s giving them a lot of confidence.”* (Maryborough Neighbourhood Renewal Place Manager)

One of the Shutterbug members went on to enter and win a state wide photography competition: the V/Line Escape Competition that asked people to submit photos from their favourite parts of the state. The photographer said the support from Neighbourhood Renewal for Shutterbugs was important.

*“It has given us a little bit of confidence to enter competitions. I would have never thought of entering a competition. I definitely didn’t have the confidence...I put my photo in just before midnight on closing.”*<sup>27</sup>

The winning photo was displayed on the side of a regional train.

Two of the Shutterbug members have started selling their photography online and one has done some wedding photography work. The Shutterbugs have been funded to take photos around the region that will be used as postcards to promote the Shire.

<sup>25</sup> Unpublished interviews with Maryborough Neighbourhood Renewal Place Manager and Community Development Worker, 2011 & 2013. Arts Victoria.

<sup>26</sup> MacDowall L, Dr Gilmour J, Dr Adams R J & Blonkamp E. (2012). *Agile Government and the Arts: An Evaluation of the Cross-Government Partnership Brokerage Model for Supporting Creative Communities at Renewal Sites*. Centre for Cultural Partnerships, Faculty of the VCA and MCM, University of Melbourne, p 35 (unpublished).

<sup>27</sup> Johnston K. (December 1 2012). ‘Train Coup for Photo,’ *Maryborough District Advertiser*, accessed 31 January 2014. Available at <http://www.maryboroughadvertiser.com.au/2012/12/train-coup-for-photo/>

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NSF Consulting. (2011). *The Role of the Arts in Rebuilding Community – An Evaluation of Arts Victoria's and Regional Arts Victoria's Bushfire Initiatives*. Sydney, p 4.