

**‘Just Culture’ symposium: arts and social change, part of ‘Just Communities’
National LGCSAA Conference 25 – 18th October, 2005**

I have been asked to talk about the value of community cultural development in social transformation and local government’s engagement, or potential for engagement in harnessing creativity for social change.

Under what circumstances can art contribute to social change?

Some would argue that art changes nothing.

Others would argue that cultural change is necessary in order for social change to happen.

What do they mean by this?

They have a view of art and culture which goes something like this:

- Culture: ‘the collective habits of thinking and acting that give particular meanings to the existence of individuals, or groups, or the public culture of whole societies’;
- Art: “a way of articulating cultural memories, ‘not to imprison us in the past, but to free us from the traps of habit.’. A transformative process.

The proposition I would like to discuss with you today is that our habits of thinking, seeing and behaving can be transformed through our active participation in creative processes. When these creative processes lead to social change, we call this community cultural development.

As all governments, including local government grapple with sustainability and the need to achieve a balance between environmental sustainability, economic viability and social equity – they can be missing the essential ingredient – culture. Our habits of thinking and acting need to be challenged and changed if these new policy paradigms for sustainability are to take hold. Transformational art processes can assist in engendering these new habits.

What do I mean by transformational art processes?

I mean arts processes which help us imagine new possibilities – for ourselves and for our society and which, under the right circumstances, can lead to change.

Predominantly, the arts have been applied by governments in an instrumental way. By this I mean ‘let’s implement policy using the arts as a tool.’ In this sense the arts have, for example, served as a tool for promoting a city, as a way of educating communities about environmental issues or as a tool for civic enhancement. However this instrumental application is only half the story.

There are transformational possibilities arising from engagement with the world of the intellect and the arts which move beyond these instrumental applications. By

transformational I mean **‘let’s allow creative activity to help determine policy by developing and negotiating shared understandings of various policy challenges and mapping out solutions.’**

Transformational arts processes can do this through changing the way we think see and behave.

They can stimulate new ways of thinking through encouraging debate, extending knowledge, illuminating divergence and highlighting consensus around shared meaning, purpose and values.

Transformational art processes can bring about **new ways of seeing** by connecting policy makers with those for whom the policies are intended and transforming the way in which these policy makers see and act, thereby changing the policies themselves.

Transformational processes can also **stimulate new ways of behaving**. They can encourage organisations to be more innovative in their policies and programs making them more willing to take risks and experiment with new ways of working. They can build and strengthen social capital between groups – even when those groups appear to have competing or conflicting interests. They can encourage cross sectoral and multi agency cooperation.

Rather than seeing the arts as a tool for achieving government economic, environmental and social objectives, transformational approaches recognise that the arts are the language with which we articulate and challenge our habits of seeing, thinking and behaving. Transformational creative processes can help make visible the cultural concepts which underpin public planning. If we can acknowledge culture and recognize it as a living, breathing part of individual and community life, then we can give new meaning and force to efforts to achieve sustainable economic, social and environmental development.

Another way of saying this is that each dimension to government decision making, be it social, economic or environmental has a cultural dimension. In government, including local government, rather than see the need to stake out yet another separate and distinct cultural policy or empire, we should be striving to establish a cultural sensibility in all decision makers; a cultural framework through which all government planning and decision making can be evaluated.

What are the tools being used by local government to develop these cultural sensibilities?

1. Cultural Mapping:

This is a series of techniques for understanding how people are experiencing their place and culture and their relationship to community and place. Often this involves engaging specific communities in creative processes to map their environment, priorities, perceptions, experiences and identity in order to build understanding and dialogue within communities about these issues and contribute to an interpretation of locality and identity. These interpretations can be used to inform government strategies and plans.

2. Community Cultural Development:

This term is used to describe a process that generates social transformation through participatory arts. This often involves artists working with communities and using creativity interpreted in the broadest sense. Like all good community development work, these processes are designed to increase participant's capacity to continue achieving their own goals and development beyond the life of a particular project and the partnership with professional artists.

3. Place Making:

Placemaking is about 'turning public spaces into public places; places which engage those who inhabit them, places through which people do not merely pass, but have reason to stop and become involved; places which offer rich experience and a sense of belonging; places in short which have meaning, which evoke pleasure or contemplation, or reflection and, most importantly, an appreciation of cultural and environmental diversity.' (Ryan quoted in Winikoff, 2000). Placemaking often involves multi-disciplinary teams of architects, planners, designers and artists working in partnership with the people who inhabit these places to ensure that the design achieves meaning and a sense of belonging in their eyes.

4. Policies and procedures which embed cultural sensibilities into the ways in which councils think and act:

I have developed a list of what I think those policies and procedures need to be if local councils are to successfully develop and apply an awareness of the cultural to their thinking and actions. Some councils already have some of these policies and procedures in place.

We need policies and procedures which:

- Recognise that all new development with a public interface should reflect and strengthen a town or city's culture rather than lead to the installation of generic, international spaces.
- We need council policies that recognise that it is how residents *experience* their city – their sense of place, identity and personal safety – which is the vital ingredient in successful urban development and regeneration; that the *readability of the city* – its signage, opportunities to interpret its history, relate to and experience its natural and built environment are crucial aspects of successful planning.
- We need council policies which recognise the critical role of the arts in creating an inclusive, distinctive and vibrant public domain. These policies need to understand that it is not the symbolic aspect of the artworks alone which creates a sense of identity and meaning, but the processes used in the development of the works, namely community involvement in conception, refinement and, in some cases, the manufacture of the works. It is these participatory, collaborative processes which are critical to the creation of a meaningful, inclusive and vibrant public place.

- We need council policies and procedures which recognise the effectiveness of these participatory creative processes and apply them more generally across their work in, for example, strategic, environmental and public health planning.
- We need policies and procedures which support a multi-disciplinary approach; which allow different parts of council to work together, different disciplines to work together and government and non-government agencies to work together. These councils must be willing to permit a dispersal of power - a power sharing down the employment hierarchy - but also out into community based organisations through the development of mutually beneficial and mutually respectful partnerships.
- We need council policies and procedures which use participatory arts processes to bring policy makers and those for whom the policies are intended face to face, changing the way in which these policy makers see and think and ultimately changing policies.
- We need policies and procedures which support the systemic development of cultural sensibilities and their routine application into the way local government thinks and acts. This will require leadership which is committed to systemic change rather than short term, episodic forays into arty projects. These short term efforts have little if any long term impact on the communities for whom they are intended or on the thinking or actions of the councils sponsoring them.
- We need council policies and procedures which encourage the development of new forms of knowledge. Attempts to develop a holistic approach and response to economic, environmental and social development and which recognise the interdependence of these issues are often undone by the different knowledge systems operating within these diverse disciplines.

Different knowledge systems can use different assumptions, values and language. For instance, think about the way in which a landscape architect and an engineer approach the issue of stormwater management. The landscape architect will be thinking in terms of ecosystems, the diversity of plant and animal life inhabiting the water-course and the need to preserve wildlife corridors. The engineer will be thinking about taming nature, solving problems of drainage and the need for the rapid disbursement of storm water to prevent flooding and to preserve the safety of people and property. Their diverse knowledge systems will have them thinking in different paradigms, valuing different things and speaking a different language. The dominance of one knowledge system over another is also an issue in multi-disciplinary environments like local government. The dominance of economic rationalism and the impact of this is something most of us have encountered.

- We need council policies and procedures which recognise encourage and protect the participation of residents as producers in the widest range of

cultural activities. We need public policies which recognise that our relationship to creativity and art goes beyond the narrow concerns of individualism and consumerism. We need policies which support our involvement in creative activity as producers, not merely as spectators and consumers.

- We need council policies and procedures which support our direct, critical engagement with creative processes and the arts; which understand and embrace how these creative processes appeal to the irrational, to our sense of wonder, imagination and curiosity, help us to make lateral connections and imagine new possibilities – for ourselves, our communities and for our society.

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