

‘Cube 37: Engaging young people in outer metropolitan areas’
Merryn Tinkler, Arts Development Coordinator, Frankston Arts Centre

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I am responsible for developing arts initiatives that engage the community and help facilitate social change and growth through arts. I come from 20 years experience in the performing arts where I became passionate about contemporary arts practice, especially the way it impacts on the community and how it can be used as a tool for growth within a community. I hope you will come away from this presentation with knowledge on the ways arts facilities can contribute to community growth and building – or at least how we are attempting to make a difference at Frankston.

To begin with, a bit of background about Frankston and the venue. We are a regional hub on the very southern fringe of metropolitan Melbourne on the way to the Mornington Peninsula. Frankston Central Activities District is one of the largest retail centres outside the Melbourne CBD. Frankston’s resident population is just over 110,000 people with 27% of those being under 17.

Frankston Arts Centre is owned and operated by the local government. It is a 10 year old, purpose built venue with an 800 seat auditorium and a 400 seat function centre. With the onset of Federation, Federal funds were matched by local government to build an annex to the main arts centre called Cube 37.

Cube 37 is where I operate from and is the hub of arts development within Frankston and the region. We run a full visual arts program of five gallery spaces, an arts workshop program for children, youth and artists and usually two or three externally funded community development programs per year. Apart from the \$1.5 million that Frankston Council put into the building before it opened in March 2001, it contributes about \$200,000 of ongoing operational funding per annum.

I am going to use two case studies to demonstrate the kinds of programs that we run at Cube 37 – two programs that are pretty different, but have had significant effect on the development of the community. These are a new media program for youth called ‘Digital Graffiti’ and the ‘Hip Cat Circus’ – a youth social circus.

Firstly a bit about the building itself.



The building Cube 37 is unique. It has funky colours and industrial surfaces, designed to appeal to the youth market. It was designed by Kirril Kosslof who was also the brainchild behind the most prominent feature of the building, the glass studio. Cube 37 consists of:

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- The courtyard – used for outdoor sculptural exhibitions a few times a year, an entertainment area and area for outdoor fire twirling and juggling.
- The media studio (depicted above in yellow) is a multi purpose space that houses a suite of computers used by local artists and community for video and new media design work and workshops. This is the space where a lot of the new media developmental work happens, including Artist in Residence programs and workshops for our Emerging New Media artists programs. It is also a room for other workshops including childrens art classes.
- The main studio (depicted above in light blue) is a flat floor studio space with retractable seating for up to 200. It is well used for short term exhibitions, particularly by schools and is the main arts workshop studio for drama and art classes and the training studio for the youth circus.
- Federation Gallery (depicted above in pink). This is a community access gallery catering for local arts groups and individuals, and our own programmed exhibitions.
- (Depicted in dark blue) Then there is the Glass Studio. This venue features the majority of the New Media presentations at Frankston Arts Centre and is the most contemporary and public aspect of the building. It is a large three sided glass room fronting on to a main street which has three large rear projections screens covering each window. It is a fully programmable automated public exhibition space. The automation system means that exhibitions can be “set and forget” and operate automatically dusk till dawn. The first work in the space was “Speed of Light” by Ian deGruchy - a slide based sight specific work with soundscape by Dan Witton. The work was launched with the opening of the building and the feedback was fantastic. It set the scene for the community support for the centre.

Frankston has its challenges demographically with a large percentage of the population being of very low socio-economic background and another percentage being on the very opposite end of the scale. People from both aspects and all in between have embraced Cube 37 and especially the New Media aspects with the Art after Dark exhibitions given their very public nature.



Essentially we are talking about the Glass Studio being dynamic public art and all the arguments for public art apply to the Glass Studio. Not surprisingly, Frankston City Council has a Public Arts Policy that embraces New Media.

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The beauty of this venue and this artform is that it is dynamic - the exhibitions change monthly, sometimes less, and it provides colour and movement and a whole lot of energy – sometimes controversy – and at the very least points of discussion for the community.

Now, having described the venue, I will consider some of our most interesting programs.

Digital Graffiti: youth new media project

Firstly while we are on the new media bandwagon – I will describe a youth new media project called Digital Graffiti. The outcome of the first year of this program is currently on exhibition in Federation Gallery and the Glass Studio.

This project has been running for a year supported by funding from the Australia Council of the Arts EPIC (Emerging Artists in the Community) Fund and the Department of Health and Ageing through their National Illicit Drug Strategy Community Partnerships Initiative. The Australia Council provided funding for an Artist in Residence – Daniel Flood – to be onsite three days per week, and the Dept of Health and Ageing provided the project costs – workshop tutors, equipment materials, etc.

Daniel managed the project and created a methodology for the delivery of workshops to young people in the area on video editing, short film making, mobile phone icons, digital comics, t-shirt design. We worked in partnership with local schools, youth service organisations and our own resident group of emerging new media artists to deliver the program to 200 participants over the 8 months of the workshop program.

We set initial objectives - As with a lot of these kinds of projects, it is difficult to imagine at the beginning the scope of where things can go. These kinds of projects have a certain kind of organic nature which means that they need to be given the room to grow and evolve naturally over the time frame. For instance – the initial target we set for participants involved in this project was 30. This was me sitting down designing the project probably a year before even Daniel was employed. The idea that we might reach 200 young people was nowhere near where I imagined the project could head.

Objectives

Intern

- Skills development
- Establish networks
- Develop and run workshops for youth
- Curate major exhibition outcome

Project

- Involve 30 participants in workshops
- Establish an outlet for skills digital development
- Produce works of art in digital media for exhibition

When designing a project like this I have found the templates and guidelines developed by VicHealth and Arts Victoria actually really useful. They look at Aims and Outcomes of the project as having three tiers and three timeframes.

	Participants	Project/ Organisation	Community
Process <i>Short term</i>			
Impact <i>Medium Term</i>			
Outcome <i>Long Term</i>			

We develop process driven – ie short term aims like ‘to involve up to 30 young people in practical workshops in film, video and digital art’. Impact – medium term outcomes – ie ‘to develop skills, establish support networks’ and outcome driven aims that are long term – ‘instil a sense of pride and self confidence’. We develop these for the participants, the organisations involved and for the community.

These give a project a real sense of ‘making a difference’ in the short, medium and long term – so in terms of sustainability, the project itself may not be sustainable, but the effects are long lasting. Also the practices or the models strive for sustainability.

Of course the issue of how to measure these longer term outcomes remains very difficult. For instance – how do you measure pride and self confidence?



What we are talking about here is a quality experience that creates a sense that the community has a voice – a project that is ‘satisfying’ and has tangible outcomes for the participants will have an ongoing and medium or long term effect on the individuals involved and by default, will have impact on the community of which they are a part.

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What I am looking for in a project like Digital Graffiti is that quality experience for the participants. We set numbers at 30 because of that – the fact that we reached 200 is secondary – very secondary to what the experience was for them – did it inspire?, did it give them a sense of achievement?, did it instil a sense of pride? – all of those emotional things.

The only way to evaluate those things is from feedback – anecdotal feedback – focus groups – and asking the right questions of the participants. So getting feedback from the participants has to form a part of any project.



We are in the evaluation phase of Digital Graffiti currently – the feedback is certainly really positive at this stage.

Hip Cat Circus.

The next case study I would like to discuss has become a flagship project for Cube 37, Hip Cat Circus.

I had been involved in the very beginnings of the Women’s Circus as a participant, and I have since read quite a bit about its strength as a community development tool. We started by running some small circus workshop programs – both funded and self-funding to test the interest, and the rest did that organic thing....

The social circus model is used worldwide. At its heart, social circus has a philosophy of acceptance and seeks to create a respectful and supportive environment where people can experience something that may be radically different to anything else they have ever tried. The language is supportive, not critical, and fun and participation is more highly valued than the outcome of a routine.



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The real strengths of circus for youth come from

- **Skills development** – Achievable outcomes for participants – some circus skills are quick and easy to learn – so a real sense of achievement is possible within a short timeframe.
- **Sense of safety** – Safe touching – in our society today touching is so taboo – in this environment touching is necessary and safe.
- **Safe risk taking** – our young people like to take risks – this is an environment where they can take risks where it is monitored and safe.
- **Real engagement** – the work is physical and needs team work, so the process works to develop young people in a number of ways
- **Public outcome** - Working towards a public performance outcome was an important part of the project – and about fulfilment.



The youth issues in Frankston were paramount – still are really, and so we targeted youth for the circus project.

The first year of the project attracted 50 young people to experience circus workshops and a circus troupe formed with 20 members. They called themselves Hip Cat Circus.

Project objectives of the first year were:

Social Inclusion

- To make the project accessible to a broad socio-economic range of young people and to break down perceived barriers
(as a bi line to this I remind you that the Arts Centre sits between the million dollar mansions and the public housing areas and we are aiming to reach people from both)

Increased participation

- Generally increase young people's participation in arts and recreational activities, group activities, decision making, leadership and community engagement

Youth Development

- developing performance skills in young people, encouraging self-confidence, trust and sense of achievement

Community development and partnerships

- To build an audience for this style of performance
- To offer opportunity to community members to be involved on a range of support levels

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- To engage local business community and local youth service organisations in partnerships, fostering a sense of involvement
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We attracted VicHealth funding and a corporate sponsor – Infraserve – who is our local infrastructure maintenance organisation as well as some philanthropic support.

We developed a strong link with Westside Circus to design and deliver the project. Westside Circus has a 10 year history of running circus-based programs particularly for youth and ‘at risk’ youth. Bringing them onboard as a partner meant that we didn’t have to reinvent the wheel – they provided the expertise – we provided the community in need.

We partnered with local service organisations in the monitoring of the project – and encouraged their ‘buy in’ early – do that they would promote the project to their clients.

The project began with free intensive circus workshops during the school holidays which were well attended. The workshops then became weekly – and attendance dropped off a little. Promotional tools like out and out bribery were employed – free movie tickets if you brought a friend – that kind of thing.

Some of the main outcomes achieved were:

- 50 Participants
- Young people determine own working agreement

HIP CAT CIRCUS 2005 WORKING POLICY

“The way we want to work together”

Have Fun

Support each other

Encourage each other

Use positive language

Be inclusive of everyone in the group

HIP CAT IS YOURS - Lets make it the most positive we can

- 5 sold out performances
- Extensive local media coverage
- Ongoing commitment from local business and service organisations

In the first year we had one member from Menzies – a local organisation that provides support services to young people who can no longer live with their natural families. His development was profound – the Deputy Director of Menzies wrote after the project : ‘one of our young people who has just completed your program would be the best testimony to your great work and efforts. He not only enjoyed going to the circus but he also learned some skills, improved his coordination, gained confidence and developed better social skills’.



Those responses really were an understatement

The young man's comments were:

I came along because I didn't want to be bored or getting into trouble after school anymore. I've made some really good friends – people I wouldn't have met otherwise. And now I've got heaps of family and friends coming to watch me perform – I'll be on stilts all night, but I'm not nervous.

We were so taken by the impact the project had on him that I went into discussion with Menzies about a fuller involvement with their young clients for the following year. That fell flat on its face despite all the promises – the logistics of working with those young people in an inclusive environment were too much to overcome in the short term. It will take a longer term vision and a lot more discussion before we can get there.

The project completed a second year with the same funding partners and an obvious development in theme and skill level from the first year.

One of the most daunting aspects of embarking on projects such as this is the funding side of things. What comes first – your project or the funding?. It is a fine balance between building a project around funding guidelines and finding funding for a project you have in mind. It is worthwhile doing extensive research because there is funding out there that you might not think of initially – for instance the Department of Health and Ageing's fund was an unexpected find.

There is more and more recognition that the arts play a very dynamic role in the growth and development of a community.

Given that what we are talking about is essentially a health issue, and community engagement issue, then funding can be quite creative and not necessarily from what we might see as the traditional art funding sources.

VicHealth has played no small a part in the linkage of community arts and health especially for youth, but there are many sources of funding that can be interpreted as community capacity building – where the arts is the medium not the outcome.

To embark on any new programming initiative it is important to begin by looking from a strategic planning point of view. This provides for sustainable programs and a commitment

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to the methodology from the community development sake – not for the kudos of the organisation. Funding will always be easier to source when you are coming from that kind of strategic commitment.

From a practical point of view when looking at budgeting for funding submissions, the management of projects such as these can never be underestimated. It is important to make sure there is adequate funding for project management and administration on top of the day to day operation of the venue.

It is also important to make sure you have researched the ideas – is this what the young people in your community want or need? – have you asked them what they want? Is there evidence to support what they ‘need’? Why do you want to engage in youth community development programs, and not say with the older community?.

Do some gap analysis - Are there similar things happening in your area already that you don’t know about?

What can you sustain practically? – there’s no point in doing a new media project if you have no equipment or resources to start with or a circus project if there’s no flat floor venue. Also what partners can you attract? – local sponsors are great, corporate sponsors are great – they all take their own levels of maintenance and servicing. Don’t forget about partnering with other arts organisations who can deliver projects.

It is a large area to embark on as a venue or community facility, and at Frankston Arts Centre we have found it a very fulfilling way to engage and involve our community both in their facility and programs and in their own personal development.

Promoting arts as a participation sport as well as a spectator sport is a powerful tool for uplifting and building the emotional capacity of any community. I encourage those of you who are dabbling with the idea to partner with other organisations that are skilled in these areas, and embrace it into your programs.

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