

# Councils put value on community art

MORE THAN JUST BEING ART FOR ART'S SAKE, A SERIES OF LESS THAN TRADITIONAL CULTURAL PROJECTS IN THREE MUNICIPALITIES HAVE SHOWN HOW MUSIC, STORYTELLING, PHOTOGRAPHY AND OTHER CREATIVE FORMS CAN BE USEFUL IN COMMUNITY CONSULTATION, ENGAGEMENT AND CONNECTIVITY.

## Talking about Generations

Geelong, Wangaratta and Latrobe are all using arts based projects to tackle the big issues for their communities.

Launched in 2006 these three councils have collaborated internally and externally to create new models of civic engagement using the arts.

Geelong called its project Connecting Identities to focus on the changes its municipality was facing. Wangaratta decided to tackle its ageing population and Latrobe took an environmental theme

around greenhouse gas emissions to create Green Expectations.

The three councils partnered with the Cultural Development Network, an independent agency linking communities, artists and councils, who played an important role in securing funding from Australian Council for the Arts, Arts Victoria and the Department for Planning and Community Development.

Cultural Development Network Director John Smithie said after identifying their issue, councils had developed some exemplary projects to engage with the community.

"Individual arts projects were developed under each council's own unique theme identified as an issue in their municipality," he said.

"The starting point was for councils to decide what their big issues were and then put together a team to work with local artists."

Each council developed its own in-house team to deliver its Generations projects and hundreds of local artists across each municipality, as well as some well known names, have been engaged.

"It is an opportunity for local artists to gain some paid employment but also, for emerging artists, it's a chance to be mentored by some well known names in the arts," Mr Smithie said.

Geelong, Wangaratta, Latrobe and two participating interstate councils will present their Generation project outcomes at the ReGenerating Community: Arts, Community and Governance conference in September. ■

## Connecting Identities

### Geelong City Council

Geelong spent 12 months developing content and establishing its internal structures to ensure Connecting Identities had a foundation that would enable it to continue beyond the life of the project.

The theme of Connecting Identities was chosen by council to provide a focus for acknowledging and exploring the municipality's diverse landscape, environment and communities, and the issues affecting them.

Coordinator Cultural Development Duncan Esler said that a fundamental agenda of Connecting Identities was to open up opportunities for arts and culture to empower and influence other departments of Council.

"That first year of planning gave councillors and other departments the chance to explore the civic engagement possibilities presented by Connecting Identities and its artistic process. This engendered great enthusiasm and a strong level of ownership over the project," Mr Esler said.

"Many departments recognised the potential to work in with strands of the project that resonated with the work they were already doing," Mr Esler said.

"Other connections developed over a period of time as the project concept evolved and we had growing momentum that is continuing now."

Geelong has created a legacy for its Connecting Identities project by developing its own unique website which will continue to be updated with stories and images.

The three part project is based on the connection of residents to the land, and presenting Indigenous traditions in a contemporary context, including



Photo by Bindi Cole



Photo by Travis Easton

**Memory Bank** – a collection of films and stories about people living in Geelong and places of local significance. Launched in July 2008, an installation of film screens and panels with quotes transformed the National Wool Museum which included a rendered sculpture of the whole municipality and a collection of memorabilia frozen in ice.

**Mouth to Mountain** – A 12 hour relay journey to bring together people and places. 96 community ambassadors carried sea water in beautifully crafted story vessels from the beach, and eventually poured it into an ancient waterhole atop the You Yangs. Artworks and celebrations highlighted community involvement and the natural environment on the day.

**M2M** – Connecting Identities is now planning the third phase for 2010 entitled M2M. The contemporary songline previewed during Mouth to Mountain, plus film and photography taken from the dawn to dusk journey and stories from Memory Bank will play a central role in this major celebration of Geelong communities' embracing change, honouring the past, acknowledging the present and visioning the future. ■

## Generations

### Wangaratta Rural City

Wangaratta used its Generations project to address findings that its ageing population was being perceived as negative for the community's future.

The findings, from a council study into its population, prompted council to challenge these misconceptions by using non traditional community engagement methods and embracing the arts to turn negativity into a celebration.

Cultural Development Officer Maz McGann said through the Generations project, council wanted to celebrate the past and talk about the future.

"Culturally people want to tell stories and need to hear other people's stories," she said.

"We saw this as a way to better engage and get to know the older people in our community who have stories and let others respond."

Once the issue was identified, council consulted with representatives from a diverse network of individuals and groups to both inform the project and encourage them to become ambassadors.

"After looking at a number of projects that were around and where we could complement the work that other organisations were doing in this area, we came up with a series of initiatives that have been rolled out over the past two and a half years," Ms McGann said.



The conversation couch is bound to get people talking.

### The Generations project includes:

>> **An Imagined Future** – two local artists were commissioned to create postcards and start people thinking about what they wanted from the future.

>> **By Myself** – Older Wangaratta residents who chose to continue living independently rather than in aged care facilities were photographed and interviewed as a way of celebrating independence in older people. The result was a street-based exhibition where the artwork was enlarged and hung in CBD shop windows.

>> **Heritage Idol** – This project challenged people's idea of ageing by promoting the value of old artefacts such as furniture, jewellery and cars because of their history. Nominations for the best old person or object formed a top 10 and the community voted on its favourite. A story was attached to each and displayed on storyboards in the library, local newspaper and at the Wangaratta Show.

>> **Telling River Secrets Short Film Festival** – A couple of community based film makers joined a professional film maker to capture stories from different generations about people's relationships with the Ovens and King rivers.

>> **The Conversation Couch** – A steel framed upholstered couch has been designed by three artists with Wangaratta street names, local birds and scenery woven in. The eye catching piece of furniture is designed to spark conversation. A living libraries project is planned where the couch will be a place for older people to sit and tell their stories. ■

- in 1855 Mrs Hinchey gave the plate to her 10 y.o daughter Bridget when she left Ireland for Australia.
- Bridget kept the plate as she moved to Shepparton, Oakey and then Carboor. After she married, meals for births, deaths and weddings were served on the plate.
- Colleen has had the plate for 45 years and is certain the plate's journey is not over yet.



ANGEL CITY BY  
Wangaratta

Wangaratta's Heritage Idol was a unique storytelling initiative of the Generations projects.

## La Trobe City Council Green Expectations

Latrobe's Green Expectations project is an inter-departmental joint endeavour between council's Arts and the Sustainability and Environment units to deal with the issue of greenhouse emissions.

This three part project involves collecting community thoughts and feelings about climate change, using these to create an arts installation and culminating in a street parade later this year.

After three years of ground work, the installation, known as The Grid, will take its place this year. The central image for The Grid is the Pylon Tree-woven recycled cables from the electricity grid and decorative leaves carrying community messages growing out of the base of a power pylon.

Previous projects include a theatre performance themed on climate change, a tree planting trailer painted with local animals who survive on indigenous habitat and a sculptural representation of a cooling tower and coal mine. ■