

The early beginnings of the Generations Project

**Transcript of interview with Judy Spokes, Director of the Cultural Development Network until late 2005, and Co-ordinator of the Generations Project from its earliest beginnings until late 2005.
*Researcher Pia Smith, September 2009.***

PS It would be great to start if you can articulate your original aims and the story of the project coming into being.

JS At the time, and I think this goes back to about 2003 or 2004, I was the Director of the Cultural Development Network. It was clear to me that the value of the arts and a conscious drawing in of the cultural dimension of local life, are two really powerful mechanisms to more effectively strengthen community. They can stimulate the kind of cultural vitality, resilience and can-do spirit of qualities that we know communities need to survive and to thrive in changing circumstances.

Our members (in local government, the arts and the community sector) were telling us a really strong set of message, which was that “we know this stuff works, we know it because we are doing it all the time; our struggle is that people from outside the immediate field of practice struggle to understand a) what the practice is, and b) why it’s useful and meaningful”. This was a refrain I had heard often before in various roles in the arts and local government sphere and policy sphere over many years, In local government, particularly, and in governments outside the arts more generally, the hardheads dismiss it. That’s been a long cry – ‘if only we could get the people at the top of the food chain to understand the value of this work in sustaining and strengthening community, we would get the resources that the work deserves, because it’s so effective – but we can’t get through’. So that was one thing that people had constantly told us. With Generations we wanted to engage people at the top of the tree – at CEO level.

Another common challenge we wanted to tackle was the perils of short-termism. Even when arts techniques and cultural processes are used to support community sustainability and they work, there can be serious consequences of resource limitations that come with typically short-term projects. Like for instance, your common ten- or twelve-week project where you might get a grant -and tremendous work is done and everybody hits a slump after a project high and leaves at the end feeling down hearted and upset because there’s no capacity to build on what has been created. We wanted this work was to be understood for its potential beyond simply for the ‘art for arts sake’ agenda – a noble goal obviously, but not upper most on most local governments priority lists. We wanted a chance to demonstrate (from inside the

fence) that well crafted arts interventions could help achieve really important goals that local government works towards with on a daily basis., Essentially, local government's job is to sustain healthy communities and healthy places – that's the work that a certain kind of arts practitioner has been doing successfully for a long time, in short bursts with little dribs and drabs of money, against the odds, with inadequate understanding and support from senior leadership in councils and other organisations. We wanted to deliver much more sustainable results for the partner communities, leave legacies behind that could really be built on, and refuse the too common quick fix, or the short burst of something fabulous and then a great burst of disappointment at the end.

So we knew one of the obstacles was lack of understanding from senior leadership, and hence resources not flowing. Not just resources in terms of money, but staff, access to planning processes for the 'serious' issues and other resources beyond the arts or community development departments. We wanted to tackle complex problems using a multi-disciplinary toolkit in which arts were central – but supported by other tools and wisdom. We wanted to once and for all move past the era of the short-term project. Like any serious development, things need time to incubate, then land in the community, then ultimately be owned fully by the community and then be taken on. That needs long-term work.

The other thing we wanted to do was to recognise that some of the obstacles to best practice had been due to the fact that the arts field and the local government field, with some exceptions, don't usually overlap in their understandings of the world and their priorities. We recognised that, and although local governments for a long time have been supporting arts for arts sake – and that's fantastic and critically important – we wanted to demonstrate what we thought we already knew through our practice – that the problems that local government were dealing with were becoming more and more complex and needed more creative approaches to finding solutions that grew from deeper engagement with communities. Arts-based interventions we knew could opening up a more lateral way of engaging communities, and really reaching them, and could nurture a kind of 'let's tackle these problems together' kind of approach. Councils are looking for new relationships with their citizens to jointly tackle big challenges. We thought that the arts could be the missing link, in a lot of circumstances, to opening up the space where the community could genuinely, on its own terms, be drawn in to a meaningful dialogue, with itself and the council seeking to deliver services, or programs, to solve problems or confront challenges on the horizon or whatever it might be.

So this next element is the need to actually stand entirely within a local government context – not an arts context but a local government context, and recognise that at the most senior level, at the CEO level, the issues that local governments are really grappling with themselves? Once we understand those, we might be able to offer the creative arts process,

the CCD process, to assist those councils to deal with problems that they have identified themselves as important.

So it's not simply an arts project, from that point of view. It's a larger initiative of some kind, where resources are drawn from across the whole organisation – including, centrally, the arts – as a means for a local council to, with its community, deal with something complex.

We thought we needed to get longer-term investment to attract more resources and have a more sustained, steady and deliberate approach to local issues – to engage people at the senior levels where the decision making emanates from, and to work within an understanding of local government's imperatives to do its own job. Let's face it, at the end of the day, local government's own job is to sustain and enrich its community – that is also the primary business of this specialist area of arts practice. So it was a natural marriage. The problem that we had, I guess, was we had no way of demonstrating those things. We kept on talking about it, but we wanted an opportunity to trial that in a way where there was some independent research travelling alongside a praxis-based engagement, and where that evidence could be presented in the context of the broader literature in the field of arts development and its' relationship with local development, that would influence decision makers far beyond any investment in particular localities.

So it's a long-winded way of saying the whole field of community cultural development practice, and the relationship between local councils and that practice, seemed to us to be stalled – by a lack of good evidence, by a lack of long-term investment, and by a lack of senior buy in. We thought if we tried something that was real, we would demonstrate those things. It was from those kinds of discussions that we looked amongst our colleagues in the field and in councils and, through a complex series of discussions, we identified some willing participants and started the process of approaching some funding bodies and so on.

So that's what we were trying to do! Because we wanted to move the field on.

PS It's interesting how you're talking about the task that you identified, in the building of healthy communities and the processes around that, and how that aligns, as you say, with what's come out of the literature review.

JS Well it's really interesting to me. I've made it clear at this conference that I was involved in establishing the partnerships, the funding relationships, structures and early planning of the Generations project to do the things that I have just talked about. But once those things were in place, after Meme was employed as the creative director, I moved on to another role. Now coming back at the end of the program, four or five years on, its' really

interesting for me to be at this conference and see those five councils, and the artists involved, and the community members talk about their experiences. It's very gratifying.

PS It is? Okay.

JS Because some of the work is fantastic. Obviously there's been different types of experiences and different levels of success in each of those communities depending on the complex range of objectives they were trying to achieve. So they are all very different and had unique opportunities and obstacles. I haven't been involved at all in the intervening period so there's a lot of detail I don't have. But it's really interesting to me to talk to people involved on the ground and see how positive those results were in the communities. When we started planning Generations all those years ago it was big, it was unwieldy, it was difficult for everybody to come to grips with because there were so many different agendas, so many different levels of understanding. And an awful lot of things could have gone wrong. It seems to me that the project has been overall very successful, because it has established a new agenda for discussion and development of the practice, over and above any local benefits in each of the particular communities. We wanted that as much as any local benefits, so that's really interesting.

The other thing that I have found really fascinating is that when I heard yourself and Martin address the conference this morning and give a sense of the key findings as they were emerging from your research, it is exactly, almost without exception, the kinds of intellectual ideas that we were looking to inject into the thinking of policy makers and planners at local government, so that the space would be opened up for more strategic and more fulsome engagement with communities through creative arts processes. It's amazing to me.

PS That's a relief!

JS I've heard over the period that there have been particular challenges here and there, but I think overall I would see that value of the Generations project in being not just the individual projects but the whole undertaking. That is to say, how can we move the arts agenda and local government's relationship with it closer together in such a way that local governments can do their jobs more effectively? That's the real thing. I think some good research and the discussion that the program has generated right across Australia, and the interest it's generated in funding bodies and arts circles and community development circles as well as local government is really beneficial in itself, and I would really strongly urge those people who have a continuing stake in this project to get the material out as widely as possible. We need to keep the conversation going.

The Cultural Development Network has been very good, I think, at trying always to push the next stage of development in its areas of interest – arts development, cultural development more broadly, local development of places and communities. Hence the strong local government focus. We always wanted to be at the next era of practice. I think there's a real need to ... things get a bit cyclic – you hear the same old debates and the same old discussions, and the field really needs to move on because the world is changing. Local governments risk losing a really important asset – their own communities – if they fail to engage their citizens meaningfully and purposefully. Community: is local government's principal responsibility of course but, in tackling big challenges or coping with change it is principal asset as well. Stories of, by, for and about local communities creatively told, is the absolute simplest key, I think, that the arts help to unlock.

So there are big issues out there and we have to start solving them, and it seems silly to not make better use of all resources – especially citizens themselves and their own creative potential.

PS The material from what's been learnt from these projects is really broad, and there are really interesting lessons coming from each place related to the way they were implemented into the local government networks. The state funding bodies in particular were really asking about that: 'How can this be fed into the bigger picture? How is this going into networks outside the sector..?'

JS As one local government cultural planner (operating now out of Queensland), I am one of many enthusiastic distribution vehicles for this research. Not just to get it out there to others through us, but to continue to empower and enrich our own conversation, with our own communities, with each other as colleagues, and increasingly with other government stakeholders, councils and beyond that. That's a commitment I'm happy to make myself, and I know there are hundreds of others out there who will do the same.

You've touched on something I want to make a comment on: I, along with Anne Dunn, was involved in the National Local Government and Arts Task Force established by the Australia Council for the Arts and the Commonwealth Office of Local Government right back in 1992. That moment, I suppose, was another significant moment where what we sought to do was to move the whole field of arts and local government on to the next set of developments after the successful support of community arts officers in local government in the early days set the agenda. Now, even that Task Force is a long time ago, it's getting on for 20 years ago, and I think since that time there have been many efforts here and there to bring the arts, community and local government agendas more effectively together, but it's all been a bit loose, and ad-hoc. But I think we're overdue for a much simpler, much more honest appraisal of what the needs are, what the challenges are and how to move forward.

I think all of the three sectors now, compared with how things were in 1992 when we established that national task force and published some research and did some promotional work at the time. Everybody knows now, to a greater or lesser extent, that there's something in this stuff, but it needs to be more intelligently discussed. It needs to be a discussion that happens with number of other disciplines, both within councils and within the arts and so on. One of the problems that I think still haunts the field, is a sense of policy impotence and injustice felt by local governments– that despite the fact that Councils are the largest investor in the cultural sector, (I think I'm still correct on this but you can check the ABS statistics), they are still treated as poor cousins in national and state public policy forums.

PS Local government?

JS By far.

PS I got a question about this after our talk.

JS So we put most of the money in. And that's across the full range of cultural opportunities – library facilities, art galleries, performing arts centres, as well as some of this other, more specialist, strategic work, where artists are among the resources that work with communities to strengthen those communities and to tackle complex problems. So that is where all the money is! And yet all of the dialogue, or most of it, most of the discussion, is from either a federal or a state level – particularly a state level. It's 'how can we get local government to do more?' It's the wrong paradigm, it's the wrong question! Local governments obviously have a continuing set of problems that they need to manage. They are expected to do more and more and more with less and less and less. The dilemmas and expectations of other levels of government coming on them don't just happen in the arts, it happens right across the board.

So this is not tackling the direct Generations research questions, but I think it's an important background issue – that local government is at least an equal player, and actually the principal player in the development of community, of places and communities. It needs the state government to provide services, and it needs the federal government to provide leadership and resources and a larger framework, but it's doing the work and it's go to deal with the work. It's a bit the poor cousin.

So we have got to change the discussion somehow. The discussion with the states tends to happen from the arts departments. Now that's not surprising, because the arts are naturally at the heart of cultural development and a special part of culture, because they have so much power to illuminate, create open spaces, lateral solutions and so on. But it's not the be all and

end all – there are a whole lot of other cultural activities that go outside the narrow concept of the arts as it might be defined by a national or a state arts funding body. There are questions of heritage, there are questions that go beyond heritage as well, and media and a whole lot of stuff... education...health, I could go on and on. That cultural dimension is, I think, increasingly understood by some local councils as being an important underpinning to all of their work, and that the cultural tools, particularly powerful ones like the creative arts, can really help them to achieve all sorts of objectives that fall not just in their social development portfolio, but in their environmental management portfolio, their governance agenda more broadly, planning, civic engagement, animating democracy and a whole host of other things – urban planning and all sorts of stuff.

So then we come to have a discussion about really forming effective partnerships with the states, and we talk to the arts department who, all across Australia there are different kinds of support programs, available and that's great, I'm not criticising those, but we need to be able to engage with a state government across a whole range of issues. It's not enough to think about the pointy end of the arts, which is all you can really talk about within a state arts funding authority structure, because that's their brief, that's reasonable, but local governments are thinking on a much wider continuum. So there are many councils right across this country for whom it's absolutely immaterial, the top-end arts agenda. It doesn't reach them where their needs are at. Yet the power of creative arts, when it's embedded in community, actually helping to strengthen that community, and creating a meaningful engagement between a community and its 'governors' is really, really powerful.

There's a new Queensland Local Government Act this year, and one of the principles of the act is 'meaningful community engagement'. This is the territory of good creative arts practice. By the way I should clarify here that what I'm talking about is local, community-based cultural practice – we need good artists, we need great artists, that's another larger topic that I'd like to come back to. My main point really is the challenge of talking across jurisdictions and disciplines. We're talking French and they're talking Spanish because we don't yet have a common interest. The interest of the state and the federal levels of government is: 'how can we get local government to do more and to fund the arts more?' Our question is a different question: 'how can we enrich and strengthen our communities, and tackle massive and rapid change in our communities?' Because people like myself and others at this conference, and through the Generations Project, because we know that creative artists with the right skills and experience and so on, when embedded in the right processes – can actually help deliver those things. Then we've got, as it happens, a lot more artists being employed in one way or another – and that's what the arts funding bodies want, and we've got those arts really touching the issues that are most important to those people on the ground, because they are defined by those people, they're not defined by the entirely different imperatives of the arts industry.

I just want to also be really clear in the comments I'm making now that none of what I'm saying is talking against art for arts sake, nor the established institutions and programs of the arts. They are actually critical, and I hasten to add that. But there is a missing link, and there is an opportunity. The opportunity, I think, is now – it exists right now. But I don't think it will exist until state government, particularly, is prepared to come to with a blank page and talk to local government. Not to have the agenda set and the timelines framed and all of that.

In a way that's the other thing the Generations Project tried to do – it tried to elongate the timing, and it tried to open up the agenda. So things could emerge and be developed conceptually and then be managed systematically once they were all set up. That's what we need across the whole.

PS Did you anticipate that question when you emphasised the whole-of-government approach to funding Generations? That there was that expectation of local government? Was that already in your mind or has that emerged?

JS We always wanted there to be a legacy left behind in each of the communities, and anything that was useful in that legacy we were reasonably confident would be picked up by the local council and potentially other funders, because it would be in their interest, because it was helping them to deal with their issues. And if it wasn't that's not such a bad thing, because it wasn't useful, perhaps. Sometimes good research and good experimentation requires the capacity to fail a little as well as succeed, so we wanted to create that space.

There's another point that I wanted to make. There is a whole range of other projects that I'm aware of, and one in my own community, Redlands City Council, that is I think a good demonstration of exactly what the larger aims of the Generations project were. There will be other communities and other councils that have similar projects. The one I'm talking about is the Bay Views arts residency that was conceived and delivered by artist and cultural researcher Chris Dew and funded by Council as part of a whole of government investment in the of the southern Moreton Bay islands. Focussed on creative storytelling and multimedia the residency has already had a tremendous impact on the unique and, in many ways disadvantaged, communities. Obviously we don't have time to talk about that project now, but like Generations we sought with Bay Views to tackle very complex issues in partnership with these island communities, through a creative approach that would go to their heart and soul dimensions, yet encompass some very practical and prosaic issues and concerns, which were issues that the council shares with those communities. We've had a lot of success. The council invested in the Bay Views Project and sought partnerships with the Australia Council and Arts Queensland to do, essentially on a smaller scale, what the Generations Project was seeking to do. That is, we want to do this properly: we want to go in there over three years.

We've got some multi-disciplinary relationships established within council. With the exception of Arts Queensland we've got some multi-disciplinary, whole-of-government partnership established across with the Queensland Government – the department of communities, health, education, a number of other departments who are investing in these communities.

PS With the exception of Arts Queensland?

JS Arts Queensland is a tiny agency. It's very small, they've got a big brief and a big state. I appreciate that it's not possible for them to be everywhere. All I'm really trying to say is there's a project – council invested in it itself. We did get some support from the Queensland Department of Communities in that first phase. What we've always wanted to do, though, is what the community wants us to do, which is to invest in this program for a long period. We wanted a three-year commitment. We had all of the other ingredients set up, and we have demonstrated the success in the first stage in the project, and it's very consistent with some of the early findings of the Generations Project. We want now to not just leave that behind and go on to the next thing and wait for the next funding closing date, whether it's the Australia Council or Arts Queensland. We want still to engage those other two levels of government, and our community, which is already engaged, in this project to deliver some really important outcomes for that community, but also to continue the practice and the reflective practice – which is informed by the research – of the Generations Project.

I'm only talking about that project because it's in my community and we are currently working out how to keep it going. There are others I'm aware of elsewhere. I guess what I'm saying is that the scope of this research exercise obviously can't encompass those other projects, but the inclusion of a couple of those examples from elsewhere in Australia, even as brief snapshots, will help for people to understand that this project, the Generations Project, to a greater or lesser extent, is being trialled – perhaps without the resources – in other parts of the country. The five case studies in Generations, together with these other emerging initiatives, even if there was only a chance to refer to a smattering of them, will help to inform those partners in states that weren't engaged in Generations, and will help establish the threads that the funding bodies and the councils and researchers, and artist practitioners, and community leaders, need to pick up, knit together in their ongoing discussion, and really land the next phase of development. I am very eager to help. If there's some role that I can play or something that I can offer that might make that possible, so feel free to contact me.

There's one final thing if I'm able to make another comment, about the experience of Redlands City Council where I work. When council adopted a ten-year cultural plan that I put together last year, it did so informed by an international local government policy instrument called Agenda 21 for Culture. This was an important document in enlarging council's understanding of culture. I think that's an important issue that is part of the background for the

larger topic, about how the arts and local government can come together in a more dynamic relationship that helps to strengthen and sustain local communities, because that's the main job. There's some scope, I think, to link that international dimension into the research. At council we are talking about a possibility that we might look to host an Australian link to the Agenda 21 conference by establishing some sort of a forum for discussion that really focuses local government on the question of culture, generally, cultural diversity, and civic participation, and artists, arts and heritage as an enzyme for development and change, that I think will help all of us to get to the next level of development. Because even though there's a whole lot of good practice happening out there, as a field of practice and as a discourse, we desperately need to be moving past all of the tried and tested lessons that we keep reiterating to one another and get into the territory that is a little bit trickier but is more and more critical. Global forces like climate change and the sort of homogenised cultures imposed on us from elsewhere are making these issues much more pressing.

Whatever the flaws in any of the individual case studies in Generations, or other aspects of the program, I think it's enormously important as a milestone to kick us on, and what matters now is how the conversation can continue.

Enquiries about this interview or the Generations Project

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