



CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY AND THE NATIONAL AGENDA

Jennifer Bott, CEO, Australia Council

Firstly I'd like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people, the traditional owners of the land on which we stand.

In the current Boyer Lectures on ABC Radio National, the Australian expatriate writer Peter Conrad quotes the inimitable Oscar Wilde. 'Maps of the world,' said Wilde, 'must leave room for Utopia.' Most people in this room I suspect have spent much of their lives and passion on building if not seeking Utopia. It's a wonderful sentiment, but the reality is that Utopia - even a sense of Utopia - seems further than ever from these shores and just about everywhere else. Utopia is a straightforward existence and all the good things in abundance. It implies simplicity, but the world - our world - is growing more complex by the day.

Anxiety rules much of what we do, and blurs much of what we see - as we navigate between the global and the local, between embracing the world and retreating from it, between a sense of engulfment and a fear of abandonment. Not only individuals but whole nations, and indeed cultures, have trouble adjusting, or just keeping up. I begin with these rather gloomy perspectives not to put a damper on proceedings - I'm a fully paid-up member of the Optimists' Club - but to set the stage for real-world solutions. Utopia has its place, but - as far as I'm aware - it's not in this world, so we need to look at other options.

We're all searching for some clarity, and security. And beneath the often-slick surfaces of modern life we know there are problems that simply aren't responding to the usual formulas: the carefully targeted application of public monies, the injection of well-chosen professionals, complex infrastructure programs to attract either people or jobs. The best-laid plans of economists and social engineers can work, but in many cases they seem afflicted from the outset. Everyone is left wondering - why didn't it work, where did we go wrong?

Or is it: What part of the equation did we leave out?

By world standards, Australia is a highly stable, successful nation; its economy is strong, unemployment is relatively low, our political system - for all its frustrations - is the envy of many. Yet anxieties continue to frame and rule our daily lives. And no matter how wealthy or powerful, an anxious nation cannot be a healthy nation. Around us our population is ageing, our families are getting smaller, our friends are more scattered - across the country, across the world - and happiness (that old-fashioned word) seems all the more elusive.

As the sociologist Hugh Mackay has pointed out, a lot of Australians are reacting by disengaging, turning from the 'big picture', becoming more inward looking. When it all gets too much, renovate the home and fix up the backyard, preferably all in two days. This can lead to isolation, prejudice, less tolerance and compassion, selfishness. So from a national perspective, the need for sustainability is not only about retaining industries and jobs and local services, it's very much about sustaining our values as a people. It's about sustaining our culture, our identity, and our sense of place.

There is a more positive side to what's happening. The global pressures that unsettle us can also produce a heightened desire for community - for more local involvement, local activity, local solutions, things we can relate to. We see this happening: book clubs and reading groups are spouting up, teenage friendship networks, movements focused on local issues.

For the past decade, the Australia Council - as the Australian Government's arts funding and advisory body - and ALGA - the Australian Local Government Association - have promoted community arts and cultural development as a core function of local government. The arts are central to Australian identity, and nowhere more so than in local communities, where they reflect all the energy, courage and resilience that make Australians such a unique people. By the way, while I'm mentioning ALGA, I'd like to congratulate the Mayor of Darebin City Council here in Melbourne, Councillor Rae Perry, who's just been elected the first woman president of ALGA. Well done Rae!

So - our links with local government are crucial to getting culture onto local agendas. We're looking to Australia's local councils to foster cultural identity and diversity, to protect and enhance cultural heritage, to build greater civic identity and involvement, to promote social cohesion and reconciliation, to create paths to environmental renewal and better health.

Across the Tasman they've gone a step further.

So importantly is culture regarded at local levels that in New Zealand it's now legislated into the Local Government Act. 'The purpose of local government,' says the Act, 'is (a) to enable democratic local decision-making and action by, and on behalf of,

communities, and (b) to promote the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of communities, in the present and for the future.’

That approach puts culture not at the end of the value chain, tacked on ‘if and when’ funds are available, but right at the start - and the heart - of community building and engagement, where it belongs. And here in Australia too, cultural initiatives can grow on a solid base. They may not always admit it, but Australians are very strong supporters of the arts.

Research shows we spend \$10 billion annually on arts goods; 85% of Australian adults attend cultural events or performances; 78% read for pleasure on most days; close to 30% of Australia’s children are involved in after-school arts activities. We also know that 85% of Australians want the arts as part of the education of their children, and that above all Australians want to participate and learn not to only consume and subscribe. How are we as an arts community to respond? So when we speak of developing arts as a force for community sustainability, clearly we’re not starting off a low base; it’s not alien territory. In most cases the commitment and raw material is waiting to be tapped, to unlock the creative energies of the community.

Economically, the arts and related industry groups are annually worth about \$8 billion plus to the Australian economy. Even in the smallest outposts, the arts can be relatively big business - they’ve saved many from economic decline, and brought others ‘back from the edge’.

But sustainability is about more than economics, health, education, welfare, security, the environment. A community struggling to pay its bills is hardly on the road to longevity, of course; a community lacking in jobs is more worried about its immediate survival than ten-year plans. These can be critical concerns, but real sustainability boils down to something even more fundamental: having a strong sense of who we are.

Our culture as contemporary Australians. Our identity. What do we mean when we say ‘culture’? UNESCO’s 2001 Declaration on Cultural Diversity noted: ‘culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.’

Culture gives us identity, and without identity, two essential questions remain unanswered: Who are we? What are we doing here? History shows us that the most disadvantaged, the most oppressed societies can hang on - so long as they retain their identities. That’s surely the basis of the remarkable survival in the face of enormous challenges of our Indigenous people - who for all their suffering, have held onto their culture and identity. They have the world’s oldest culture, nobody can take it from them - it’s the essential component of their past and future.

If non-Indigenous Australians want a prime example of sustainability based on culture and identity, they really don’t have to look very far. And the message is abundantly clear: culture is never an ‘add-on’; it’s intrinsic to who we are.

But talk of culture and many Australians will run a mile. They equate culture with S.O.B. - not that S.O.B., but the symphony, opera and ballet! And culture with a capital ‘C’ sometimes gets a bad press, although our research shows that more Australians attend performances every year than attend football games. I hasten to note I’m also a fully paid-up member of the Rugby-Is-The-Game-They-Play-in-Heaven Club, so don’t get me wrong. I’m passionate about sport - but I’m equally convinced the arts are relevant to our daily lives, in fact central, and that equally we need to broaden our narrow definition of culture.

If culture - Jon Hawkes’ Fourth Pillar - doesn’t speak as loudly as the three other pillars - economic, social and environmental - that’s largely because of the fluidity of culture, the way culture influences and absorbs and affects, rather than pushes, shapes and hammers home its messages. But make no mistake: culture is not only a key driver behind the other pillars, it underpins and pulls together every factor in the sustainability equation. And more often than not it’s the missing link in why things don’t work. And conversely, why some things work brilliantly.

Let’s take two examples, cultural in one sense but also fusing the three other pillars: economic, social, environmental. One is the focus of global interest, the other quietly beaver away but no less interesting and potentially more important in terms of what we’re discussing.

By the late 1980s, the Spanish port of Bilbao was in serious trouble, its recession-plagued economic structure unable to compete with larger and more dynamic European cities. I’m sure you’re all aware of what happened next. In 1991, the Basque authorities contacted the Guggenheim Museum with an unlikely proposal to create a new cultural icon, a major gallery in itself but also a magnet for cultural tourism, for Europe’s creative classes, for innovation and excellence - and, critically, as an expression of Basque identity. The Guggenheim bought the idea and American architect Frank Gehry, whose previous work included a

corrugated cardboard lounge chair, got the job.

The Guggenheim Bilbao opened in late 1997 and less than one year later had already received more than 1,300,000 visitors. The upshot of this now-familiar story is that the once-rundown Atlantic port city now receives an additional 5-million visitors a year, which generates another \$US160 million annually and has created nearly 4000 new permanent jobs. It's become a textbook example of how imagination, free thinking and technology can combine not only to create economic sustainability, but how the cultural dimension can sustain, shape, and define - and even redefine - local identity.

Closer to home, an Australian example. On the mid-north coast of New South Wales, the town of Wauchope had been a cedar logging centre since the mid-19th century, and as the trees were cleared, it evolved into a dairying centre. Ultimately it became the commercial and administrative heart of the Hastings region.

But in recent years, restructuring of the timber and dairy industries threatened the town's existence. It also left a deep sense of loss and disillusionment within the local community. Working on the belief enunciated by Roman poet Horace - that 'prosperity conceals genius, and adversity reveals it' - the 5000 citizens of Wauchope were determined not to be another statistic of economic rationalism.

Their solution? They created a community arts festival to 'revision the town', replacing the negative impact of timber and dairy restructuring with a more creative focus on arts and locally-grown produce. The Wauchope farmers' market is now driving production of gourmet produce, ranging from wine to bush herbs, goat meat and even edible bamboo. A key activity was Bago Stories, a storytelling project built on the relationship between the people of Wauchope and the local Broken Bago mountain range. And eco-tourism has taken off!

Again, the vital factor was the breadth of involvement, the cooperation between authorities and the local population: the Hastings Council, the Wauchope Chamber of Commerce, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Wauchope Community Arts Council, the Hastings Gazette local paper, small business, local artists, landholders, Indigenous groups, the local Scouts, the local photographic society. One measure of Wauchope's success - for the first time in years, its population is rising.

Note that in both these cases - one of them spectacular and highly publicised, the other proceeding quietly at its own pace - the core driver was culture - a new museum, a community arts festival. When change happens, when change is forced upon us, our culture can be the first thing to go - or the last thing to go. Here we see culture as a catalyst of change. Evidence too of the concept that 'breakdowns can create breakthroughs' - and our response to that is very Australian, an integral part of our culture, to pick ourselves up and start again.

Who are we, what are we doing here?

Those questions not only shape our identity, they're the foundation of culture, of the great sustaining narratives that weave through our culture, the unique stories that tell us who we are as Australians and how we got here and where we're going, the always-unfolding stories that shape our communal destiny. In his 1998 Boyer Lecture, David Malouf suggested we take a quantum leap away from the same old issues of fussing and fretting over identity. 'Perhaps,' he said, 'it is time we discovered a new shape for the story we have been telling ourselves.'

That was six years ago. The need now is even greater.

We're compelled to keep moving forward, reassessing the stories we've shaped our lives around, and that applies no less to communities than to individual artists. David Malouf was right, of course. There's no such thing, if there ever was, as the Australian identity: there are many. But Australian communities do have unique identities - not fixed in time, but changing and evolving identities, built around stories that evolve with their changing fortunes.

It's those stories we need to create - and listen to, more than ever. Those Australian stories are our clues to cultural identity, and to cultural sustainability - and without them, communities in trouble will drift further from the national flow, into isolation and even despair.

As Indigenous Australians know well, sustainability is both cultural and communal. In the tribal world, sustainable isolation is simply not an option. People learn early that to survive, they must work together, share good and bad times, share a common culture to sustain them through bad times and to celebrate in good times. From a truly national perspective, these are lessons that all Australians could learn well and live by.

Recently the Australia Council agreed to fund a four-way partnership that takes these issues right into the realm of local government. The project, called Community Sustainability and Cultural Vitality, brings together the Australia Council; the Cultural Development Network (CDN), which promotes innovation in locally-based cultural development; the Local Government Community Services Association; and on the evaluation side, the Globalism Institute at RMIT, with its world-class work on cultural diversity and sustainability issues.

We're funding the feasibility stage through our Regional Arts Fund allocation for projects of national significance because we agree there's enormous scope at national level to integrate local government support for arts and heritage more strategically with social development programs. We saw that potential explored at the LGCSAA biennial conference in Townsville last year, which I think positively influenced many delegates, including me.

What Judy Spokes and Anne Dunn and the team at CDN are trying to achieve here is I think absolutely critical to the concept of cultural sustainability in this country. Importantly they're not rushing headlong into things, looking for a quick fix - because cultural sustainability isn't about headline-grabbing programs and it's not about instant solutions. It's literally about changing culture, and experience shows that 'speed kills' - that throwing money or formulaic programs at problems isn't the answer.

CDN's feasibility stage runs across eight months, consulting with participating councils and communities, listening to their problems, to their needs and their visions - the 'bottom-up' approach' - and developing the terms and the scope of longer-term sustainability programs in six Australian communities.

The pilot programs to follow aim to invest in medium to long-term cultural interventions of at least three years, well beyond the usual six to twelve months of many community arts projects. That's the key. That, and focusing hard on cultural questions more than purely economic issues - asking local communities about identity, belonging, a sense of place: the markers of cultural sustainability, and the starting point for any serious attempts, I believe, to overcome systemic social problems.

Creative change is proactive, not passive. If they're to survive, communities that are contracting or under threat need to face up to tough questions, questions literally about their survival. Why are people leaving, and what can we do to make them stay? How can we draw new people to our community, how should we treat them when they arrive? What do we want to preserve here, and what are we prepared to give up, to change? What needs changing - and just as importantly, what must we save at any cost? It takes a lot of community courage to ask such basic questions, but for those brave enough, using creativity to promote the dialogue on difficult issues can produce real breakthroughs.

So what of the more traditional inputs: of national, state and local government, of public authorities, of experts and advisors? None of this seeks to exclude those already engaged; rather it calls for greater involvement, but within less narrow confines. It argues strongly that the days of siloed activity are numbered, that the only worthwhile and lasting solutions are likely to come from more integrated responses, from whole-of-government, whole-of-society approaches - and that we need to target whole communities, in all their diversity, rather than tackle sub-sets of intractable problems with one-off, short-term solutions.

To achieve that, we need to regenerate civic engagement, and offer encouragement. Creativity creates its own bandwagon, but its often-loaded jargon can easily turn people off. The man who founded MacDonal'd's, Ray Kroc, used to say that creativity was 'a highfalutin' word for all the work I have to do between now and Tuesday'. And he was right: successful companies are, by definition, creative companies. In a recent edition of *Overland*, Jon Hawkes also referred to the language issue. 'The rhetoric of public life,' Jon noted, 'is increasingly spiced with notions of energy - participation, engagement, vitality, vibrancy, activity, innovation and participation'.

It can make you dizzy, and as Jon Hawkes says, not a little cynical. We can turn the rhetoric of community building to democratic advantage, but we have to convince the unbelievers that we're talking about something that's more than babble - and show them what's possible. As arts consultant June Moorhouse says about hype, 'Let's get some reality into our processes and the way we talk about them.' And we also have to empower people, give them the tools to make things happen.

Some Australians will argue that the pursuit of culture is a luxury they can't afford. Before we label them philistines, we should listen to their case, and survey the landscape as they see it. Many are happy to throw another sausage on the barbie and live the unexamined life. It's a free country and that's their right. Others look around and see a blighted landscape of salination, degradation, drought. Or the spiral of drug-related crime, of teenage prostitution, of youth suicide. Often their first response, their only response, is to call for more cash, not culture.

'My kids getting music lessons will solve our problems?'

I can imagine that many Australians - well-meaning, hard-working Australians - would hear our appeals for greater cultural input and scratch their heads. And that's not their problem, it's ours. It's a problem of getting the message across, bridging that divide - not with grand promises and visions splendid, but with the determination of, say, Scott Rankin's rigorous work with BIG hART, which helps to create art with people suffering from marginalisation in rural, regional and isolated areas.

And here again, the emphasis is on action, not words. 'The arts,' says Scott Rankin, 'bring nuance, the arts can act as a canary in the coalmine, the arts allow for the maverick vision, the arts ignore committee, the arts don't stay on message': all vital for keeping the discussion of the future inclusive.

We need to reach out to the unconverted with concrete examples of how culture can build creative communities, creative cities, and truly sustainable economies. And above all, showing the intrinsic value of culture - not as an adjunct to the other pillars, but as something of value in itself. I've never met a person who didn't buy into the value argument - if you can show someone the value in doing something, and concurrently the cost of not doing anything, you've got their attention.

So I think there's a need here for greater communication, for greater marketing of these ideas. In my experience, 'If you build it they will come' only applies to Hoyts multiplex cinemas and Westfield shopping malls. In the cultural sphere, you really have to go out there and sell it, market it with all the professionalism you can muster, because it's never been an easy sell, and in an age of wealth and distractions, it's getting harder. Solutions are hard and distractions are easy. Going to the latest movie won't solve the issue of salination or the loss of local industries, but it will reduce anxiety about that - at least until the movie's over.

One of the key messages we need to get across is how culture - in its positive form - really can reduce anxiety. It can do that first by giving people something they can relate to and believe in. It can bring them into contact with other people who believe in the same things, the same values. It can reinforce those values, and bring in new values. It can visibly make people come alive, by reducing their anxiety and raising their hopes. Get the culture right and the rest will follow. And the impact across whole communities can be quite extraordinary.

All this points to why culture matters - any culture, in any society, in any period of history - and why it now matters more, not less, than ever. Culture provides us with identity. It's why the Pharaohs built the pyramids, why Americans produced both the Marx Brothers and Miles Davis, and why in the millennia before that, Indigenous people who inhabited this land carved fertility circles on rock canyons in the Flinders Ranges. Cultures create their own unique identities, and leave their mark. Cultures create spaces that are filled by other ideas, even bigger ideas about how we can live to the fullness of our potential. Often those ideas can inspire whole societies to change dramatically.

Cultural sustainability is one of those seminal ideas.

Sustainability implies stability, but in fact is dynamic. It's not only about the continuation of culture, but also about applying creative solutions to our problems, and about improving our lives not only through economic, social and ecological moves, but also through cultural dimensions - through new ways of doing things, new ways of seeing things.

Maybe Utopia isn't so far away after all. Maybe it just doesn't look like Utopia. We may live in an imperfect world but so long as the frontiers are not closed and the doors are not shut, we live in hope. Maybe what Oscar Wilde meant was that Utopia isn't a place, but a space we need to fill with a sense of our being.

On that basis, Utopia is about knowing who we are, what we want from our lives, and how - by working more closely together - we can convert our aspirations into reality.

Utopia may well exist, in our own communities.

Thank you.

Jennifer Bott was appointed Chief Executive Officer and member (ex officio) of the Australia Council for five years on 8 February 1999. She is a member of Council's Finance, Audit, Nominations and Governance and Decisions Review Committees. Jennifer is a member of the Australia International Cultural Council, the Commission for International Cultural Promotion and the Australian National Commission for United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).