

Homelessness & Cultural Democracy

Thursday 27th November 2008
City Library Seminar Room,
1st Floor, City Library, Flinders Lane, Melbourne

Homelessness and Cultural Democracy was an afternoon forum to discuss and debate ways to facilitate the inclusion of homeless individuals and families in the cultural life of the community, and culture's place in responses to homelessness. Facilitated by Cultural Development Network Director, John



Smithies, panellists presented their thoughts and experiences, representing a range of points of view from arts workers and musicians, to advocates, researchers, service providers and local government. The second part of the afternoon included discussion and debate, questions from attendees, and networking opportunities.

Deb Tsorbaris, CEO of the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) was unable to attend at the last minute however was ably filled in for by Parity Editor, Noel Murray. Noel spoke passionately about the work of Council to Homeless Persons, citizenship and homelessness, and representations of homelessness in the mainstream media. Parity, as the national publication of the Council to Homeless Persons is a key platform for challenging stereotypical representations about homelessness.
www.chp.org.au/parity



Nanette Mitchell, a Senior Social Planner with the City of Melbourne talked about homelessness as the most extreme form of social exclusion, and discussed the cultural elements of responses to homelessness, with freedom of expression and inclusion in cultural participation key elements. Nanette spoke about the importance and benefits of including all members of society as beneficial to both the individual concerned and the broader community more generally. Nanette also spoke about the City of Melbourne's Homelessness

Framework, looking at 'sustainable pathways out of homelessness' with the aim, shared with CHP, of ending homelessness.

Kiera McDonald, Manager of the Ozanam Community Centre in North Melbourne, spoke about her experiences in the community centre model of service provision, the shared culture of homeless, and explored what 'cultural democracy' could mean,

encompass, and look like. Kiera spoke about the need for a holistic response to homelessness, culture's place within this, and different ways to engage and relate meaningfully and respectfully with people currently or having previously experienced homelessness.

Dale, a panellist with 3CR's popular 'Roominations' program, presented the history of program, held up as an example of Cultural Democracy in action – and emphasised the need for the voices of homeless people to be heard and valued. Dale also discussed the substantial discrepancy between public perceptions and the lived realities of homelessness, and the work of grass roots organisations who actively engage and welcome everyone, such as Roarhouse www.roarhouse.org, an all inclusive music and performance showcase in Melbourne. Dale also mentioned the barriers to accessing funding for small untrained grass roots organisations and the need for training and accessible funding formats.



Rebecca Lister spoke about her work and experience at the Artful Dodgers Studios, and offered case studies of young people who had worked at the studios to illustrate the complex and varied needs and requirements of young people, their relationship with the label 'homelessness', and interaction with staff within the art space. Rebecca discussed the democratic collective nature of studio decision making, and the difficulties in achieving genuine collaboration. Rebecca also discussed the importance of accessibility and technology, the culture of perception around 'place' and the importance of the creative process in building confidence and pride.

The afternoon concluded after afternoon tea with general discussion and networking, bringing in stories and experiences from those who attended. Questions and comments from the audience included the lack of choice, in particular with regards to food and health – and how this connects to issues of self esteem and empowerment. Access to information was also a key topic, in particular knowledge about the services and projects available, and the value of a centralised database was debated.

Feedback from delegates was extremely positive; 80% of attendees found the afternoon very or extremely useful, 95% found the panellists very good or excellent, and 75% found the event overall either very good or excellent.

Comments include:

- "really interesting and inspiring forum with a great mix of speakers"
- "All speakers had excellent life experience in their fields"
- "Roominations input brilliant!"
- "Thank you - able to glean some info and begin brainstorming some ideas for our service"
- "Dale was inspiring"

Homelessness and Cultural Democracy was presented by the Cultural Development Network in partnership with the City of Melbourne

