



Expanding Cultures

Arts and Local Government Conference

July 24-27 2007

Chapel off Chapel, Prahran, Victoria, Australia

Conference Report

This two day conference was held at Chapel Off Chapel Arts and Leisure Complex in late July 2007. 'Expanding Cultures' was hosted by the City of Stonnington and supported by the Cities of Yarra, Melbourne, Moreland, Maribyrnong, Moonee Valley, Boroondara and Port Phillip and the Cultural Development Network. The conference focussed on the contribution of arts and cultural development to the strength and well-being of local communities.

Conference themes explored included

- the changing shape of community cultures and their impact on local government in Victoria, Australia and overseas
- arts as a vehicle for strengthening communities and facilitating social inclusion
- the impact of arts activities on health, education and economic development
- local government's engagement with Indigenous art and culture
- improving evaluation of arts activities and cultural development programs
- innovative partnerships

Conference program

Conference delegates listened to keynote speakers and panel presentations, participated in debates and discussions and enjoyed networking through formal and informal activities. The three international keynote speakers were well received; independent researcher from the UK Jude Bloomfield on *Intercultural Dialogue - creating the new*, Jordi Pascual, Coordinator of the Working Group on Culture, of United Cities for Local Governments on '*Global Community and Local Government: Agenda 21 for Culture*' and the Hon Nanaia Mahuta from New Zealand on '*Cultural Well-Being: Linking local and central government to promote cultural well-being*'. These three presentations received overwhelmingly positive feedback, in comments such as '*I learnt an enormous amount from keynote speakers*', '*Jordi - fantastic. Challenging, relevant, universal*', '*Jude Bloomfield was amazing & inspirational and very topical*', '*Ms. Mahuta was an absolute inspiration. Her speech was moving, insightful practical and based on an extraordinary amount of common sense. Our MPs should take lessons from her!*'

Local keynote speakers Professor John Wiseman from Melbourne University's McCaughey Centre on '*The contribution of cultural development to community well-being: key trends and emerging ideas*' and RMIT's Dr Martin Mulligan on '*Arts and democratic participation in Australia: how can the arts be more strategically important to local government?*' were also very well received. Comments included, '*University presenters (John Wiseman & Martin Mulligan) gave the Australian contingent professionalism and something to aspire to - quality and well prepared*', '*the McCaughey Centre was a revelation*', '*Globalism Institute speaker stimulated my thoughts and gave me hope for future change and support in CCD practices*'.

Seven of the host councils hosted visits and tours for delegates, with diverse facilities visited including Abbotsford Convent, the Jewish Museum, Incinerator Arts Centre and Braybrook Buddhist Temple. Between ten and twenty visitors attended each of these, and informal and formal feedback from hosts and visitors was overwhelmingly positive, despite some challenges with transport for visitors.

Conference attendance

The conference audience was diverse, with attendees coming mostly from local government, especially from the arts and culture sector. Others included artists and artworkers from non-government organisations, cultural facility workers, academics and federal and state government workers from a variety of sectors, from all levels, officers, managers, CEOs and elected representatives. Over the three days, almost 300 people from all around Australia and New Zealand attended the conference and associated activities, including tours and visits to host councils and the conference dinner. A further forty, including local government CEOs, senior managers and councillors, state politicians and state government staff were addressed by keynote speaker Jordi Pascual about Agenda 21 for Culture in Local Government, at VIP sponsor function hosted by Stonnington Council. This reception was intended to be an opportunity for the messages of the conference to reach decision makers and resource holders who would have been unlikely to attend, and given the excellent attendance and the well received speech by Jordi, was considered very successful.

Conference evaluation

Overall, the conference rated highly with respondents, with more than 80% commenting in the evaluation survey that the overall event quality was '*Excellent*' or '*Very Good*', and that presentations were '*Extremely useful*' or '*Very useful*' in prompting new thinking about delegates' own work. There were also suggestions for areas of improvements. Most frequently mentioned issues were problems with technology, the challenges with fitting everything in and lunch running out!.

Overall, our sense was the conference was well-received and valuable for those that participated. Possible areas of improvement, ideas and positive and critical feedback will be noted in planning of future activities.

Conference outcomes

Some hoped for outcomes of the conference include better informed, skilled and networked cultural development workers. Initial feedback indicates that this goal was achieved, with the longer term benefit of this aspect of the conference still to be assessed. A six month follow up is planned, where a sense of how learnings from the conference might have impacted delegates' work in the longer term can be ascertained.

Bigger picture outcomes of the conference, included a raised profile and value of the role of arts and culture in local government are yet to be assessed. Initial responses indicate that the conference has impacted positively on the working environment of councils whose staff members attended, especially those who had several staff members attend, ensuring sharing and possibilities for discussion of new ideas. For example, AnneMaree Pfabe from Moreland City Council has reported that the concepts of 'intercultural dialogue' which were new to her and colleagues at the conference, have added a valuable dimension to the framework of their activities at Moreland.

Peak bodies engagement

The conference goals of engaging peak bodies in consideration of the role of culture in local government was achieved. All three relevant bodies in Victoria (Municipal Association of Victoria, Victorian Local Governance Association and Local Government Professionals), were contacted in the planning stages of the conference and invited to contribute. CDN Director spent considerable time in discussions with staff and leaders in each organisation. MAV Chair Dick Gross chaired an introductory session to the conference and pleasingly, stayed for much of the day. VLGA CEO Rae Perry participated enthusiastically in a panel discussion on the possible relationship of Agenda 21 for culture in the Australian context, and has invited Cultural Development Network to co-host another session for other local government workers in the future. Dialogue with LGPro was extended in the course of the conference development. Valuable contacts were made with Local Government and Shires Association NSW, whose Cultural Development Policy Officer attended the conference and associated roundtable. Jordi Pascual's visit to Australia for the conference afforded him the opportunity to spread the message about Agenda 21 for Culture beyond conference delegates through additional presentations in other states. He met with Emeritus Mayor Peter Woods OAM, Secretary General of UCLG-Asia Pacific Regional Section, spoke to forty NSW local government staff at an event co-hosted by LGSA NSW co-hosted with the Centre for Local Government at the University of Technology, Sydney and led discussions on Agenda 21 at Redland Shire Council in Queensland.

Conference publicity

Conference publicity was very successful, as evidenced by the reach of the conference to delegates from all around Australia and New Zealand. There were several articles about conference presenters in local press, and considerable information about the conference in sector publications. Conference reach outside the local government arts sector was modest, despite organisers' best efforts. A new initiative for the Cultural Development Network, the contracting of a professional publicist to facilitate wider reach of conference issues, was achieved. Publicist Kelly Fogarty did manage to tee up some interviews including a radio interview on ABC with Jordi Pascual. However, unfortunately this interview did not occur, being gazumped by the sudden resignation of the Premier and Deputy Premier of Victoria in the course of the conference.

The goal that councils in Australia would be inspired to become members of United Cities for Local Government and signatories to Agenda 21 for culture is looking hopeful, with several councils involved with the conference expressing an interest in finding out more about Agenda 21, and some considering such a commitment. Many delegates commented how useful they found this international perspective of Agenda 21 to be. One council arts manager commented that being able to place his team's work in the global perspective of Agenda 21 has helped strengthen his argument for council's support of their cultural development work and planning process. He believes that this addition ammunition for his resource bid may result in a more positive outcome, with councillors gaining a sense for the first time, of the global movement towards local government support for cultural development, and the appropriateness of their council being part of it.

To the future!

A strong sense of the value of the professional development opportunity of the conference was evident, with many delegates calling for more regular events. A modest financial surplus will provide support for the gestation of future conferences. The conference organising committee encourages other networks of cultural development workers to consider taking the baton.

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