Australian Institute for
**Disaster Resilience**

Australian Disaster Resilience
Conference 2019 papers

# Arts and culture – sustaining people and place in a changing world

**Scotia Monkivitch**
The Creative Recovery Network

connection · empowerment · respect · wisdom

## Arts and Culture - sustaining people and place in a changing world

### AIDR Conference 2019

Life if full of surprises, twists and turns that trip us up or enable growth and new opportunity. Our response to these challenges, as individuals and communities, is as varied as the context in which they occur. And you can be sure that the context is complex and forever changing. The challenge of knowing and growing resilience is a vital task of resilience thinking.

Resilience thinking is about understanding and engaging with a changing world. By understanding how and why the system as a whole is changing, we are better placed to build a capacity to work with change, as apposed to being a victim of it. Natural disasters are a deepening reality of our changing world, driving where and how we live and connect with each other.

The arts play a deep, real role in supporting communities and individuals to tackle disasters and the potential of reframing life, landscape and connection before and beyond impact. An arts/cultural response can mean many things – care, comfort, reduced feelings of isolation, increased community cohesiveness, empowerment, reimagining, celebration, memorialising, new personal and creative skills, strengthened connections to place, and a sense of shared optimism.

Arts and culture, with their ability to create cohesive communities, address contemporary issues and tell difficult stories can demonstrate that there are choices for a different future and support communities in making these choices.

The arts support us to share the unspeakable, process our experiences and to plan for the future. Creativity finds solutions to what is seen to be impossible and opens new perspectives in the face of new challenges. The creative process usually makes people more open and therefore likely to be affected by what they see and hear. The creative exchange enables people to share personal stories and make human connections.

*"The role of a fire-fighter in bushfire emergency is to put out the fire. The role of the artist in an emergency situation is harder to define but the fact that you cant define it clearly or cleanly or quickly doesn't mean it's any less essential part of it." Fiona Sinclair, WA independent artist working with fire impacted community*

Creative Recovery Network works to demonstrate the value and importance of arts and culture in building disaster resilient communities from the ground up so that arts and culture are given a 'seat at the table' when preparedness and response are being planned.

The National Strategy for Disaster Resilience states "A disaster resilient community is one that works together to understand and manage the risks that it confronts. Disaster resilience is the collective responsibility of all sectors of society, including all levels of government, business, the non-government sector and individuals. If all these sectors work together with a united focus and a shared sense of responsibility to improve disaster resilience, they will

be far more effective than the individual efforts of one sector."[1] We need to ensure that culture and arts are the bedrock of this togetherness and can form the structure around which we connect, learn and grow.

An appreciation of the complex nature of regional and remote communities circumstance, lifestyle and history is crucial for Creative Recovery Network. Literature on resilience[2] raises the need to foster greater community engagement, capacity development and empowerment, on better communication strategies and the need for better education regarding how emergency services are delivered.

Resilience factors are often themselves vulnerable to external forces such as inconsistent government policy, funding priorities, and the imposition of inappropriate governance structures or 'over-governance' of communities. The United Nations review post the 2004 Asian Tsunami highlighted the need for cultural recognition, respect and the framing of protocols for engagement, this needs to be effectively reflected in Australian emergency management development and training. Culture and the arts can play a leading role in this work.

The Creative Recovery Network works to harness the creative thinking and skills of artists and the arts sector. The arts bring adaptive skills, diverse experience and unlimited potential for influencing the way we work with and in preparedness, response and recovery. Supporting the arts means sharing and celebrating individual and collective wisdom, beliefs and values and healing through connectedness and understanding. We see pursuing true participation and collaboration as the only path to a shared and sustainable outcome.

*'Community Cultural Development' describes the work of artist – organisers ('community artist') who collaborate with others to express identity, concerns and aspirations through the arts and communications media, while building cultural capacity and contributing to social change. In community cultural development work, community artists, singly or in teams, use their artist and organisational skills to serve the emancipation and development of a community.(Adams and Goldbard 2002, 8[3]).*

We as a network of artists and cultural leaders aim to develop a fine-grained understanding of how local knowledge and other capacity relate to existing risk management and post-event responses and what changes within a culture and arts context would be most effective. This work will support us in working actively to build connections and the sustainable resilience of our regional and remote communities.

Through our network we work together to create and achieve locally owned visions and goals, putting local voices in the lead, building on local strengths and collaborating across sectors. The community arts and cultural development sector has been establishing partnerships with others, for decades. This relationship focus is intentional and adaptable, and works to achieve systemic change focused on self-determination and resilience building.

---

[1] *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience*, Council of Australian Governments, 2011 p. iv
[2] Attorney General's Department 2007, COAG n.d., FESA and KLRC 2008, Hocke and O'Brien 2003, Leonard et al. 2013
[3] Adams, Don, and Arlene Goldbard; *Community, Culture and Globalisation*: The Rockfeller Foundation 2002; 8

*Community arts and cultural development practice is a powerful vehicle for communities to tell their own stories and in doing so the process has social transformative qualities for individuals and communities. At the individual level, practitioners, participants, and community members report increased cultural competencies and awareness, articulation of hope, healing, enhanced artistic skills and a renewed sense of possibilities. At a community level, there is evidence of strengthened cultural identity, having fun and improved social interactions amongst groups. (Kasat 2013[4])*

While service providers traditionally focus on hard assets and notions of personal safety there are likely to be different understandings of these risks and additional assets that are valued at the community level. These may for example include cultural assets; relationships; aspects of country; and livelihood activities. These may be regarded not only as vulnerable to disasters but also key factors in ensuring the ongoing resilience of communities. Our work aims to address the complexities inherent in identifying and building on the existing knowledge and understanding of disaster management in a Australian context and how we might support and grow this.

Communities by their very nature suggest considerable complexity, multidimensional and rapidly changing. In such an environment direct contact with affected populations, understandings of local cultural and political contexts, and development of close working relationships with local partner organisations do not come easily and can take second place in the priorities of agencies, their staff and funding. As the emergency management work is divided between organisations, an overview of the whole process becomes increasingly difficult to achieve, let alone keep in focus. Consequently these become reasons why there is a need for local knowledge and experience and the linguistic and cultural skills needed to access the views of local people, as well as access to other actors.

Community arts and cultural development practice enables people to engage in discussions and take action on issues that matter to them. This active engagement in civic matters is an important antidote to passive consumption, resilience on external sources and manipulation of community decisions. Engagement in community arts exercises the muscles of cultural participation and citizenship, which run the risk of atrophying if underutilized[5].

Achieving community development outcomes and building capacity in communities has been documented as one of the key advantages of the arts over other forms of community engagement such as sport. Community arts is non-competitive and enables modes of collaboration and inclusion among the participants.[6]

Speaking about the arts in general, McCarthy and colleagues (2004) propose that the intrinsic value of the arts is evident in three spheres: a) at the private level – the captivation

---

[4] Kasat, Pilar; *Community Arts and Cultural Development: A Powerful Tool for Social Transformation*, Research Masters August 2013

[5] Adams, Don, and Arlene Goldbard; *Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development:* The Rockefeller Foundation. 2001

[6] Impact of the Arts in Regional Western Australia In *Community Development and Justice Standing Committee*. Perth: Government of Western Australia 2004

and pleasure that the arts give to an individual, b) at the private to public level – the expanded capacity for empathy and cognitive growth that occurs when someone is exposed to the arts, and c) at the public level – the creation of social bonds and expression of communal meaning[7].

The process of finding a voice is mediated through a carefully facilitated art-making process, where the community artist plays a critical role in creating the conditions for the process and the outcomes to be driven by the community. Community arts practice is a two-way street. It is about artists and other reflective practitioners lending their creative talents and gifts to the community, which in turn responds with imagination and willingness to share their precious stories. When these creative exchanges come from a place of self-awareness, mutual respect and from the desire to create a new narrative, a unique and social transformative phenomenon occurs – the imagining of hope.[8]

Since the earliest times of recorded history there is evidence of the power of sharing stories through word, music, image and dance. Through story we have formed emotional and political connections, shared experiences, warned of danger and shared the management of interconnected social-ecological systems.

Community arts practice is also viewed as a vehicle for creating a safe forum to express, and to cope with, the loss and grief that community experience: Often what you are doing is, you are holding a space for people and making it safe for people... the art workshops is a place where very dangerous things can be said, once a safe space has been established[9]. Community arts activity is described as creating a sense of hope and social/civic normality.

Community arts practice has long claimed its capacity to facilitate the telling of stories through the arts, enabling community to tell their own stories. Stories express who we are, framing the present, the past and helping us to imagine who we can become in the future. Creating meaning, framing memory and affirming our place in the world.

Since the first community arts social impact study published in the U.K. in 1997[10], there has been incremental research in Australia examining the social benefits of participating in the arts. As research on the practice grows, so too does the evidence of the social impact that community arts and cultural practice has on community development and capacity building (Jones 2005; Anwar 2011); engendering participation and citizenship (Pippen 2003; Dunn 2006); enhancing creative talent and critical capacity (National Cultural Policy Discussion Paper 2011, 9); rural and regional revitalisation (Anwar 2011); mental health and wellbeing (McQueen Thomson and Ziguras 2002; Mills and Brown 2004; Lewis and Doyle 2008; Anwar 2011) and social engagement and the inclusion of disadvantaged communities (Ruane 2007; Palmer and Sonn 2010; Sonn and Quayle 2011)[11]

---

[7] McCarthy, Kevin F., Elizabeth H. Ondaatje, Laura Zakaras, and Arthur Brooks. 2004. *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts.* The Wallace Foundation. 2004, xv

[8] Kasat Pilar;  *Community Arts and Cultural Development: A Powerful Tool for Social Transformation*, Research Masters August 2013

[9] Moriarty, Gerri; *In Our Time: Creating Arts Within Reach*. Belfast: Northern Visions, 2011

[10] Matarasso, Francois; *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts*: Comedia 1997

[11] Kasat Pilar;  *Community Arts and Cultural Development: A Powerful Tool for Social Transformation*, Research Masters August 2013

Transformative community arts can help to change dominant narratives and help create different stories, whereby communities can be the protagonists of their reality and, from that reflection, hope can be envisioned. Within emergency management there is an implicit assumption that the bulk of the work is taken by service agencies. This view fails to recognise that the bulk of work is actually undertaken by local communities, with the support of local government and organisations and community groups. Our practices need to be embedded by values and principles that are fundamental to building relationships and gaining trust.

*"This landscape of the emerging era of disasters is going to increasingly stretch emergency services, undermine community resilience and escalate the economic costs and loss of life. We need to begin preparing now for this future."* Dr Robert Glasser, former Head, UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction

At the heart of resilient thinking is a very simple notion – things change – and to ignore or resist this change is to increase our vulnerability and forego emerging opportunities. [12] Transformative community arts and cultural development occurs when collective art making, facilitated by an artist, enables communities to critically reflect on and understand the way in which they exist in the world, their circumstances and their pain. Investment and support for arts and cultural engagement supports community connection, economic revival, clarity of collective vision, self-determination and emotional and psychological well-being.

The Creative Recovery Network strives to support emergency management and our communities in disaster to be more functional, efficient and resilient. We work from a starting place that recognises that if we are able to truly connect and join each other in the human story of endeavour and survival we will be stronger, adaptable and hopeful – the corner stones of resilience. We believe that the arts are the bridge that enables us to meet and build strength together.

**Scotia Monkivitch, Executive Officer**
**EMAIL: contact@creativerecovery.net.au**
**PH: 0423 987 207**
**WEB: www.creativerecovery.net.au**

**About Scotia Monkivitch**
Scotia has a broad range of professional experiences in the community arts and cultural development sector - training, mentoring, strategic planning, project management, research and facilitation. She has a performance background in movement based theatre and performance that crosses through traditional theatre forms, installation-performance, film, live-art and on-line exchanges.

**About Creative Recovery Network**
Creative Recovery Network is a collective of artists working with our communities as we prepare, respond and recover from disasters. Our way of being (First Peoples First, Deep Listening, Cultural

---

[12] Walker,B & Salt,D; *Resilience Thinking Sustaining Ecosystems and People in a Changing World*; Island Press 10

Competency, Community-Led) upholds what we do (Advocate, Lead, Prepare, Respond).

***Advocate:*** To have governments of all levels recognise the importance and need of Creative Recovery strategies in Australian communities

***Lead:*** To be recognised as the leading organisation of CACD practices in preparedness and response to natural disaster

***Prepare:*** To have a strong network of specifically trained artists and stakeholders available to respond and work in preparedness of communities

***Respond:*** To be the coordinator of an interconnected network across Australia