

BIG hART AT JOHN NORTHCOTT ESTATE: COMMUNITY, HEALTH AND THE ARTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the work of Big hART, a social impact of the Arts company, in their residency entitled Northcott Narratives over three and half years at John Northcott Estate, a public housing estate in Sydney. During this time Big hART used arts practice to engage tenants, strengthen their creative dispositions, and build relationships between tenants and a range of different communities. Northcott Narratives used a variety of multi-modal forms with tenants to inquire into, and then express ideas in relation to issues that confront them. These ideas are presented as social policy recommendations. The power and benefits of this form of arts practice along with the tensions and challenges are revealed. The paper adds to the developing discourse in relation to community cultural development.

Challenges in relation to understanding impact of the arts within community are substantial. This is because both the arts and change, personal and social are processual, iterative, dynamic, and hence temporal in nature. Furthermore, questions exist as to what counts as evidence in relation to impact, what constitutes 'impact' itself, and the different values and priorities held by various stakeholders in such projects. This paper adds to this developing body of knowledge through describing impact as revealed through a case study of one Australian company's work (Wright & Palmer 2007).

This inquiry was multi-modal in approach and drew on various forms of data including focus groups, semi-structured interviews, artefacts, performance, video and film, media reports, and observations and reflections derived from fieldwork. These data were then analysed using a variety of conceptual, theoretical, and empirical tools. A series of social policy recommendations developed by Big hART growing out of, and reflective of their experience in this particular project, are offered as a series of provocations and counterpoint to the paper itself.

In 1961 John Northcott Estate, a public housing estate in Sydney, was opened by Her Majesty, the Queen of England. Conceived of as a social experiment in public housing, and based on a Scandinavian model, unfortunately without due regard to the different climatic conditions, Northcott Estate was Sydney's first high rise public housing and part of the inner cities' slum clearance program. The building itself was of red brick that was in abundant supply at that time, 14 storeys high with 591 apartments, and housed approximately 1000 residents.

While initially lauded as a 'light on the hill' (Mayo 2005), policy changes and changing demographics saw the culture of the estate change. During the turn and early years of the new century, sensational media reporting labelled the building 'Suicide Towers' and the estate itself became synonymous with crime, violence, drug dealing, murder and suicide (Wright & Palmer 2007). The changing population base saw two thirds of tenants single, 95 per cent receiving aged or disability pensions, with tenant's average age 58 years. While there is a transient population, there are also tenants of 46 years residency. It was into this milieu that Big hART (cf www.bighart.org), a social impact of the Arts company, started work.

Big hART is an award winning, nationally recognised, not-for-profit organisation that has been using arts practice within challenging communities since 1992. Big hART works with communities through multi-modal forms to engage them, deepen and validate their lived experiences, and then to express these experiences to others; this approach having multiple benefits for both participants and communities around them.

Big hART traditionally works in communities for 150 weeks, this being informed by long established company practices that reveals a substantial time commitment to community in order for benefits to accrue. In Northcott Estate this time frame was extended through a variety of component projects that together comprised *Northcott Narratives*; the title given to project in its entirety.

Northcott Narratives had six types of arts activity: *3 days in November* music workshops in 2003 and 2004; *Tenant by Tenant* photography workshops and exhibitions; *StickybrickS* storytelling workshops building into performances for the 2006 Sydney Festival; Dance workshops that developed work featured in *StickybrickS*; Oral history workshops in 2002-2003—this material providing text for *StickybrickS*; and film making workshops that subsequently became part of *900 Neighbours*, a documentary featured on ABC TV.

In each of these separate but linked projects, professional musicians, a photographer, film makers and the like were used to mentor, coach, and develop tenants' creative skills, abilities, and confidence through workshops

with public outcomes. For example, in the music workshops, tenants coached and mentored by professional musicians wrote, performed, and recorded original music. These workshops culminated in public performances and digital recording. In *Tenant by Tenant*, tenants under the tutoring of a professional photographer, selected and photographed other tenants creating high-level portraits that then featured in five public exhibitions. These images not only revealed the capacity of residents to create art, but also had a powerful legacy through being included as postcards in the Northcott Narratives Box, a resource distributed to each estate tenant and given to new arrivals.

In a like manner the storytelling and dance workshops were informed by tenants' own oral histories. This material was workshopped, shaped and framed with arts professionals into the *StickybrickS* performance. This performance ran over four sold-out nights in the converted car park of the estate using the building itself as a set and backdrop to the performance. Finally, workshops in scripting, filming and performing drew much of the tenant-generated material together into award winning documentary *900 Neighbours* shown on ABC TV.

VIOLENCE, CRIME AND FEELINGS OF SAFETY

Northcott Narratives was developed conjointly by Big hART and estate tenants specifically to address tenants' concerns with respect to fears of violence and isolation, lack of safety, and diminution in perceptions of community. Arts practice proved to be a particularly powerful way that tenants could inquire into these concerns, and express their ideas and experiences. For example, photographing other tenants, recording oral histories and then shaping and framing those into an aesthetic whole, encouraged tenants to become involved with others, and build social connectedness that influenced their perceptions of safety and created conditions that helped decrease the incidence of violent crime. The Surry Hills Tenants Association noted that there was a decrease in the incidence of crime at night and reporting of crime; the Surry Hills Crime Prevention Officer remarking that there has been: 'a marked decrease in crimes, particularly violent crimes at Northcott', and the Surry Hills Police reporting that: 'crime is down, people feel safer'. What this helps reveal is that arts practice and the disposition of creativity and social connectedness strengthened through it, can play a profound role in times and places of upheaval (Cleveland 2008).

Social policy recommendation one: make people feel welcome.

STORYING TENANTS' LIVES

Arts-based processes not only brought people together, but also provided the means through which tenants could give 'voice' to their experiences, ideas, and aspirations. One defining feature of Big hART's work is the way that they 'literally tell the stories of tenants, in the language of tenants, often with the voices of tenants, at the instruction of tenants, and draw on tenants' everyday experiences' (Wright & Palmer 2007, p.13). This means that tenants use **their** voices, words, bodies, music and creative abilities and hence promote a form of cultural democracy that is authentic, vital, and meaningful (Graves 2005).

What audiences see through the various artefacts produced through *Northcott Narratives* are insights into tenants' lives. When this happens performatively, this is not only revealing for the broader community but is also celebratory. Scott Rankin, artistic director of Big hART, for example, noted the way that those who see a

Northcott production get to 'make celebration out of [tenant's] everyday lives'. Consequently, the cultural experiences and social issues faced by tenants are imbued with an aesthetic dimension and layers of meaning for the audience in a clear, accessible way reaffirming the reciprocal relationship between art and life. This means that a bridge is built between actors/tenants and audience who bear witness to other lives; this process drawing us into relationship with them (Anderson 2001). Storying one's life is also important as identity formation with arts practice provides powerful developmental and communicative tools that contribute to this formation, the development of agency (Cote & Levine 2002), and the ladder of participation.

As text from the performance of *StickybrickS* discloses, tenants live both ordinary and extraordinary lives having 'travelled from many parts of the world... found shelter, and been in love and loved others'. What this reveals is that there are common elements of routine and normality, as well as challenges of difficult times, and stories of profound individual and community transformation. It is these stories, rich with meaning and wisdom often denied, that were heard, honoured and celebrated through *Northcott Narratives*.

Social policy recommendation two: it's harder to hurt someone when you know their story.

HIGH QUALITY ARTWORKS

A further defining feature of Big hART's work with the Northcott community was their ability to conjointly produce high quality work that attracted attention both locally and nationally. For example, *Tenant by Tenant* was featured in 'Walking the Streets Festival' and was awarded the Art Critics Award by the Museum of Contemporary Art, with the Sydney Museum purchasing some of the collection. Various performance pieces were featured during weather 'spots' on television news hour, and critical acclaim was noted in the national press. Reviews of *StickybrickS*, by way of example, included the following observations:

...this is not [just] oral history or tenant life narrative. It's rather a façade cracking and joyous slice of life, a self-portrait in hope, possibility and pop songs (Sydney Morning Herald).

StickybrickS is a grand multimedia production-cum-celebration in a transformed car park at Northcott... If Lineham was looking for resonance StickybrickS has so much it's almost bouncing off the walls (The Australian).

Consequently, not only did project participants get to see their lives and experiences affirmed through this process but also a broader platform was provided for them that would not normally be available. One local newspaper encapsulated this notion in the following way:

This is a golden opportunity for the highlighting of positive outcomes... for all parties to this unique project. This 'coal face' showcase opportunity in itself is daunting to the ivory tower mindset of officialdom (South Sydney Herald).

Finally, *900 Neighbours* was premiered to 2000 people at the Sydney Film Festival and subsequently shown on ABC TV to critical acclaim. Consequently, tenants became culture makers expanding the 'expected' cultural canon that can compound existing patterns of exclusion (Bourdieu 1993).

IMPACT ON OTHERS

A subsequent benefit from this confluence of factors was the impact of *Northcott Narratives* on others. For example, 16 known partnerships were brokered and developed both during the development of the project and as a consequence of it. A range of funding bodies, community leaders, organisations, policy regimes and professionals reported changes to their work practices, procedures and programs (Wright & Palmer 2007). For example, the Director General of the NSW Department of Housing (DoH) at that time, noting the value of this work shared that: 'we will have less reservations and more courage when it comes to this kind of work [and] the strongest measure of the influence of the work is that we would do it again—absolutely yes'.

Of importance to tenants on a local scale has been a reinvigoration of the Tenant's Association and Community Centre, increased attendance at Neighbourhood Advisory Board meetings, and an increased interconnectedness and information sharing between different service organisations such as St Vincent's Health, The NSW Police, the NSW Department of Housing, Local Government and Member of Parliament. Most profoundly, many of these agencies and prominent individuals came together to support the successful endorsement by the World Health Organisation (WHO) of Northcott Estate as a 'Safe Community'; the world's first public housing estate to be accredited by WHO in this way.

Social policy recommendation three: say hello

WELLBEING AND CRIME PREVENTION

The nexus of organisations, agencies and individuals coming together to inquire into, promote and then express the wellbeing or otherwise of tenants has meant that a range of practical projects, processes and procedures have been created with an intent of improving safety. These have included the provision of safety information to tenants, the introduction of health and agility programs for seniors, the presence of Crime Prevention Officers, the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between Police and DoH, the establishment of tri-annual safety audit including the Tenant's Association as partners, and the development of a Local Allocation Strategy by DoH to appropriately manage the mix of tenants so that they are more easily able to be supportive and supported, feel safe, and enhance their sense of wellbeing.

Notions of wellbeing, itself complex and multifaceted, including both a state of being as well as a process for example (Haworth & Hart 2007), have been reported on positively in relation to *Northcott Narratives* by tenants and agencies alike. In a tenant's words: 'People now know me for something positive'. Another described how the work had helped 'bring you in touch with different parts of yourself and you life' and in relation to others: 'Big hART has brought people together and still bring them together even though they have finished their work'; this comment particularly reflecting an ongoing legacy to the project. Another commented:

We have [now] got so many people who are capable of turning things around. We needed someone to give us a UBD (street directory) so we could find our way around a bit to get rid of the crime, the drugs, the dangerous stuff. Big hART and [partners] gave us the UBD.

What this reveals is the way that tenants have developed self-belief and taken on leadership and advocacy roles both in, and for the community. And finally, evidence of hope, pride, and self-worth:

We will never go back to the way things were before. We have seen what we can do. We know it can be different. [Big hART] have helped generate hope.

Before all this [Northcott Narratives] happened, because of all the shit that went on people wouldn't want to come and live at Northcott. Now they announce ... I live at Northcott.

Social policy recommendation four: freedom and democracy comes from participation

MARKERS OF QUALITY

A scan of available literature reveals 11 markers of quality that enable judgements to be made in relation to *Northcott Narratives*. These include for artists: having flexible and adaptable working methods; working collaboratively with participants; pursuing quality in both process and product; being responsive to individuals needs. And for Big hART itself: building in time to plan and research projects; setting clear and realistic aims and objectives; supporting tenants' participation by meeting their practical needs such as food, transport and refreshments; building robust partnerships; ensuring sustainability and appropriate exit strategies; having a clear evaluation strategy; and where appropriate, creating a working structure that supports the effective work of freelance artists. In each case, Big hART and arts workers either met or exceeded each of these.

TENSIONS AND CHALLENGES

Working within communities with multiple levels of disadvantage brings enormous challenges. The day-to-day struggles of tenants who often have complex and competing needs are reminders of those challenges. It is also naïve to expect that there are simple solutions to complex and embedded difficulties. It is the case, for example, that work as innovative and successful as *Northcott Narratives* will not be 'curative' in the way that governments or funding bodies may like. Despite the significant developments in self-worth, self-respect, and social cohesiveness that many identified as an outcome of *Northcott Narratives*, there are still simple challenges such as bringing different language groups together. In addition, while the arts provided exciting and expressive modalities with which to work, those tenants with significant mental health issues not directly engaged with the project found rehearsals and production processes difficult.

It is also the case that tenants participated in various ways, at different times, and for different purposes. At least some felt 'exploited' and others reported not feeling 'heard' in the way that might have liked. However, it is also important to note that this milieu also provided opportunities, generated issues, ideas and material to be considered, and brought many feeling isolated together. Shared stories of pain and hardship enabled people to feel connected through their common humanity, memories, and experiences. One arts worker described how the arts can contribute in this regard:

Conflict, dare I say chaos, has been important in the model that we have developed here. What we have created is a space for people to work out and work through this conflict and tension, sometimes literally and sometimes through creative spaces like the theatre.

The work of building and maintaining working relationships across so many organisations, each with its own imperatives, and established ways of working was challenging. Risk, for example, a keystone to the creative process, was actively mitigated against by a number of agencies. Also exiting Northcott Estate, a firmly established Big hART principle, necessarily became a loss for some tenants who grieved for what had been created, nurtured, and developed. As one tenant wistfully shared: 'the only thing I would change is to have them stay longer ... it was marvellous having them here, both as friends and as people who helped us achieve so much ... they were beautiful'.

Social policy recommendation five: you can't always get what you want

LEARNING

It is possible to identify a powerful range of learnings that occurred as a consequence of *Northcott Narratives*. For the approximately 378 tenants who became project participants¹, increasing levels of involvement led to such changes as returning or turning to education for the first time and assuming leadership positions within the community. This grew out of the development of new skills and knowledge that are both implicit and explicit in arts practice, for example, creative problem solving, being expressive, and skills involved with being able to work with others.

The development of sometimes latent abilities to creatively both inquire into and express issues is conceptualised by Webster & Buglass as 'Finding Voices, Making Choices: Creativity for Social Change' (2005). What this reveals is that as tenants start to become 'visible' and experience the ability to affect change, a capacity to 'see things as if they could be otherwise' (Greene 2001) becomes manifest. This means that there are not only benefits to individuals, but also to the community around them.

For Big hART, the learning included increased knowledge and skills of how to work with aged and infirm communities, and the networking required to support such diversity; this built capacity within the organisation. The learning for the Northcott Estate community itself reflected an increased sense of confidence, knowledge of and subsequent participation in local democracy leading to an ability to advocate on its own behalf. Finally, learning for partner organisations was reflected in increasing levels of trust from an understanding of, and evidence that revealed the way arts-based practice has an important contribution to make in building human capacity.

Taking each of these together, and reflecting the context in which they sit it is possible to think of these broadly speaking as what Holden (2008, p.11) describes as *cultural learning*. Culture is not taken here in its widest ethnographic sense, but as manifest through the arts broadly speaking; this notion informed by Geertz's definition

ⁱ It is difficult to provide exact numbers of project participants as some tenants participated at some times, and not others. Still others became increasingly engaged as the project developed. It is also the case that while some observed processes from a distance, the effects on them were profound. Consequently, numbers provide only part of the 'story' as depth of experience and immersion in the project varied. It is the case, however, that at least these numbers of tenants were engaged in some way by the project and it is highly likely that many were also touched in some way

referring to public symbolic forms that people can use to express meaning. In Holden's words: 'Cultural learning means the acquisition and development of memories and behaviours, including skills, knowledge, understanding, values and wisdom by cultural means, or in a cultural context, or to a cultural end. Cultural learning is a lifelong pursuit. It is an affective experience where enjoyment motivates and enhances learning' (2008, p.11). What this definition foregrounds is the multi-layered dimensions of participatory arts experiences that constituted *Northcott Narratives* and the symbolic forms shared both within and without John Northcott estate. In this way, learning is *sense-making*.

CULTURAL LEARNING, CULTURAL PARTICIPATION, AND CULTURAL VITALITY

In overview, what Big hART has done with *Northcott Narratives* is use arts practice to engage tenants and others at John Northcott Estate. This engagement has led to cultural participation and learning. In particular, this form of cultural participation facilitated by Big hART, has a range of benefits and is increasingly recognised as important to planning, quality of life, health and wellbeing and in being able to sustain social relationships and build bridges between groups (Hawkes 2001; Jackson, Kabwasa-Green, & Herranz 2006; Wright & Palmer 2007).

Presence of opportunities for cultural participation, cultural participation itself, and support for this to happen, are now being recognised as constituent elements of 'cultural vitality' (Jackson & Herranz 2002; Jackson, et al. 2006). Cultural vitality, a concept developed by the Urban Institute, is where the presence of and opportunities for the arts, culture, and creative expression are reflected in communities being healthier places to live and often markers of how they fare (Jackson et al. 2006). What the concept of cultural vitality also reveals is that people participate in many different ways with various skill levels, individually and collectively, and on a regular or intermittent basis. For example, some individuals contributed original material to performances or exhibitions, others attended skills-based workshops, saw exhibitions and performances, and performed or created arts products themselves. While it is hard to measure 'participation' when consideration is to project participants as consumers on one end of a continuum and producers on the other, both reception and production can be creative acts. What tenants also report is that the more creative the work, the greater investment of self, the more pride and ownership that was generated, and the greater the benefits that accrued. In tenants' words this: 'enlarged a vision of possibility'; [Big hART] 'got people out of their doors', with a third tenant highlighting that 'we did it altogether, it will stay with me forever'.

CONCLUSION

Finally, what was developed through *Northcott Narratives* was an understanding of the way that the arts contributes to: well-functioning individuals, understanding and tolerance of difference, traditional as well as emergent communities, promoting social justice, strengthening identity and citizenship, and strengthening the creative abilities of tenants so that they become active culture makers rather than passive culture consumers. In short, vital arts cannot be disaggregated from vital communities, and through developing work that 'provokes discourse, stimulates participation and encourages action', John Northcott Estate can be seen as moving towards what Goldbard (2006. p.11) describes as a 'new creative community'. Consequently, what *Northcott Narratives* reveals is that John Northcott Estate is not a place to be avoided, but a keeping place that houses the diversity of our heritage.

Social policy recommendation six: hello, let's dance.

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