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Agenda 21 for culture

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Cultural development and local governments in New South Wales

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Cultural development and local governments in New South Wales

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Summary

Local Governments in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, have not adopted Agenda 21 for culture at an organisational level. Although Agenda 21 for culture it is beginning to be referenced in local policy and planning, it remains largely remote from NSW Local Government. However, Agenda 21 for culture does provide significant conceptual support for those working in the arts in Local Government. When the work that NSW councils are doing in the arts is examined, it strongly relates to the Agenda 21 for culture articles, especially the 'Undertakings'.

Local Governments in NSW are working to gain recognition and influence and to grow support for cultural development, by promoting the intrinsic value of culture alongside instrumental values, which are often social in nature.

The Local Government and Shires Associations of NSW are working to advance understanding of Local Government work in the arts. Two current policy principles advocated by the Local Government and Shires Associations of NSW are, that government policy:

- Finds value in the process of arts endeavours at the local level, not just in the end product
- Recognises that everyone's cultural tastes and affinities are as valid as anyone else's – as long as human and other rights are not being infringed

1. Background

There are three spheres of government in Australia. There is Federal Government, State Government as well as Local Government. New South Wales (NSW) is one of the eight States and Territories that make up Australia and is home to 152 Local Government councils. The Local Government and Shires Associations (LGSA) are their peak representative body.

LGSA has been supported by the NSW State Government over the last 10 years with provision for a Policy Officer, Cultural Development. This is the only position of its type in a Local Government peak body in Australia and perhaps in the world.

2. Current challenges for cultural policy and arts development in New South Wales, Australia

The biggest challenge for cultural policy and local arts development as practiced by Local Government, is to continue to gain recognition and influence and to grow support.

Arts have been a concern of NSW Local Government since it started, with participation in local cultural production from the early nineteenth century, mostly through using town halls as performing arts spaces. Despite this, arts in Australian Local Government, and some argue in Australia overall, continue to be seen as marginal to other concerns, which are considered to be more important. So the biggest challenge for cultural policy is to be taken seriously, especially during difficult economic times.

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To be taken seriously, you need to have capital. The arts have yet to properly realise their biggest assets, in part because they are so huge and difficult to communicate. We can think about arts capital in Local Government in two ways:

- Intrinsic value – the arts sit equally with sisters religion and science, as one of the ways we can understand ourselves and our world
- Instrumental value – some arts processes can work to practically advance personal, social, organisational, environmental, health and economic development in local communities

People working in Local Government and the arts in NSW talk of those who ‘get it’ or ‘don’t get it’. The ‘it’ here refers to an understanding of the intrinsic value of arts practice that there are considerable, vital, although often intangible, benefits for councils and communities participating in the arts.

Part of the difficulty for NSW councils in the adoption of Agenda 21 for culture, is one of exclusivity. This difficulty arises when the agenda of cultural development is understood as being separate and different from everything else. This occurred in NSW when the seminal *'The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's Essential Role in Public Planning'* (Hawkes 2001) was misinterpreted by some in Local Government.

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Hawkes staked a claim for culture to sit alongside the familiar 'triple bottom line': environmental, economic and social. The addition of a cultural 'bottom line' was a new and influential concept, in Europe as well as Australia, and provided an important boost in advancing the cultural development agenda. Hawkes makes a strong case for recognition and understanding of culture in the wider sense and an understanding of background assumptions and values, which direct us, including when we make policy. Even so, some interpreted the 'cultural pillar' as being separate from other concerns, which presented the problem of exclusivity. Despite the promising intellectual start from Hawkes, *Fourth Pillar* ideas and Agenda 21 for culture have not gained policy currency in NSW councils.

Although Australian councils do not feature as adoptees of Agenda 21 for culture, there is satisfaction and comfort for Local Government staff working in cultural development that Agenda 21 for culture exists, and its 'worldwide mission' has begun. Agenda 21 for culture is successful in elucidating, at an overarching level, the essential truth of the intrinsic value of cultural policy and arts practice.

There's also very practical advice in Agenda 21 for culture, for example, some NSW councils advancing cultural development are doing so in accord with article 30: 'To boost the strategic role of the cultural industries and the local media for their contribution to local identity, creative continuity and job creation'. A good example is Arts Northern Rivers,¹ supported by seven councils in NSW. However, this work is not being done as a direct result of Agenda 21 for culture, but rather, in parallel to it.



Wilcannia Arts Centre. Picture: © Christopher Hudson

The challenge for Local Government cultural policy and arts development is to effectively integrate with other council policy portfolios. For example, park benches can be made by local artists, rather than being chosen from a generic catalogue of street furniture. Or further, local artists can be involved at the design and master-plan stage of urban development, such as Bankstown Council did at Greenacre in Western Sydney.²

Although not adopting Agenda 21 for culture, NSW councils are beginning to reference it in their own policy documents, such as Hornsby Shire Council.³

1 <http://www.artsnorthernrivers.com.au>

2 <http://culturalawards2008.lgsa.org.au/projects/29-greenacre-town-centre-improvement-program-tcip>

3 <http://www.hornsby.nsw.gov.au/ourcommunity/index.cfm?NavigationID=1310>

The challenge for NSW councils is to increasingly reference and build on useful international documentation such as Agenda 21 for culture, and at the same time demonstrate clearly how incorporating arts processes can be of practical benefit to many areas of Local Government operations.

Despite the promising intellectual start from Jon Hawkes, Fourth Pillar ideas and Agenda 21 for culture have not gained policy currency in NSW councils.

3. Current challenge for council arts institutions and artists working with councils

What about arts practice itself? What responsibility do programmers, curators, arts administrators and artists have to advance cultural development? In the case of Local Government arts practice, this can be an unmet responsibility. In NSW, Local Government museums, galleries and libraries can be somewhat disconnected from the rest of council operations. This is a dangerous and unsustainable position. Arts institutions must approach their patron councils offering the treasures of art and arts processes, to expand their relevance and influence.

At the most basic level arts institutions can offer their spaces for community consultations, and as venues for engagement between government and citizens. The welcoming and creative spaces of libraries, museums and galleries are well suited for genuine democratic dialogues.

It is the context and capacity for 'blue sky' thinking, for imagining for dreaming, and the allowance for error that are best offered by the arts. It is in the human ability to innovate, to create from nothing, which is at the core of arts practice. These are skills and abilities that can be stifled by organisations, yet they are now more vital than ever if we're to work together to sustain and grow local communities.

It is becoming increasingly important that arts institutions bring forward the treasures of arts process to help solve the many challenges faced by government. As well as offering venues and processes, arts institutions must participate directly in discussions of concern to Local Government, through programming and curating. It is through practice such as this, which actively and directly demonstrates their usefulness, that Local Government arts institutions in NSW will survive and grow.

A good example of Local Government using arts processes in city planning is seen in Griffith, in regional NSW.⁴

4 <http://culturalawards2008.lgsa.org.au/projects/45-are-we-there-yet---griffiths-cultural-plan>

4. Current challenge for Local Government and Shires Associations of NSW

The current challenge for LGSA, is to increase understanding of Local Government arts practice, by State and Australian Governments.

The purpose of governments, hopefully, is to make our world a better place. A blending of cultural and community development ideologies results in what is called community cultural development or CCD. Many councils have been successfully supporting CCD practice in Australia - since it was pioneered here in the seventies. CCD is all about making the world a better place.

CCD is associated with 'community arts', which has in Australia been framed by some as being the antithesis of the 'excellent art'. Some CCD practice has significantly changed from early community arts. This CCD practice is able, in process, to make lasting positive social change, as well as being a well-recognised product - see the Blacktown example below.

Some contemporary Australian CCD practice produces work that not only meets social needs, but has products that are accepted by the cultural funding taste gatekeepers, or 'artocrats' as being 'excellent'. The term 'excellent' is used by funding bodies and major arts organisations to justify being the arbiters of taste. Local Government are often integral partners in CCD work, such as Blacktown Council, when they supported Urban Theatre Projects to produce *Back Home*.⁵ Development of this play significantly advanced relations between local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and was programmed as part of Sydney Festival as well as touring to Canada.

However there is also great value in community arts activity, without an approved market outcome. As Hawkes said in a 2004 paper, delivered at the *Fourth Pillar* Conference, Melbourne:

"The impetus for art is neither financial (art will make us rich) nor social (art will make us powerful, or, according to the new age version of 'social', art will make us happy). Rather its impetus may be something as banal (and as important) as curiosity, or as mysterious as obsession or compulsion – it is simply just something we have to do.

Only when every local government supports the communal arts activities of all their constituents – as automatically as they do keeping the roads waterproof and the refuse re-cycled - will they be properly fulfilling their governance obligations. The fact that it wouldn't be all that difficult to do this makes it even more depressing that it's not happening. What's so hard about having a place where people can come together to sing, dance, paint, write and where there's a team of facilitators whose job it is to make welcome, to give confidence, to inspire, to suggest different ways? How is it that we've reached such a pass that this sort of activity isn't seen as both essential and normal?"

5 <http://www.urbantheatre.com.au/backhome.html>

It is worth investigating why community arts struggle for recognition in NSW. Two factors have de-valued community arts. The first is about how we value process compared with product, and the second is about how we rank and judge people's personal taste.

Much of the value in community arts is achieved during the process – it is the making of and the doing that gives great benefit to those participating. We find it very hard to measure these intangibles. Benefits for those turning clay on a pottery wheel for the first time are experiential. It is the 'doing of' that provides the returns. However we often get stuck on measuring results with the product – in this example, perhaps somewhat simple pots. The pots may never feature in the art market place, unless the budding ceramicist makes a successful career of it - 'first pot they ever made'. However, the pots can have great personal and sentimental value, as a representation of what it felt like to manipulate clay, the earth, on a wheel.

The second issue is about ranking and judging art. Part of the power of art is that we can each have personal and different responses to, and understandings of, art works. Various cliques and cabals have long worked to promote their particular set of tastes as being superior to others. They have been able to successfully institutionalise their particular set of tastes under the banner of 'excellent'.

There is a very liberating and inclusive alternative, which says that everyone's cultural tastes and affinities are as valid as anyone else's – as long as human and other rights are not being infringed. This enlightened understanding can remove a lot of fear around arts, and validates the common view: 'I don't know a lot about art, but I know what I like'. It is also the reason why awards, prizes and competitions serve art so poorly.

When cultural policy accepts greater value in the creative process, not just the outcome, and that personal tastes are equal, government arts funding intervention will be more greatly applied to participatory and local level cultural development.

When cultural policy accepts greater value in the creative process, not just the outcome, and that personal tastes are equal, government arts funding intervention will be more greatly applied to participatory and local level cultural development. This funding does not have to come at the expense of larger Australian arts organisations focussing on, often European, classics - it can come from social and other agencies not typically known for arts funding.

Councils in NSW access funding for arts projects from state and federal departments such as State and Regional Development; Ageing, Disability and Home Care; Community Services; Immigration and Citizenship; Education, Employment and Workplace Relations; Transport and Regional Services; Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government; amongst others.



Wilcannia Arts Centre. Picture: © Christopher Hudson

Promotion of the utility of councils' arts practice to address social and other goals can be seen as a distraction. This argument can be understood – it is perhaps in the unknowable or indefinable in arts that is the source of greatest strength. However advancement for councils, particularly those yet to make a significant start in cultural development, requires a practical approach. Promotion of the utility of arts practice, for increasing uptake of arts activities across government portfolios, remains essential for expanding Local Government cultural policy influence and arts development practice.

What is yet to be widely understood or accepted, and Australia could be the first country to do so, is that community cultural development processes are actually very practical and effective tools to address social concerns. CCD is not a panacea, but we haven't scratched the surface in terms of the CCD potential to help our communities. There are currently all the signs that we're going to need everything at our disposal to address looming increases in social disadvantage.

5. Telling local stories – NSW Local Government Cultural Awards

One of the more successful ventures of LGSA has been to open to public view, all applications to the NSW Local Government Cultural Awards. This was done with the website: www.CulturalAwards.lgsa.org.au. Earlier this paper asserted that Awards and competition serve arts poorly, as the ranking and privileging of art is in opposition to an important new policy principal: that everyone's taste is equal. Rather than ranking art, these Awards are about acknowledging good Local Government practice. Although this is a fine distinction, and one which should become redundant in the future, the Cultural Awards continue to serve the purpose of promoting Local Government arts practice in NSW.

The Cultural Awards sites for 2008 and 2009 account for over 200 Local Government arts projects in NSW, and are a valuable tool for councils and Local Government arts workers everywhere.

Work is currently underway at LGSA to provide further specific information to help councillors and Local Government staff working in cultural policy and arts development.

6. Agenda 21 for culture – future program

So whilst some NSW councils are operating in accordance with the spirit of Agenda 21 for culture, and are also effecting many of the various articles, the document remains largely removed from council operations.

This is in part because, working at a very local level, often with very little, NSW councils need to focus on what is of direct and practical use. Many NSW councils are facing substantial resource constraints, and simply don't have the time or money to work on adopting Agenda 21 for culture, which can be seen as too esoteric. However, the fact that what NSW councils are doing in the arts is paralleled by the content of Agenda 21 for culture is a vote of confidence for the document.

When thinking about a future program for Agenda 21 for culture, let's consider how to bring the important conceptual contributions of Agenda 21 for culture and the supporting documents, closer to the practice of NSW councils.

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For NSW, the biggest incentive for adoption of Agenda 21 for culture would be through some kind of direct practical benefit that would flow to councils, such as access to funding support or exchange programs.

Another way to raise the profile of the United Cities and Local Governments' Committee on Culture would be to manage and facilitate networks between Local Governments internationally and to act as a central repository and distributor for information relating to Local Government and cultural development. For example, it was surprising to recently discover that Seoul in Korea is holding an international conference on "Creativity, the Power to Change the World".⁶ This conference promotes the Seoul administration's adoption of "Seoul Creative City Governance". This process has "applied the creative ideas of civil servants regarding city governance and strived for a citizen-oriented administration by adopting the perspective of the citizens." Here we find perhaps the most important role of cultural development in Local Government – having arts processes to change the organisational culture of government itself.

6 <http://www.mcst.go.kr/english/issue/issueView.jsp>

- The article and the full report are available on-line at <http://www.cities-localgovernments.org> and <http://www.agenda21culture.net>. They can be reproduced for free as long as UCLG and Barcelona City Council are cited as sources.
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