

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Being human – the importance of cultural vitality

I applaud the development of a National Cultural strategy for Australia. I am a PhD candidate at the University of Tasmania, investigating the cultural impact of regional arts festivals in partnership with 'Ten Days on the Island' a biannual arts and cultural festival here in Tasmania. I argue that there has never been a more important time for leadership at a national level in the cultural policy area. Raising the profile of culture is as important in our response to the current portfolio of crises that confront us as any economic, health or environmental initiative. It has the potential to join conversations and highlight existing developments in this policy area that have valiantly moved forward in pursuit of greater cultural vitality in our society despite decreasing resources and deliberate deprioritization under the previous federal government.

My personal journey helps explain how I have arrived at this position.

The Christmas after I finished high school, and before my first year at University, I told my uncle, a farmer, businessman and community leader who I had a great deal of respect for, that I had enrolled to study acting and theatre making. His response was brief and to the point;

“what’s the bloody use of that?”

I was totally unable to articulate an answer at the time and it’s a question which has resonated through my career as a theatre maker, cultural development practitioner, local government officer and now researcher. Of course, the answer has been expressed differently depending on the context of the question.

- As a theatre maker it was often about shoehorning the predicted outcomes of a project into the language of excellence and innovation to compete for limited arts funding opportunities.
- As a cultural development practitioner, it was about explaining the value of programs and projects in the context of three year or annual funding applications – or bringing on board communities to the latest large-scale community production or schools touring show.
- As a program officer in local government, it was about advocating for the continuation or expansion of resources for cultural development projects in the municipality.
- As a leader and policy developer in local government it was about situating the cultural vitality of the community as a priority alongside the many other demands for resources.

In all these contexts I had an intrinsic understanding that there is significant value to be attributed to cultural and artistic activity. This was an instinctive knowledge often based on personal experience and gut feeling. It felt fundamental to my humanity. What I was lacking was the language to fully articulate the value of culture. The outcomes of arts and cultural activity were, particularly in a local government context, considered intangible and even indescribable.

Then I read Jon Hawkes’ 2001 paper “The fourth pillar of sustainability – culture’s essential role in public planning”. In it, he argues for the adoption of cultural vitality as a fourth policy domain alongside economic growth, social inclusion and environmental balance. He makes the connection between a society’s values and its culture:

‘The way a society governs itself cannot be fully democratic without there being clear avenues for the expression of community values, and unless these expressions directly affect the direction a community takes. These processes are culture at work’ (Hawkes 2001, pg vii)

I now had a platform from which to pitch from. His language is provocative and inspiring. Take his description of the manifestations of cultural vitality:

'... robust diversity, tolerant cohesiveness, multidimensional egalitarianism, compassionate inclusivity, energetic creativity, open minded curiosity, confident independence, rude health.'
(Hawkes 2001, pg 23)

His paper contributed to an international movement advocating for the role of culture in sustainable development. In 1982 at the World conference on Cultural policies UNESCO had delivered the Mexico City Declaration on Cultural policies including what was to become a seminal definition of culture and clearly influenced Hawkes:

'the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions, and beliefs' (UNESCO 1982).

In 2004 the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) held its foundational congress and in the same year adopted 'Agenda 21 for culture' as a reference document. In 2010 they released their policy statement 'Culture: Fourth Pillar of sustainable development'.

The Cultural Development Network (CDN), who commissioned Hawkes' 2001 book, have taken a lead in this movement in Australia. They established the National Local Government Cultural Forum which operated from 2013 to 2018 with several key objectives and initiatives:

- they added the civic domain to capture the importance of the realm of governance for local government
- they identified the data sets to be considered, inputs and outputs

and of most relevance to my journey and my research,

- they developed a schema of cultural outcomes of cultural activity

The CDN had identified that one of the obstacles to the adoption of culture as a policy domain for local government was the lack of a set of well defined, commonly understood cultural outcomes. Whilst economic, social, environmental and civic domains had a clear line of sight from the activity undertaken to the outcome derived, culture often relied on outcomes from social or economic domains to understand or define its impact. These outcomes are valid and real but do not capture the full spectrum of cultures role in our society. They say little about what it means to be human. The cultural outcomes schema they released in 2016 is designed to fill this gap. It comprises of five distinct elements.

- Stimulation (Creative expression stimulated),
- Enrichment (Aesthetic enrichment experienced),
- Insight (Knowledge, ideas and insight gained),
- Appreciation (cultural diversity appreciated) and
- Belonging (connection to a shared heritage experienced)

This was a moment of crystallisation for me. I immediately advocated for the adoption of these outcomes in the city plan of the local government I was working for and adopted the CDN structures in the Arts and cultural strategy I was developing. For the first time, the arts and culture team had a

clear line of sight from their activities to clearly defined outcomes, to the delivery of the city plan. No longer peripheral or 'nice to have', but fundamental and central.

The development of this framework continues. The CDN is rolling out 'Takso'; an outcomes planning platform or as they describe it "the flight recorder for cultural activities" (CDN website, accessed Aug 2022). My research will investigate the utility of the articulation of cultural outcomes beyond the internal planning processes of government. It will investigate their usefulness as a shared language between artists, cultural organisations, community organisations, local governments and the communities they engage with.

Through observation of and interaction with artists and participants in the development of works, their production and performance, I will bring to bear my own experience as a community cultural development worker and local government policy developer to deliver a deeper understanding of the cultural value generated by regional festivals and articulate whether the cultural outcomes schema could be a useful tool to generate greater cultural vitality in society.

I support the 5 pillars that have been mooted for the National Cultural strategy. In particular; the recognition of first nations cultures as central, the place of all Australians as cultural contributors and the celebration and support of artists. I do hope the new strategy seriously considers the work of the CDN and the structures they have developed. Their alignment with existing governance structures in Australia, as well as the international movement for the significance of culture in sustainable development, provides a solid foundation for the generation of greater cultural vitality and positive cultural action. And, to finish with a quote from Hawkes:

It is through cultural action that we:

- *make sense of our existence and the environment we inhabit*
- *find common expressions of our values and needs*
- *meet the challenges presented by our continued stewardship of the planet*

Without culture, we are, quite literally, not human.

(Hawkes 2001, pg 4)

References

Hawkes, J. (2001). The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability, Cultures essential role in public planning.

UNESCO, World Conference on Cultural Policies, Mexico City 26 July - 6 August 1982; *Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies*

UCLG website, <https://www.uclg.org/> Accessed 22/08/2022

Cultural Development Network website, <https://culturaldevelopment.net.au/> Accessed 22/08/2022