

**RE-ENGAGING COMMUNITY**  
**THE FUTURE OF ARTS POLICY IN VICTORIA**  
**A report to Arts Victoria**  
**from the Cultural Development Network**  
**14 June 2001**

**Arts policy in context**

This paper arises out of the day long workshop session held by the Cultural Development Network (CDN) on 4/6/01. Network members at the meeting included professionals working in both metropolitan and regional Local Government. Focusing on arts development and local government, this paper is the CDN's response to Arts Victoria's request for input to its arts policy development process.

While an arts policy is a necessary component of government policy, an integrated overview from a cultural perspective is as, if not more, important to the effective development of all public policy. So, before dealing with the specifics of the arts in Victoria, this paper clarifies our position on the critical need for a cultural perspective.

The ideas presented in the following section summarise the arguments expressed in the CDN commissioned publication, [\*The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: culture's essential role in public planning\*](#). A thorough reading of the monograph is recommended in order to fully appreciate the proposals outlined below.

**Culture and sustainability**

Since the Council of Australian Governments proclaimed the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) in 1992, all tiers of government have been striving to develop policy that achieves a balance between social, environmental and economic issues. These three dimensions have been identified as the key elements in the achievement of sustainability and well-being.

What is missing from this admirable initiative, and from all the other new ways of approaching public planning, is an appreciation of the essential function of culture in society. A society's values are the basis upon which all else is built. These values and the ways they are expressed are a society's culture. Unless there are clear avenues for the expression of community values, and unless these expressions directly affect the governance of our society, we cannot claim to be a real democracy. These processes are culture at work.

When:

- culture is understood to denote the social production and transmission of values, meaning and purpose of communities, and
- it is recognised that the expression of social goals and aspirations is at the heart of the public policy-making and planning process,

then the connection between culture and the affairs of state becomes clear. So also does the potential for the use of culture as a core element in the mechanisms that facilitate effective public planning.

Cultural vitality is as essential to a healthy and sustainable society as social equity, environmental responsibility and economic viability. In order for public policy-making, planning and program design and implementation to be more effective, its methodology should include an integrated framework of cultural evaluation. This framework should be structured along similar lines to those being developed for social, environmental and economic impact assessment.

In this context, the concept of culture is being used to describe the community creation of values, meaning and purpose in life. This is in marked contrast to the more limited view of culture as simply encompassing the arts and heritage of a society. Both these usages enjoy

wide currency, and it is the confusion between them that has created significant problems in the development of previous 'cultural' policies.

This wider concept of culture is an invaluable tool that has been largely ignored in the attempts to develop the ways that governments plan for the future and evaluate past activities.

Culture is both integral to, and unacknowledged by, the new views of public planning, including those that emphasise sustainability and well-being as key goals. But without a foundation that expressly includes culture, these new perspectives are bereft of the means of comprehending, let alone implementing, the changes they promote. Culture has to be a separate and 'distinct' reference point. An essential aspect of the move towards the creation of an effective public planning process is the development of a 'Cultural Framework' that stands alongside similar social, environmental and economic instruments. Only then can ALL public policy be appropriately evaluated. The emerging focus on issues such as sustainability, well-being, community building and civic engagement needs a clear cultural perspective as a basis for successful implementation.

The CDN recommends therefore that:

- the fundamental role of culture in society's development towards sustainability and well-being be recognised;
- culture be elevated from its current function as a mere servant of social and economic policy to an independent but interdependent element in the overall evaluation of ALL policy;
- the dimensions of Ecologically Sustainable Development (as expressed in the National Strategy for ESD) be expanded from social, economic and environmental issues to include a cultural aspect;
- a Cultural Framework and cultural indicators be developed that facilitate effective community input into the values informing ALL public policy.

## **Past arts policy**

No examination of previous Victorian State Government cultural/arts policy should fail to revisit the visionary policy, *Mapping Our Culture*, produced in the final days of the previous Labor Government. This policy document, which never became operational, is a high watermark of policy articulation, as relevant today as it was when it was launched a decade ago. The current Labor Government could do far worse than simply to adopt it in its entirety.

The State Coalition Government's *Arts 21* was, when it was introduced, probably the most 'rational' economic rationalist arts policy the world has ever seen. Its implementation saw a massive focus on 'big item' edifices and events. The infrastructure that this concentration produced is impressive but, as the years have passed, it has become increasingly evident that there are significant gaps, particularly in the regions.

*Arts 21* did support professional artists and arts organisations, but according to a narrow 'industry' model that, in our view must be expanded to encompass objectives other than those designated purely economic. Under *Arts 21*, the concept of community participation metamorphosed into 'customer focused marketing'. Art as product, community as consumer was the beginning and end of the Kennett vision.

The Labor Government's arts policy, *Making Victoria the Cultural Centre of Australia* (MVCCA), under which Arts Victoria has been operating since late 1999, is deservedly under review as it is clearly a short term, election-induced document, full of quite specific commitments but lacking a fully developed long term view. This was appropriate for the time, particularly as there were a large number of glaringly obvious issues that needed addressing. Many, indeed most, of the commitments in this policy have been fulfilled and it is now the right time to be developing a long term vision for culture and the arts in Victoria. The MVCCA's inclusion in this document of specific (albeit underdeveloped) references to community arts was encouraging, especially as a priority on locally-driven, community-based programs has been absent from the policy, rhetoric and funding of Arts Victoria for too long.

The CDN welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of this vision and applauds the Government's commitment to this consultative process.

## Major concerns

The CDN has identified three key areas that we believe require a concerted attention that has not been especially evident in recent years.

### Active community participation in arts practice

The encouragement and facilitation of active community participation in arts practice has not been fully recognised as an essential basis of public arts policy. Glimpses of an awareness of its importance appear in the current Government's policy: MVCCA states that:

*'(u)nderpinning Labor's past and present cultural policies is a fundamental belief in the principles of access and equity. Opportunity in the Arts comes from Victorians having full access to all forms of artistic expression and participation in their communities.'*

This is a laudable position but the danger is that 'participation' has the potential to be interpreted as 'consumption' (the participant partakes of the meal rather than makes it). A common tendency in government arts policies is to see participation included as a subset of 'audience development' or as referring to the improvement of isolated communities' access to professionally produced arts product.

Our position is that:

*'a society makes (or discovers) meaning through its arts. In our pursuit of a democracy that really does engage all citizens, that facilitates active participation from the entire spectrum of the body politic, the democratisation of arts practice has to be at the forefront of our strategies.'*

*'How can a community develop a conscious, symbolic and effective expression of its own values, meanings and aspirations (that is, culture) without having developed its own creative capacities (that is, arts skills)?'*

*'No longer can we be content to leave the creation of meaning to the 'experts'. Yes, it is wonderful to live in a society in which those who choose to devote their entire lives to art are cherished and respected. But this should not diminish our own confidence in making meaning, it should not allow us to become lazy, embarrassed, passive witnesses, silent consumers, mere customers. The new rhetoric is 'engagement' – the first engagement we should have is with arts practice.'*

*'Why? Because the arts are the creative imagination at work (and play). Its techniques involve improvisation, intuition, spontaneity, lateral thought, imagination, co-operation, serendipity, trust, inclusion, openness, risk-taking, provocation, surprise, concentration, unorthodoxy, deconstruction, innovation, fortitude and an ability and willingness to delve beneath the surface, beyond the present, above the practical and around the fixed. These are the aspects of human behaviour that social scientists have identified as being the source and manifestation of creativity and innovation - the essential elements for the survival of the species.'*

*'An innovative society is open-minded, curious, compassionate and lively; it respects and embraces difference. In so being, it is able to meet every challenge and adapt to changing circumstances. But it can only become so if its citizens are comfortable with applying their creative imaginations to new and changing situations.'*

*'A society in which arts practice is not endemic risks its future. The support of professional artists is a laudable policy but far more important is offering all citizens, and their offspring, the opportunity to actively participate in arts practice – to make their own culture.'*

*'Creativity, engagement, cohesiveness, well-being and respect for difference will be inevitable outcomes.'*

*'Communities need access to, and facility with, the tools that come with arts practice in order find meaningful ways to express their values. Actively involving communities in arts practice (as against product consumption) is the essential starting point to the exercise of generating community-owned expressions of what matters to them.'*  
(4Pillars, P24)

And this is not a particularly isolated view of how the arts function in society. The Saatchi & Saatchi report, *Australians and the Arts*, notes the following:

*'(T)wo-thirds of Australians ... believe that "the arts should be as much about doing these things yourself as being part of an audience"' (p 313)*

*'There is ... a high level of interest among Australians in being artistically creative themselves. Almost half of all survey participants reported that they gained [at least] some enjoyment out of performing, creating or writing things for others to enjoy ... The proportion rises to 61% of people who get [at least] some enjoyment out of being artistic just for their own enjoyment ... There is little doubt that there is a substantial pool of latent artistic interest and talent in Australia ready for opportunities to be personally involved' (p 193-4)*

*'(P)articipation in the arts, rather than just consumption of the arts, is a strong area of latent potential for expanding the value that people place on the arts in the future' (p 125)*

Beyond affirming the basic **right** of communities to engage in arts practice (and thereby make their own culture), it is time that the **social value** of arts participation is properly recognised. Arts participation has been clearly demonstrated to have enormous side-benefits in improving educational intake (see below), community well-being, community capacity, etc, etc. This awareness should inform not simply policy development within the Arts portfolio but all policy across the board.

The point is that citizens have the right to express themselves (and consequently the state has a responsibility to facilitate that expression) AND that the arts are a key process through which people find expression. As we search for a more inclusive society, a more functional democracy, active community participation in arts practice has a hugely important role to play.

Art is primarily a mode of expression, NOT simply a product for consumption.

### **The role and responsibilities of local government**

MVCCA states that:

*'Labor will work with Local governments across the State to provide co-ordination and encouragement to the community Arts sector through the provision of community based arts and crafts centres and programmes in metropolitan and regional areas.'*

This is a welcome intention but, in the context of a more fully developed policy, we would argue for a wider perspective to be expressed.

Our position is that:

*'local government is ... the tier of governance closest to the citizenry, and therefore (at least theoretically) the one most in touch with, and capable of being responsive to, its constituency. It is probably the best governance level at which to develop new methodologies of participatory democracy and cultural action. It is ideally placed to stimulate community debate on the values and aspirations that should inform our future, and to plan its actions in direct response to the visions of the community.'*  
(4Pillars, P16)

In the context of arts development, local government is unlikely to be able to realise its potential without significant intervention from the State. Policy development should address the following issues:

- the need for the State to have a dedicated community development/Local Government arts unit with policy, resources, staff and programs;

- the need for the (re)development of advisory services to local government;
- the need to improve both the initial training and professional development of local government arts workers;
- the need to open the minds of (senior) local government staff and elected officials to the value and importance of the arts;
- the need for local government access to examples of great practice;
- the need to increase the resources deployed by local government towards arts practice by their communities (stimulatory State programs are an option);
- the need for local government peak organisations to become involved in cultural and arts issues;
- the need for the integration of local government into the wider public planning environment.

We will make some specific recommendations concerning these matters below. In passing, we believe it is relevant to mention one other matter arising from the MVCCA policy. It is stated that:

*'Labor will establish a Regional Arts Infrastructure Fund to tackle the backlog of arts infrastructure projects in regional Victoria. This fund will provide additional capital funds to improve regional museum buildings, concert halls, theatre and other cultural facilities.'*

We would hope that the scope of this aspect of current policy will expand to recognise that:

- there is much more to infrastructure than the traditional set of edifices, including recurrent, non-capital expenditure. For example a comprehensive cultural infrastructure would include tools, access to skilled and enthusiastic facilitators, easily accessed information and promotional and distributive mechanisms;
- local government is a key source for the identification of infrastructural needs;
- local government has a significant role managing these resources with and on behalf of local communities.

For at least these reasons, the State would be sensible to closely involve local government in the development and implementation of infrastructural support programs. We have noted a tendency for related programs to be devolved to metropolitan-based, arts-focused agencies. Programs involving community development may best be administered by locally based community development agencies – for example, local government.

### **The role and responsibilities of the education sector**

The CDN planning session spent considerable time discussing the parlous state of the arts within the education sector. Subsequently, we noted the 'major research' that Margaret Seares described in yesterday's National Press Club Address:

*'... undertaken in the USA over 10 years and with 25,000 high school students which shows the academic advantages for high school students who participate in arts programs, either in or out of school. The research showed increased test scores across the standard areas of maths, literacy, science, etc. It also showed the correlation between those students studying a musical instrument and progress in maths, and those participating in drama with an improvement in literacy skills. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, it showed that students in low socio-economic areas who were heavily involved in arts programs scored better across the standard testing than those from more middle class areas who were arts deprived.'*

We identified at least the following issues as requiring scrutiny:

- the quality of primary and secondary education arts curricula;
- appropriate training of arts schoolteachers;

- training of artists (in all artforms) to fit them to work in schools;
- the range of out-of-school (but school-supported) arts programs;
- the encouragement of cross-generational activities (ie, programs actively involving children, parents and teachers);
- the placement of artists in school residencies;
- community access to school resources;
- the application of **education** resources to support such initiatives.

Our recommendations have, to some extent, been pre-empted by the establishment of the 'Arts and Education Reference Group' although the fact that the membership of the Group includes no artists (with the exception of the AD of Arena Theatre), community development professionals or regionally based individuals is a cause for concern. On the basis of the media coverage of the announced establishment, we also have concerns relating to a possible undue focus on audience development, expanded vocational training and the use of schools simply as touring venues. Nevertheless, it is an initiative we welcome and we look forward to being able to take up these issues with the Reference Group during their deliberations.

The CDN proposes a range of strategies around these three issues that, in its opinion, have the potential to place Victoria at the forefront of cultural policy-making. Central to these strategies are the building of community capacity and the need for responsive, open and integrated government.

## Key objectives

The strategies proposed by the CDN focus on three key objectives. It is crucial that Victoria achieves:

- **a whole-of-government perspective on cultural development;**
- **a widely understood and accepted expression of the purpose of cultural development;**
- **a cultural infrastructure that serves the needs and aspirations of communities throughout Victoria.**

### Objective 1: Whole-of-government

*'Cultural vitality is as essential to a healthy and sustainable society as social equity, environmental responsibility and economic viability. In order for public planning to be more effective, its methodology should include an integrated framework of cultural evaluation along similar lines to those being developed for social, environmental and economic impact assessment.'* (4 Pillars, Pvii)

The establishment of a cultural framework through which ALL government policy should be evaluated will involve the development of clear indicators. While the conceptual groundwork for these has been laid in *4 Pillars*, there remains much detailed work to be done. The CDN is seeking a partnership with the Institute of Social Research (ISR) at Swinburne University to develop a project with this focus. We envisage that, as well drawing on the work that we have already done, this project would build on the State Government sponsored *Victorian Social Benchmarks & Indicators Project* that, under the leadership of Mike Salvaris, ISR has already undertaken. We would hope that Arts Victoria would advocate for Government support of this project.

But an effectively integrated government approach to cultural development will require much more than the creation of a high quality planning instrument. Attitudes, day-to-day procedures, and consultative methods will have to change. For example:

- an appreciation of the necessary conditions for the building of community capacity: including direct community access to resources (both financial and human), information and training;

- an appreciation of the key function that cultural development in general and arts development in particular can fulfil in community development;
- recognition and respect for the diverse cultural functions that local government already carries out AND an appreciation of the enormous possibilities that, with encouragement and co-operation, can be realised through this level of government;
- regular and formalised dialogue between the agencies of State and Local Government; in particular the encouragement of the VLGA, LG Pro and the MAV to develop their coverage of cultural matters; representation of Local Government on the Arts Minister's Council for the Arts and other State-established bodies with community development responsibilities and oversight;
- regular and formalised dialogue between Federal, State and Local Government; including, for example, representation of Local Government in the Cultural Ministers Conference;
- regular and formalised dialogue between all the State Government departments and agencies with community development responsibilities (for example, Arts Victoria, the Community Support Fund, State and Regional Development, Education, VicHealth, Infrastructure, Heritage Victoria, Human Services, Tourism Victoria, Natural Resources and Environment);
- these dialogues to include meaningful prior consultation concerning cultural and arts policy development, program design and implementation and, most importantly, specific resource allocation.

Arts Victoria has the potential to develop a pivotal role in co-ordinating an integrated approach to cultural and arts planning in Victoria. The CDN would be an enthusiastic supporter of initiatives that Arts Victoria took in this direction.

## **Objective 2: Expression of purpose**

According to David Yencken in his foreword to the *Fourth Pillar of Sustainability*, the CDN has begun the task of '*reintroduc(ing) the notion of culture into the language of politicians and bureaucrats*' (Piii). But all we have done is extend the horizon – we have helped make clear just how much more needs to be done – not least by State Government. We have already raised the necessity of developing cultural and arts indicators which would in turn form the basis of funding criteria and evaluation. But a more extensive process of communication is necessary.

As a first step, the purpose of government initiatives in culture and arts must be clearly expressed. The ways in which issues such as access, diversity, inclusion, well-being, sustainability, creativity and participation underpin the Government's cultural and arts policies need to be articulated in a manner that is both simple and meaningful.

The changes in the language of cultural and arts development that follow from an understanding of culture's function in the building of community capacity are ones that will require extensive exposure and promotion within all sectors of society. The capacity of arts-based activities to enhance programs with community development goals will be a useful and practical field in which to demonstrate the reality of this assertion.

This process will, of course, require the preparation and distribution of accessible documentation but more important will be face-to-face communications. A critical strategy will be the design and implementation of a series of 'direct contacts' in at least the following areas:

- State Government departments and agencies with community development responsibilities;
- Local Government senior staff and Councillors;
- community-based agencies and organisations with a community development focus;
- individual artists and their representative organisations that wish to apply their skills in a community context;

- policy-makers in the education sector;
- the philanthropy and corporate community support sectors.

Beyond an expression of purpose, and the active explanation of that purpose to those that are interested and affected by that purpose, is the development of the capacity to transform action on the basis this new language.

Contexts in which artists, amateurs, community activists and organisers, government officers and the like can develop their on-the-ground skills in cultural practices that effectively build community expression will need to be developed.

This really is Arts 21 – a new arts policy for a new century. But this time it's not the market driven development of an industrial model but the response to the people of Victoria's desire re-engage with the navigation of their destiny – an arts-led recovery of an entirely new order. We are confident that Arts Victoria can rise to the challenge and are keen to contribute in whatever way we can.

### **Objective 3: Cultural infrastructure**

The bottom line, as always, is the control and allocation of resources. What we have already proposed above will require considerable financial commitments but ultimately the most important commitment will have to be that which goes toward the direct support of community cultural expression.

**We propose a \$3 million annual commitment by State Government to community-based arts programs.**

We suggest that this program be designed along the following lines:

- that it be undertaken in partnership with local government on the basis of a dollar-for-dollar commitment from both parties;
- that the State funds be allocated across the State on a demographically equitable basis with in-built loadings for isolated and otherwise disadvantaged communities;
- that local programs be administered directly by Local Governments;
- that the program recognise that there are many ways of facilitating community expression; the development of and maintenance of accessible infrastructure (described earlier in this paper) is at least as important and, may be more effective than, support for specific arts-based activities;
- that projects be eligible on the basis of community initiative and control;
- that proposed projects be evaluated according to a clear set of community development principles;
- that the documentation of projects be comprehensive and undertaken by a separately financed and independent team;
- that evaluation of projects be a continuous process based on clear community developed indicators and undertaken by a separately financed and independent team;
- that documentation and evaluation be designed to become part of a publicly accessible archive;
- that opportunities are created for project participants to regularly meet with others engaged in the program;
- that a separately financed professional development program be initiated that creates opportunities for on the ground training of artists and community activists in appropriate skills;
- that in cases where professionals are employed they receive acceptable remuneration and conditions;
- that State and Local Government commit to adequate levels of administrative support of the program as a whole and of particular projects;

- that other government agencies be encouraged to enter specific partnerships on specific projects.

The design principles outlined above should make it clear that we believe that there are considerable responsibilities accompanying the acceptance of public funds. Whilst we don't see the pursuit of excellence as one of these responsibilities, we do believe that one should accept the responsibility to ensure that one's experience can benefit the next attempt. Succeed or fail, there are always lessons to be learnt, pitfalls that can be avoided if you know the path. In this way a sense of community connectedness is not simply a here and now or a heritage thing but a commitment to the future as well.

The CDN commends these proposals to the State Government of Victoria and offers its fullest co-operation in their implementation.