

The Art of Renewal: A Guide to Thinking Culturally About Strengthening Communities

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Abstract

The *Art of Renewal — A Guide to Thinking Culturally about Strengthening Communities* is a community engagement tool developed in partnership between Arts Queensland and the Queensland Department of Housing through its Community Renewal program and supported by a steering committee that included representatives from local government, Queensland Community Arts Network and Youth Arts Queensland.

The Art of Renewal is a publication that provides a framework to encourage communities to begin to integrate cultural issues in planning and decision-making processes for local areas, and to implement creative cultural practices that strengthen communities, build social capital and increase connectivity.

The publication identifies the role and value of culture, creative practice and the arts in communities and highlights how the inclusion of cultural identity and creativity in community engagement processes can benefit communities.

This paper will provide an overview of *The Art of Renewal* and the development of a community creativity plan, as well as provide examples from around Queensland of creative community engagement methods which build community identity, belonging and pride.

In addition, the paper will examine the steps taken for integrating community creative development into the Community Renewal program. Community Renewal is working in partnership with community, government and business to narrow the socio-economic gap between renewal communities and the rest of the state with a goal to ensure that residents feel valued, safe and proud as members of the Queensland community.

Keywords

Community renewal, cultural development, creative practice, arts and culture, Art of Renewal, community planning

Introduction

The Art of Renewal — A Guide to Thinking Culturally About Strengthening Communities is a community engagement tool developed in partnership between Arts Queensland and the Queensland Department of Housing through its Community Renewal program.

The Art of Renewal identifies the role and value of culture, creative practice and the arts in communities and highlights how the inclusion of cultural identity and creativity in community engagement processes can benefit communities and provides practical advice on achieving these benefits.

This paper will:

- answer the questions ‘why think about culture?’ and ‘why think about planning?’
- provide an overview of the major elements of *The Art of Renewal* and who can use it
- show how *The Art of Renewal* might be used in community action planning processes for the Community Renewal program
- outline the next steps in the process.

The paper is divided into two parts:

- Part A — An overview of the importance of culture and creative practice to communities and the need to connect culture and creative practice to planning
- Part B — A description of the major elements of the guide, an example of how *The Art of Renewal* might be used in community planning and the next steps in this work.

Part A

Why think about culture?

Culture and sustainable communities

Jon Hawkes, author of *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability*, describes culture as the framework for the distinctive way of life of communities. He says culture is both “the inherent values and the means and the results of social expression” (Hawkes 2001, p. 3) and it is dynamic and constantly changing.

Our culture:

- embodies the sense we make of our lives; it is built on the values we share and the ways we come to terms with our differences; it deals with what matters to people and communities: relationships, memories, experiences, identities, backgrounds, hopes and dreams in all their diversity. And most of all, our culture expresses our visions of the future: what it is we want to pass on to future generations

- connects our present with our pasts and with the future we imagine. It is with culture that we make the connections, the networks of meanings and values, and of friendship and interest, that hold us together in time, in place and in society
- describes the ways we tell each other our stories, how we create our sense of ourselves, how we remember who we are, how we imagine who we want to become, how we relax, how we celebrate, how we argue, how we bring up our children, the spaces we make for ourselves
- is the expression of our desires to be happy, our desires to belong, our desires to survive and, above all, our desires to be creative (Hawkes 2001, p.3).

Cultural values and expression can be found in many aspects of communities and community life. They manifest physically in the design and development of the built environment, in activities and pastimes such as sport, shopping or gardening, in language, cuisine, routines and ceremonies. The arts are just one manifestation, albeit an overt one, of the culture of communities.

Role of arts and creative practice in sustainable communities

Creative practice can operate in many ways to strengthen communities. Arts and other cultural activities can enhance the environment, educate, enchant and excite us. They can reflect and shape our sense of community identity. They involve local people in community development, build community pride and social cohesion. Creative practice provides opportunities for personal development and can stimulate economic activity.

Variety of creative practice

As a community strengthening tool, creative practice is especially versatile and flexible. It can:

- develop quickly in response to local needs and ideas
- be wide-ranging or focused on special groups
- have positive impacts that exceed expectations in terms of cost.

Communities in different areas possess their own unique sets of skills, talents, needs and circumstances. A program, project or activity that is meaningful and effective in one locality may lack relevance and resonance in another. So there is no particular formula for an appropriate range of cultural practices to encourage in any specific area.

There is a limitless variety of ideas for new projects and activities which constitute or support creative practice and which can be effective in community cultural development, for example:

- Understanding place
- Place-making, which includes urban design, street and park improvements
- Environmental art
- Art built-in and community-made public art

- Festivals and events
- Exhibitions
- Performance, which includes theatre, dance and music
- Contemporary cultural media
- Creative businesses
- Knowledge and skills development
- Cultural facilities.

Specialist visual, performing and literary arts are encompassed within the category of knowledge and skills development and can be important components of other categories of initiatives.

Similarly, crafts and other practices such as fashion design, which do not inherently require community collaboration or engagement, are not specifically categorised but may well be incorporated or even the focus of creative initiatives.

The Art of Renewal provides examples of creative practice in community planning in Queensland including:

- Logan River Tinny Trail — a self-guided heritage trail that reflects the natural and cultural values of the Logan River. It includes a book, a series of interpretive signs in riverside parks and walking/bike paths along the river. Logan City Council
<<http://www.logan.qld.gov.au>>
- Girringun Mija — South Mission Beach: an Aboriginal interpretation centre that provides a keeping place for the story of the Hull River Settlement. Cardwell Shire Council
<<http://www.csc.qld.gov.au>>
- Zoom Zoom Zillmere — a creative community development initiative which developed a documentary film about the place, the people, the aspirations and issues of the Zillmere community in Brisbane as a precursor to local area planning
<<http://www.heads.demon.co.uk>>
- Landscape design — a partnership between the Queensland University of Technology landscape architecture students and the Ipswich City Council to identify a range of heritage and cultural values, and public space issues in the town of Rosewood, Ipswich
- Farley Piazza — the transformation of a dead-end street into a civic focal point which includes a stage, seating and public art in Stanthorpe <<http://www.stanthorpe.qld.gov.au>>
- Collaborative street arts — collaborative design and development of landscaping and public artworks to enliven the streetscape of Kuranda village, Cairns
- Wheelchair-friendly sculptural garden furniture — development of a community garden that provides arts and cultural development opportunities at Cascade Place, Redcliffe, an adult day service of the Cerebral Palsy League of Queensland.

- Mountains to Mangroves Festival — a festival that encompasses a range of artistic, cultural and environmental projects to create, care for and celebrate a wildlife corridor that links communities in northern Brisbane, Queensland
- Walk on the Wall — training and performance of circus wall work involving homeless young people in Brisbane
- Stylin' UP Dance Festival — an annual youth music and dance event providing industry performance opportunities for young Indigenous people in Brisbane's outer western suburbs
- Gulf Dance Festival — a three-day festival of song and dance on Mornington Island, which provides networking opportunities with invited groups from other communities in the region.

Culture and government in Queensland

Cultural vitality is a key indicator of the quality of life in communities and both the government and non-government sector supports a diverse range of activities to strengthen the cultural life of Queensland communities:

- The Queensland *Smart State Strategy 2005–2015* has a strong focus on building a community that cares for its people and fosters and celebrates knowledge and creativity
- *Creative Queensland — the Queensland Government Cultural Policy 2002*, outlines a vision for Queensland to be a culturally dynamic place, rich in diversity and experiences — where ideas and talents are supported, where artistic and cultural pursuits are encouraged and where the economy is enhanced by excellence in creative innovation
- The Queensland Government's Community Renewal program recognises that cultural development activity is an essential part of community planning and a vital element in communities where people feel valued, safe and proud
- Local governments are integral to the success of cultural and renewal policies, investing substantial funding and effort in cultural facilities and programs. Each local council with a renewal area within its boundaries works closely with the Community Renewal and is taking on an increasingly diverse role in cultural development.
- The cultural life of communities also occurs through private, community and voluntary sectors and their capacity to organise and implement initiatives locally is critical to the effectiveness of any community cultural development program.

Why think about planning?

Community planning

Planning is a basic concept that applies to any activity with an intention to achieve an objective methodically. It establishes courses of action and, where resources are limited, involves prioritising.

Numerous models approach this task in different ways, but three common steps are central to the success of any community planning process:

Step 1. Building a cultural picture of your locality

Step 2. Identifying your community's resources and aspirations

Step 3. Translating aspirations into action.

The first two steps are about getting to know your community and the third step is about setting strategies and plans for action.

Community planning is a process used by government and community organisations to plan activities, infrastructure and services for neighbourhoods and bigger regions. As the name suggests, community involvement is central to community planning. In Community Renewal areas, involvement of community groups is a key mechanism for community participation in program implementation. This process brings residents and people who work in or serve the area together to inform the planning and delivery of program initiatives.

Renewal plans are prepared for each renewal zone and they:

- identify the priority issues the community and government will address in the area
- set strategies and specific actions to be undertaken within a specified timeframe.

Connections between culture and planning

In building sustainable communities, culture needs to be defined and embraced as a primary community resource. Culture is reflected in and is integral to social, economic and environmental matters.

Cultural affairs generally present complex issues and interconnections that can be difficult to perceive and articulate, which is perhaps the main reason why cultural matters are often reduced to "a marginal add-on to be considered once the important planning questions like housing, transport and land use have been dealt with" (Landry 2000, p. 7).

Community cultural development practitioners work with groups to explore and strengthen their sense of identity, sense of place and capacity to shape and enact their own future.

For maximum community benefit, cultural thinking needs to be central to planning. It is not to be seen as "the icing on the cake rather than the yeast without which the cake fails to rise to its full potential" (Mills 2003, p. 7).

It needs to be placed firmly on the planning agenda for local areas where it can influence management and resource allocation to more effective outcomes. Cultural thinking helps

communities take advantage of their cultural identity and inherent creativity to enhance their quality of life and socio-economic wellbeing.

Part B

Who can use *The Art of Renewal*?

This guide has been specifically developed to assist local area planning in the Community Renewal process. Community Renewal currently operates in urban communities in south and regional Queensland, and one remote Indigenous community. These areas include Palm Island, Caboolture, Logan, Inala, Eagleby, Cairns West, Upper Ross and Townsville West.

The guide also has relevance for committees and councils operating the Regional Arts Development Fund — an Arts Queensland and local government partnership program, Regional Arts Councils, local government planners and cultural development officers, and arts and cultural development workers in renewal areas.

However, it is also intended to be useful to the wide variety of residents and organisations involved in neighbourhood planning, community cultural development and creative practice anywhere.

What are the major elements of *The Art of Renewal*?

The Art of Renewal — A Guide To Thinking Culturally About Strengthening Communities is a planning toolkit that aims to embed cultural matters within the broad planning and decision-making processes of neighbourhoods and agencies, and offers techniques and examples for thinking, planning and acting creatively. It is a practical resource relevant to Community Renewal areas, but also applicable for use by all communities.

The guide is presented in four parts:

- Part 1 uses plain language to explain culture and creative practice and how inclusion of cultural identity and creativity on the planning agenda can benefit local communities.
- Part 2 proposes a series of exercises that groups can undertake to explore their community identity, audit their cultural resources and plan effectively to strengthen communities and promote cultural vitality. This includes practical advice on how to prepare for and run workshops, how to map cultural strengths, resources and activities in a community and how to develop an action plan for implementing arts and cultural activities.
- Part 3 describes a variety of creative practices which can be effective in community cultural development. This includes examples of successful arts and cultural activities including information about who owns the work, what it is and where it is located.

- Part 4 provides some useful information about terms commonly used, potential funding sources and organisations which may help in the planning and implementation of creative practice.

In planning to strengthen communities, it is important to think about culture as both a guiding framework to inform local area planning and as a means to build community vitality. The guide offers a pathway for communities to define their cultural picture, identify their community cultural resources and aspirations, and to stimulate creative practice through coordinated planning and action.

The Art of Renewal suggests a pathway through the three community planning steps. It outlines ten exercises that any community planning process can incorporate to identify and embed cultural matters within mainstream planning.

Step 1 begins the 'dreaming phase' that assists participants to better understand the culture of their community and imagine possible futures. It is designed to develop a collective understanding about community identity and vision which serves as a framework to inform all aspects of planning.

Steps 2 and 3 produce strategies and initiatives to promote creative practice as a way of strengthening the community. They are designed to translate dreams to reality by identifying practical outcomes as strategies and initiatives to be implemented.

Figure 1 shows the three steps in the planning pathway and their corresponding ten exercises.


| | Step | Exercises | Outcomes |
|--|---|---|----------------------------------|
| Dreaming phase  Translating dreams to reality | 1. Building a cultural picture of your community | 1. Mapping the locality 2. Reflecting and reminiscing 3. Developing themes 4. Identifying community values 5. Visioning | Our Community Culture |
| | 2. Identifying your community cultural resources and aspirations | 6. Auditing cultural resources 7. Identifying aspirations | Our Community Cultural Resources |
| | 3. Translating community cultural development aspirations into action | 8. Re-visioning and goal setting 9. Determining strategies 10. Action planning | Community Creativity Plan |

Figure 1. Steps involved in *The Art of Renewal* planning pathway

The outcome of Steps 1, 2 and 3 is a Community Creativity Plan, which will:

- draw attention to the community strengthening potential of creative practice
- enable funding and commitment to be focused on creative practice in the community.

It is important to recognise that some aspects of any Community Creativity Plan will also complement or combine to help achieve community strategies that specifically target other physical, social or economic issues.

The series of ten exercises can benefit communities by developing more effective alliances and partnerships across government agencies, local governments and the private, community and voluntary sectors.

The exercises can bring all of these partners together in an uncomplicated, non-confrontational way that helps each understand where they fit in and can contribute to the effectiveness of any program designed to strengthen the community.

The process does this by:

- developing a collective understanding of viewpoints and aspirations of community members to be taken into account
- ensuring that strategies and initiatives resulting from the process are grounded in the local cultural context
- identifying priority issues to be addressed in a coordinated way.

A rewarding dividend is that the exercises can also be a fun and stimulating community building activity that can help to establish or reinforce individual connections and cultivate partnership ideas between participants.

The Art of Renewal planning pathway helps to inform and facilitate decision-making that makes the most of community resources and efforts to create an environment in which creativity can thrive and be culturally relevant.

The series of exercises must be regarded as techniques to ground decision-making in realities and common, agreed goals. It is not a set of rules. They can, and should, be changed and recreated by each group that chooses to undertake them.

The exercises can be undertaken as a workshop or interspersed with other ongoing activities of a planning committee. They will have maximum benefit if undertaken at the outset of any local area planning process. If initial renewal planning has already occurred in a Community Renewal area, a workshop could be introduced to guide annual reviews of renewal plans. Local councils can undertake the exercises to inform preparation or review of Local Area Plans under the *Integrated Planning Act 1997* (Queensland).

Issues typically addressed in renewal plans include health and wellbeing, employment and training, access to services, neighbourhood infrastructure and amenity, support for families, community safety, community capacity and community development. Most program initiatives address several issues, and creative practice initiatives can be associated with all issues.

The scope of the exercises can be broadened to encompass any number of community development aspects, or narrowed if desired by a Regional Arts Development Fund committee or the Local Arts Council to focus on the needs of artists, arts organisations and audiences.

While the exercises are not bold new revelations, they have been chosen because they are:

- proactive and practical, and can mesh within existing planning processes to put culture firmly on the agenda and improve the overall effectiveness of planning for local areas

- collaborative techniques for gathering information, ideas, opinions and intuitions. They tap into tacit knowledge to gain deep insight into community values and meanings.
- structured sequentially to guide thinking and dialogue and assist participants to grasp and convey the complexity of cultural matters and interconnections
- inclusive and interactive and function best with between 12 and 20 participants, although they can work with as few as six or as many as 30. Depending on the number of participants, it might be more manageable to break into small groups which carry out the task and then report back to the whole group to combine and summarise outcomes.
- consultative and do not entail voting as conclusions and outcomes are reached through sharing, listening, recording and summation.

***The Art of Renewal* in action — a community development project**

After publication in August 2005, *The Art of Renewal* will gradually be applied to a range of Community Renewal projects, thereby creating practical, measurable and achievable situations for connecting planning processes to culture and identity.

A good example of its application might be the planning process for a park redevelopment in a renewal community. This process could use *The Art of Renewal* to determine what is the community's cultural connections with the park — what is their cultural identity and how can the park redesign contribute to that? This will complement the other types of outcomes more often associated with a park redevelopment — safety, transport, health, social participation.

Conclusion and next steps

The first and overarching step to informing all aspects of planning is building a cultural picture and establishing a collective understanding about community identity.

The next stage after *The Art of Renewal's* adoption as a community engagement tool by the Community Renewal program, is to work with other stakeholders to encourage wider adoption of the principles underpinning *The Art of Renewal*. This can be achieved by:

- building long-term connections between the planning, arts and culture and community renewal sectors of government
- use the expertise of the planning sector to improve the effectiveness of *The Art of Renewal*
- encourage the adoption of *The Art of Renewal* principles in other processes such as arts funding programs and community cultural development
- working with other government departments to adopt *The Art of Renewal* principles and processes in their planning work with communities.

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