

“council culture – cultural councils”

It might appear at first glance that State and Federal governments are the big players in the cultural sector. It is my belief however, that Local government is in reality the most significant force in a community's cultural life. State governments are admittedly responsible for the “Big Ticket” items such as funding the construction of new museums, art galleries and libraries. However decisions of a Council affecting a local park, plaza or shopping strip may well have far reaching consequences on the quality of life and cultural development at a local level. Every week in Council chambers around Australia Councillors in effect make cultural planning decisions without ever being aware of the cultural implications of their decisions.

Working as a Cultural Planning consultant to Local Government I am constantly aware that progress is slow and that so much relies on the vision and commitment of a few dedicated individuals. One dilemma is that the constant changeover of staff and elected members leads to a loss of collective knowledge thereby making progress in areas such as cultural development excruciatingly slow.

In the early 1990's there was a major movement towards establishing cultural development and cultural planning as core activities in local governments agendas. Around the country a number of enlightened Councils and individual Councillors became involved in projects and programmes supported by the Australian Local Government Association [ALGA], state Local Government Associations and the Australia Council. In 1991 the Local Government and Arts Task Force released its report *Local Government's Role in Arts and Cultural Development*. This whole of government task force was a catalytic factor in encouraging activity across Australia at the local council level. Over the next few years there were a number of programmes and studies among which were the South Australian Arts and Local Government study involving the cities of Prospect, Marion and Port Pirie. Community development staff and arts offices in these Councils were supported by dedicated elected members to undertake a range of cultural development projects in their respective communities. Following on from this project was the Creative Councils Programme in South Australia that involved a total of seven rural and city Councils. After the success of the previous initiative it was decided by the Local Government Association of SA [LGA] that the next phase of development should be more focused on cultural policy. The intention being that cultural policy developed and adopted by Council might have long term benefits that outlast dedicated staff and committed elected members. The programme undertaken by the team of Brecknock Consulting, Arts Plus, Chandler Consulting and the Institute of Cultural Policy Studies was documented in the *Creative Councils* report 1995.

As we now move into the 2000's it is interesting to observe some of the trends and influences of the sweeping changes that took place in local government during the 1990's when structural reform was adopted or forced upon the nations councils. For many councils the cultural agenda slipped well back as they dealt with amalgamations, commissioners, downsizing, outsourcing, business units and compulsory competitive tendering. It is understandable that cultural planning all but disappeared from the lexicon.

What then is the legacy of the 1990's?

Business units brought to local government a new sense of entrepreneurial spirit, however it also brought with it a competitive environment that created barriers to collaboration and partnerships. Cultural development, to be successful, needs to be a whole of council concern. It is only through maximising every opportunity for what we might term 'strategic opportunism', that most cultural or arts focused projects happen. Projects such as the South Australian Creative Councils programmes demonstrated the value of cultural agendas being integrated into other council activities, thereby gaining the benefits and extending the possibilities for cultural development way beyond the scope of any Council cultural development budget. The early 1990's concept of Integrated Local Area Planning [ILAP] was a real boost to

imaginative cultural development workers and councillors as it provided a vehicle for whole of council thinking and action that supplemented meagre cultural development budgets. The ALGA and the Australia Council championed such approaches and promoted the benefits through publications such as *Better Places Richer Communities*. In stark contrast we have seen the rise of the business unit driving a wedge between council departments and council funded cultural institutions as the demands of competition and the bottom line have dominated thinking. As we move into 2000 it seems that even if there is no radical abandonment of business units there does seem to be a swing away from the more ardent approach, so perhaps the pendulum is already in motion. The current trend in states such as Queensland and South Australia to restructure Council in to Purchaser and Provider divisions can be seen as having positive opportunities for cultural development. This structure often brings together all the strategic planning areas under one umbrella and equally the provider division is likely to amalgamate much of the implementation side of Council activity.

In the new economic climate it is increasingly important for local government to see its role as facilitator of community cultural development through support for groups and individuals rather than expecting council staff to initiate and manage all the activity. During the early 1990's the Community Cultural Development Officers or Community Arts Officers were the main players, adopting a very hands on approach to community cultural development. While they are still responsible for a great deal of valuable work there is a further strategic dimension that requires attention. Councils need strategic plans if they are to move forward with cultural development. It is only through having structured planning strategies that are both visionary and achievable that cultural development can become central to council agendas. As the discipline of cultural planning becomes more established and trained cultural planners gain positions as strategic thinkers in council it is likely that the next wave of cultural development will take place. It is vital therefore, that cultural planning is seen as a whole of council responsibility and not limited to the exciting and possibly risky events and activities over in the local arts centre. In addition to the arts officer we need a new breed of cultural planners who can hold their own in planning departments and strategy units of councils across Australia and bring about lasting change in council culture and contribute to the development of a new era of truly cultural councils.

End Notes:

Brecknock Consulting ET AL, 1995, *Creative Councils Programme Report 1995*, Local Government Association, Adelaide

Donovan, Andrew, 1993, *Creative Councils: The South Australian Arts and Local Government Consultancy Project*, Local Government Association, Adelaide

Graham Sansom P/L & Praxis Research, 1994, *Better Places Richer Communities: Local Government, Integrated Planning and Cultural Development*, Australia Council, Sydney

Local Government and Arts Task Force, 1991, *Local Government's Role in Arts and Cultural Development*,