

Re
Generating
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THE CENTRAL PLACE OF THE ARTS IN REDLAND CITY COUNCIL'S MAJOR COMMUNITY PLANNING PROCESS - REDLANDS 2030

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Abstract: *In developing a long term community plan to guide corporate and budget planning, Redland City Council funded several arts projects to deepen and broaden its engagement with residents. The highly successful 'Bay Views' artist-in-residence program on the Southern Moreton Bay Islands, is one of these and will be presented as a case study to explore the wider strategic context of Council's cultural plan.*

Keywords: *community engagement, Cultural Plan, Redland City Council, artist-in-residence, Indigenous.*

In this paper I will talk about the central place of the arts in Redland City Council's major community planning process – Redlands 2030. I will focus on just one of ten arts projects we commissioned to include cultural considerations in our planning effort. Community planning – as I'm sure you know - it isn't usually much fun. While there are plenty of consultants, bureaucrats, and self-appointed community leaders that enjoy after hours public meetings, whiteboard vision workshops and surveys, most people don't. That's why we included an arts program in the Redlands 2030 community engagement strategy to enrich and enlarge the process; to draw more people in, and to engage them at a deeper level. We also wanted to showcase local stories that reveal the culture and values of our communities for it is these intangible elements that are the most basic drivers of community aspirations.

Under the new Queensland Local Government Act, all Councils are now required to create long term community plans and, to do so with (quote) 'meaningful community engagement'. I think that we have achieved that – and more – with our 'Stories of the Redlands' creative arts program. It tapped the heart and soul dimension of local life and brought it from the margins to the centre of civic planning. It generated a large collection of art works, created by, for and about, local communities - in all media. There are songs, films, paintings, sculptures and stories created in collaboration with local and visiting artists. We are now evaluating these as 'data inputs' for the Community Plan alongside survey and focus group data. Importantly, the program was lots of fun and, as a consequence drew in hundreds of people - children,

teenagers, Aboriginal residents, and isolated island residents – people whose views are often poorly represented in civic debates and structured planning exercises.

Before I go too much further, I should try to give you a bit of a sense of what the Redlands is like. It is a region that lies half way between Brisbane and the Gold Coast and includes several islands in Moreton Bay, the most well known of which is North Stradbroke Island – or Minjerriba to its Traditional Owners. For a long time residents and visitors have loved the Redlands for its slow, sub-tropical, bayside lifestyle, diverse landscapes and red-soil farming history. These characteristics stand in stark contrast to the pace and glitz of the Gold Coast to the south and an increasingly log jammed and homogenised suburban sprawl in Brisbane to the north.

But life is changing in our coastal paradise on the urban fringe – and fast. The Redlands 2030 project has revealed widespread anxiety in the community that the quality and distinctiveness of the region's places and people are under threat. People fear that the impact of globalisation, population and urban growth are taking the Redlands down a path that the Gold Coast took many years ago. The fear that the unique character, sense of place and community spirit are increasingly fragile is felt particularly on the Southern Moreton Bay Islands, four small islands to the south of North Stradbroke Island, which are home to about 4000 people.

The history and character of Russell, Macleay, Lamb and Karragarra islands are unique. The issues are too complex for a comprehensive overview here, but a few key points will give you some sense of the challenges islanders face,

1. There are very high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and many islanders are living without work or without much support; in 2007 the two largest islands were ranked first and third among Queensland's top rent stressed suburbs.
2. There are an unusually high proportion of older people, the average age of residents ranged from 51 to 58 – nearly twice the QLD average.
3. There is very limited civil and social infrastructure roads are largely unpaved, and on 3 of the four islands basic services like electricity and water were connected as late as the 80's
4. Land is cheap but living and building costs are high due to high costs of private ferry transport which is the only link to mainland services
5. A controversial subdivision of the islands in the 70s is the source of most of the challenges residents and Council face today and is linked to the worst excesses of the Joh Bjelke Petersen government.
6. Related to this history of poor planning history - the population is expected to at least double in the next 20 years, creating new pressures and transforming shared community values

It is against this backdrop that Council supported an artist-residency as part of a wider effort to 'regenerate' communities on Russell, Macleay, Lamb and Karragarra islands. Under the PLACE program, Council and the Queensland government joined together in a concerted cross-departmental approach to improving services and wellbeing on the islands in partnership with residents. This approach has delivered a range of improved services and new governance structures, and is ongoing.

With funding from Council and the Department of Communities, Chris Dew, an artist and cultural researcher, was appointed to deliver a digital storytelling project she conceived called *Bay Views*. Through her research Chris saw that - despite many challenges, the islanders have a very strong sense of identity, community spirit, ingenuity and resilience - qualities which were largely uncelebrated and therefore absent in public perceptions.

She devised *Bay Views* to shine a light on these hidden community strengths and to shore up the connections between people – especially across boundaries: between the young and the old; between local community and business groups; between the four island communities; and between the islands and the mainland.

Over the past 18 months, she has worked with residents to create 13 short digital stories showcasing their unique history and exploring the things they love about their place. The results have been extraordinary, and created a buoyancy that sustains the other community regeneration work occurring through the PLACE program, and the Redlands 2030 planning process.

Two of the *Bay Views* films are animations created in collaboration with Victorian animator, Dave Jones, children from the two island primary schools, and older island residents. The first of the two, *It Never Did Sink*, was selected for exhibition in Queensland's major contemporary art gallery (GOMA) in late 2008 and in May this year as the only Australian entry at the 55th International Short Film Festival in Oberhausen, Germany. It also featured in Council's own art gallery as the centrepiece of an interactive children's exhibition earlier this year.

A number of the films were produced as a mockumentary series during the school holidays by a group of teenagers that Chris mentored. The team explored the transport challenges of island life in a way that celebrates local heritage and highlights the strengths, skills, creativity and humour of a unique community.

Two months ago we hosted the *Bay Views* project's milestone event, 'Floating Pictures', on the tiny island of Karragarra. The event was billed as the world premiere of the *Bay Views* films and was held in conjunction with an arts fair to promote the work of the many creative artists who live on the islands. It was enjoyed by around 600 islanders, many of whom were also involved in staging the event, either as caterers, marshalls, entertainers and so on. Direct participants were accorded VIP status and wore lanyards giving them special access to the catering tent, and formal proceedings. They loved that!

The films were screened on a ferry that provides islanders with their only transport link to the mainland. The local ferry company donated their largest vessel and crew that became a floating cinema cruising the Bay all day screening the film program on an hourly rotation. On the beach local artists operated an interactive creative arts tent where residents were able to creatively express their views of the future. Origami boats and silk ribbons, bearing their wishes and dreams were launched at the high tide by the Mayor on a 'raft of ideas' created by island artist, Darren Goleby and decorated during the event. These are now among the 'creative data' being processed by the Redlands 2030 community planning team. The films themselves have also helped to inform the community plan expressing as they do so articulately the special quality of island life residents are keen to protect.

The *Bay Views* project has provided a major boost to locals' sense of pride, identity and belonging. It has strengthened inter-generational and cross-island relationships; promoted contemporary expression of local heritage; developed the creative skills of children and teenagers; encouraged new perspectives of local issues; and fostered creative links between education, social services and local business sectors. Importantly, the project has also helped to forge a shared identity for

Islanders that links the heritage of established residents with the contemporary experience of many newcomers.

Biography: *Judy Spokes is Senior Advisor, Cultural Services in Redland City Council's Community and Social Planning Unit. She was the founding Director of the Cultural Development Network, where she played a key role in promoting the idea of culture as the 'fourth pillar of sustainability'. For the past twenty years she has worked for local, state and national governments in cultural planning and program development aimed at 'closing the gap' between the ideal and the reality of community sustainability. Prior to this she worked for ten years with social justice and environment organisations in the not-for-profit sector.*
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