

Community, culture and creativity

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Good afternoon, my name is Jon Hawkes. I'm speaking to you this afternoon because I'm obsessed. Obsessed with discovering a way of expressing what I believe are simple ideas in ways that make it possible for citizens to explain both to themselves, and to those that make decisions that affect their lives, why their creative capacities and imaginative talents are the most valuable public resources there are.

In hindsight, this mission has dominated most of my adult life. It informed our work at the Pram Factory and Circus Oz in the seventies, it dominated my time at the Community Arts Board of the Australia Council in the eighties, it's the underlying theme of my small book, *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability* and it dominates my work at Community Music Victoria, the small organisation with which I currently work.

The connections between community development, cultural rights and creative capacity are profound and have been profoundly overlooked.

I have refined my thoughts about these connections into ten assertions. These are:

- One: 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.
- Two: the cultural and creative rights of Australians have been trivialised, ignored and denied. The primary cultural right can be expressed as the right to actively participate in the social; production of the values and aspirations that inform one's society.
- Three: 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 meaningfully affect the directions society takes.
- Four: cultural vitality is as essential to a healthy and sustainable society as social equity, environmental responsibility and economic viability.
- Five: the processes of public planning should include an integrated framework of cultural evaluation along similar lines to those being developed for social, environmental and economic impact assessment.

- Six: it is critical that democratised creativity be recognised as the unparalleled social asset that it is. Our imaginations are our only infinite resource.
- Seven: active community participation in arts practice creates a crucible in which the synergy that comes from collaborative effort can be directly experienced and productively channelled. No other activity provides such immediate and tangible evidence of the power and joy of co-operation.
- Eight: participatory arts is an enormously useful tool in the community building process. Indeed, it is the foundation of community building.
- Nine: contemporary usage of the terms access and participation need to be re-evaluated in the context of an understanding of the importance of active community engagement.
- Ten: there are problems with the triple bottom line as an evaluation system. Without a fourth 'bottom line' – a cultural perspective – the TBL remains just an attempt to 'economise' social and environmental factors.

These are my ten claims. I will spend the rest of this talk expanding on each in turn.

First,

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.

I use 'culture' in what is known as its 'anthropological' sense (it is also the sense in which it is used in the 1996 UNESCO Declaration of Cultural Rights – to which I will come back in a minute).

In this context, the concept 'culture' describes:

- our values and aspirations;
- the ways we develop, receive and transmit these values, and
- the ways of life these processes produce.

While this outline is fine as a dictionary definition, it misses the heart and the guts of culture.

Some months ago, I was asked to comment on a draft of Cultural Planning Guidelines for Local Government in New South Wales. I suggested this preamble as a description of culture:

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.

Our culture 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.

Our culture 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.

Our culture 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.

This description demonstrates that culture describes those facets of our being that make us human; it embodies our essence.

This usage of 'culture' can be summarised as 'the social production of meaning', or simply 'making sense'.

And, of all the things we make, 'sense' is the most important; we need to recognise and facilitate this process in the ways we organise our society.

Second:

The cultural and creative rights of Australians have been trivialised, ignored and denied. The primary cultural right can be expressed as the right to actively participate in the social production of the values and aspirations that inform one's society.

Despite the fact that UNESCO made a Declaration of Cultural Rights in 1996, the issue of cultural rights has never been seriously debated, let alone acknowledged in this country; even though Donald Horne has spent at least the last fifteen years energetically promoting the idea.

The six rights that UNESCO has identified are:

- the right to cultural identity and heritage;
- the right to identify with a cultural community;
- the right to participate in cultural life;
- the right to education and training;
- the right to information; and,
- the right to participate in cultural policies.

Donald Horne has got it down to three. The rights he identifies are:

- the right to engage with human cultural heritage;
- the right to take part in new intellectual and artistic production; and,
- the right to find one's own forms of expression.

In the interests of simplicity, I've reduced it to one:

- the right to actively participate in the social production of the values and aspirations that inform one's society.

The genuine acceptance and application of this right within the structures of governance, and by those in positions that allow them to influence the methodologies of these structures, would be a positive move towards a democracy that embraces and engages its citizens, their children and those who have come to our land in search of a better life.

I am not naïve enough to believe that the declaration of a right makes its real, but I do believe that saying it gives one something to strive for, something to which actions can be called to account, something around which people can gather.

At the very least, if there were to be a formal declaration of cultural rights, we would be able to forcefully argue for an engaged cultural practice at the community level.

I am convinced that we need a formal statement of cultural rights:

- as an expression of the fundamental role that culture plays in the existence and maintenance of human society and the right of every human to contribute to and engage with that role;

- as a confirmation of culture's unique and essential function in helping us to understand and describe human behaviour, experience and aspirations;
- as an underpinning of a cultural perspective applied to all public policy;
- as the validation of cultural impact to at least an equivalent level of importance as environmental, social and economic impacts; and,
- as the basis for accepting the exercise of creativity as a basic aspect of human life above and beyond its instrumental value in achieving secondary objectives (whether they be economic prosperity or social cohesion).

Third:

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 meaningfully affect the directions society takes.

To me this is a self-evident truth. The challenge is to imagine how it might happen. Above all, it requires cultural change with the agencies of governance.

Bureaucracies already use a huge range of cultural practices (distributing a questionnaire is a cultural act). The problem is that most of them are antithetical to community development and engagement and, for that matter, democratic governance. This, both in terms of their relations with their 'clients' and internally.

Even the concept 'community building' itself is worrisome: it is yet another engineering metaphor (as unfortunately, are the 'pillars' of sustainability). A community is not an inanimate structure to be constructed by trained experts.

Community grows through the efforts of those that become a part of it. New ideas can be suggested from outside, but they will not embed unless and until they are nurtured from within, until they are 'owned' by the participants.

It is understandings like this that must become commonplace within bureaucracies if they are to achieve what they say they wish to.

Attitudes within bureaucracies will need to change before new, more democratic processes can develop. Cultural action inside bureaucracies should be aiming to shift the corporate will to:

- trust in the creative capacity of communities;
- tangibly commit to democracy;
- be prepared to devolve control, and
- go beyond a service delivery model,

Perhaps the first new cultural practice of Government should be the practice of trust, respect, patience, receptivity, gentility ...

In the context of communications between communities and bureaucracies, there are (at least) four areas where a cultural perspective can be usefully applied:

- facilitating community expression;
- listening to these expressions;
- communicating to communities (or citizens); and
- maximising internal dialogue.

All four have huge potential (and need) for a serious injection of creativity.

1. Facilitating community expression.

The current forms of community expression that are regarded as legitimate by bureaucracy are extremely limited. They include voting, responding to questionnaires and polls, making submissions according to stringent guidelines, attending public meetings, petitions, letters to the local member, etc.

These forms are very limited. They are all largely responsive: tick a box, sign here, yes or no ...; rather than creative: they don't involve local debate and negotiation, they are linear, literary and in English. There are also significant sections of our society that are extremely uncomfortable operating in these modes, and quite often end up becoming totally alienated from the process or, as anthropologists have begun to understand, give the answers that they believe the questioners want to hear, or that at least will get them off their backs.

Furthermore, they emphasise the individual (and immediate) response, discouraging any development of shared positions. So, one could argue that they aren't 'community' expression at all - they are aggregates of individual (undeveloped) opinion - rather than

negotiated syntheses of individual expression (which is the real basis of community 'building').

People can, and do, express their dreams, desires, hopes, critiques and fears in thousands of different ways. The challenge for government is to find ways of assisting communities to discover their own preferred modes of expression and to help them to work together to make expressions that confidently, creatively and effectively communicate their own collective vision. The challenge is not only in dealing in non-linear, often non-language forms but in encouraging people to believe that they actually have the capacity to be creative AND, once having overcome that hurdle, to channel confrontation, dispute and argument (inevitable results of real intra-community dialogue) into productive negotiation. None of this stuff is behaviour that we Australians are particularly comfortable with. These challenges are real.

The most obvious form that could be introduced immediately is community theatre (in particular the methods developed by Augusto Boal) - largely because we are still in the realm of words. Something that we know that bureaucrats understand.

But, we do know that sounds and images can strongly affect witnesses of them. Ultimately, all forms of expression need to be tried.

Nevertheless, it's a little difficult (though not impossible) to imagine a public servant being able to cope with a painting as a submission to an enquiry on, for example, gun control. However, as soon as one thinks of a possible scenario it immediately becomes manifestly clear how powerful such a 'submission' might be (Guernica became a very powerful statement about guns).

It should also be noted that community development is not simply about a community being able to communicate coherent, rational messages. It is as much about people developing a sense of community amongst themselves. In this context, the power of making music together should not be overlooked. There is perhaps no better way of experiencing the joy of community than through participatory music.

Anyway, to get to the point, Government's first step must be to do all it can to develop an environment in which the imaginations of the citizens, working and playing together, can flower and bear fruit in all their infinite diversities.

2. Ways of listening to these expressions.

And then to give the results the respect they are due. Currently, a mural, song, poem or play aren't accorded the credibility as expressions of a community's intent that the votes counted at a poorly attended public meeting are.

Government must grow new sense perceptrs, it must learn to see and hear in new, more creative ways. Paramount is live contact - face to face, body to body. And listening is not a passive act. One can only really demonstrate that one has listened by actively responding to what one has received: 'thank you', 'I'll take that on board', blah, blah is not enough. Demonstrating an understanding of what has been expressed is critical.

3. Ways of communicating to communities (or citizens).

Mass mail outs, press releases, human presentations are all very well but the design and implementation of 'getting the message across' has to go beyond the advertising campaign approach if one is seriously committed to a profound community engagement with the message.

Again, there are a mass of creative, arts-based examples - particularly ones that recognise that effective communication is essentially a two-way process (immediate feedback, positive reinforcement ...). Communication through conversation is perhaps the key. And developing 'spaces' in which that conversation can fully flower is critically important.

4. Ways of maximising internal dialogue.

While the internal workings of bureaucracies remain hierarchical and hidebound, no amount of the above will be particularly effective. The more I look at 'cultural development' the more it becomes apparent that the most important change that is needed is within government itself. It will only be when creativity, flexibility, diversity, innovation, imagination are valorised and exercised inside the bureaucracy, that these qualities will be recognised and promoted on the outside. Rhetorical lip-service may be paid (as would appear to be the case now) but in nearly all cases, that's all it is.

There have to be ways to turn on bureaucracies. Here are six possibilities (with less and less likelihood of success as one goes down the list)

- Direct and active involvement by officers in an arts-based meaning development process (the proof of the pudding is in the eating). A REAL POSSIBILITY is to introduce this activity via the well-being clauses in enterprise agreements – beginning as creative leisure but gradually extending into something more AND/OR demonstrating the use of creative techniques applied in focus groups, ‘client’ meetings, staff think tanks etc
- Close and extensive (and preferably at least partially participatory) staff observation / engagement of/with participatory arts practice in a community context.
- Face-to-face reports/story telling from artists/facilitators/participants
- Face-to-face presentation from polemicist/theoretician/academic
- Exposure to engaging documentation of relevant activities (particularly video)
- Exposure to written material presenting measurement/evaluation results.

Direct exposure and participation is the most likely way to infect the monolith with a dose of creativity.

With all of the above, the desire for speed, 'efficiency', 'cost-effectiveness' is an understandable but dangerous inclination. Agriculture provides the best metaphors - ideas need to be mulled over, ongoing cultivation is essential, things take as long as they take ...

And this is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to interrogating bureaucratic practice from a cultural perspective. I have concentrated above on just the communication processes utilised by government. If a four-part framework were to be employed comprehensively (as needs to be done), every aspect of an agency's activities would be analysed and evaluated as to its effect on the cultural capacities of those with whom it comes in contact.

Fourth:

Cultural vitality is as essential to a healthy and sustainable society as social equity, environmental responsibility and economic viability.

I believe that 'vitality' is the key to culture, rather than, for example, authenticity or tolerance or diversity because, no matter how commendable the values of a society may be, they

amount to nothing if that society lacks life, vitality, dynamism and democratic public discourse.

Culture springs, first and foremost from human interaction – the tangible products of these interactions, no matter how wonderful, are ultimately secondary to the daily exchanges between people.

Making culture is a daily public event – not just in schools, in the media, in the ‘culture houses’, but also in the streets, shops, trains and cafes.

By our behaviour are we known - this never-ending public process is a society’s signature.

A healthy society has a healthy culture and health is meaningless in the absence of life. Culture is not a pile of artefacts – it is us - the living, breathing sum of us.

A sustainable society depends upon a sustainable culture. If a society’s culture disintegrates, so will everything else. Vitality is the single most important characteristic of a sustainable culture.

In a culturally vital society, the meaning we make of our lives is something we do together and continually, not an activity to be left to others, no matter how skilled, or representative, they may claim to be. Hiring experts is OK for getting the plumbing fixed, but not for establishing our identities.

Fifth:

The processes of public planning should include an integrated framework of cultural evaluation along similar lines to those being developed for social, environmental and economic impact assessment.

It is only through the conscious application of a cultural perspective that the questions: ‘How can community values find voice, and affect the values of those that make public policy? and, how can the values held by the instigators of public policy more effectively reflect those of the communities they serve?’ can be effectively addressed.

Sixth:

It is critical that democratised creativity be recognised as the unparalleled social asset that it is. Our imaginations are our only infinite resource.

First there is nothing and then there is something. This is the creation moment. Most cultures have a creation myth, that moment when nothing became something. When we became anthropocentric, we took upon ourselves this capacity, although we have continued to suspect that its source may lie beyond mortal ken. It certainly lies beyond the constructions of rationality, indeed in a rationalist world, creativity has come to describe functions that lie beyond rational calculations.

Making something out of nothing, reaching a conclusion that could not be rationally deduced (ie out of thin air), intuitive leaps, inspired manipulation of shape and form, visitations by the muse – these are some of our ways of describing and interpreting creativity.

What we do know is that creativity is an essential ingredient of vitality and consequently of health and sustainability. We know that, no matter how mysterious and how risky, we must plan for creativity to flower. We know, with the problems we face, the capacity to transcend reason is a really valuable solution-development tool.

In arts practice, something being made out of nothing goes with the territory. This is why we recognise that arts practice is where the most intensive forms of creativity occur – in this realm things are regularly made out of nothing – a song, a tune, a poem, an image.

The source of this creativity is in the most abundant and fruitful resource that we have. It is a resource that isn't simply renewable – it's infinite.

It's our imaginations. And we all have imaginations and the right and responsibility to exercise them. Economic rationalism cannot guarantee a sustainable and healthy world, but we can imagine such a world and our combined creativities will help us to find our way there.

Seventh:

Active community participation in arts practice creates a crucible in which the synergy that comes from collaborative effort can be directly experienced and productively channelled. No other activity provides such immediate and tangible evidence of the power and joy of co-operation.

And Eighth:

Participatory arts is an enormously useful tool in the community building process. Indeed, it is the foundation of community building.

Participatory arts describes empowered and hands-on community involvement in the process of making the symbols that express the values of the participants. Its practice embodies the principle that we are all creative and that we all have a right, a responsibility and a desire to be actively involved in making our own culture. And that if we don't, it is inevitable that we will become alienated, disconnected and mightily pissed off.

There is a mass of research that demonstrates:

- that the insights and experiences participants gain through these activities make it easier for them to become better and more effective citizens;
- that utilising these practices in programs such as community education, community building, health promotion, cross-cultural understanding, etc, will enhance organisational responsiveness, delivery and flexibility; and,
- that embedding these practices in the everyday processes of governance has the capacity to improve community engagement, communications, decision-making, policy development, the expression of goals and the evaluation of results.

So, on the one hand I'm saying that it is a basic democratic right that every community have access to the resources that will allow them to make art, to exercise their creativity, to make and express their own meanings.

And on the other hand I'm saying that participatory arts is an invaluable instrumental tool:

- in the process of democratic governance;
- in the development of dynamic social communications;
- in the delivery of public services; and,
- in the achievement of a wide range of social objectives, including, not least, the building of community.

Ninth:

Contemporary usage of the terms access and participation need to be re-evaluated in the context of an understanding of the importance of active community engagement.

The most immediate challenge is to give the concept of active community engagement a useful meaning. This is not as easy as might first appear. I will illustrate:

Almost a year ago, our state government launched its new arts policy, 'Creative Capacity+'. The Age, reporting on the policy the following day, appended 37 column centimetres of editorial to a photo twice the size of the copy. Fair enough, a picture can often tell the story much more effectively than words. And in this case, The Age editors got it exactly right: the picture was of 11 schoolgirls looking, across a fence, at 3 very old skeletons.

This, to announce a policy that's first goal is 'Arts for all Victorians: A Culture of Participation'. Looking at bones from behind a fence is perceived as an appropriate image to illustrate participation. In a brochure entitled 'Arts Count' that accompanied the policy document, we were told that 68.3% of Victorians have been to the movies, 37.5% have been to a library and so on. It turns out that statistics like this are the measure of participation.

One wonders whether the number of people who attend AFL games would be seriously accepted as a measure of participation in sport. Yet this is exactly what's happening in the arts. What's more, even before the Premier launched the policy proper, he took time out to tell us that the admission price to the Melbourne Museum was to be reduced – and that this was an absolute indication of the government's commitment to participation.

Let's imagine for a moment Justin Madden proclaiming the cornerstone of Victoria's new sports policy as being a reduced admission price to the Museum of Sport. It wouldn't happen.

How is it that we know exactly what it means to participate in sport, but get totally confused when we use the same word to describe our relationship to the arts?

I am not using this example to denigrate the function of cultural institutions like museums. We need keeping places. And, as far as I'm concerned, as public services, they should be able to offer free access to the citizenry. What I'm questioning is how the concept of participation is being applied.

Twenty years ago, 'participation and access' were key concepts in the development of public planning. After more than a decade in the cellar, they are now re-emerging as support terms for this year's key concepts, 'engagement' and 'capacity'.

There was a time when participation and access were ideas with widely agreed meanings. These meanings, for better or worse, have stayed in the cellar.

At least in the public rhetoric of 'The Arts', current usage displays both a counter-productively broad definition and a reduced appreciation of the need to distinguish more relevantly between types of engagement. For example, museum attendances are referred to as 'participation rates'. Reading a catalogue is participation. Buying a postcard in the gallery shop is participation. Being a volunteer attendant is participation. Experiencing an interactive exhibit is participation. Being part of a reference group is participation. Actively contributing to the content of an exhibition is participation.

Being able to analyse the cultural significance of types of engagement is severely restricted when they are lumped into categories so wide that critically different activities all appear as one. This is not a very useful way of looking at the world.

As an alternative, I have developed a framework that I believe makes sense of engagement; one that makes it easier to recognise key engagement factors and that can then usefully inform strategy development and program design.

I suggest that all the afore-mentioned 'participations' are types of engagement: some are about making culture, some about ingesting it; some are more creative than others.

Being able to distinguish between them is necessary because their differences are profound – both in essence and, as important from a policy-making perspective, in resource needs, social impact and application of sustainability strategies. All these various types of engagement require different approaches.

There are two streams of cultural engagement: participation and reception, producing and consuming, breathing out and breathing in; we make culture, culture makes us.

These streams run constantly in both directions: in our daily lives they are always in dialogue, eddying around in our consciousness: we talk, we listen; we make, we learn; we show, we watch. A large part of life is the rhythm of movement between one mode and the other, of often being in both at once.

Nevertheless, envisaging them as distinct functions is both reasonable and useful.

Across this spectrum from production to consumption, our imagination engages at shifting levels of intensity. To the most intense, we apply the term 'creative'; to the least, the term 'managed'. This is the second axis.

Both participation and reception can be creative; both can be managed.

This framework offers a simple way of visualising the varying, but related, modes of engagement with cultural action.

It shows a horizontal distinction between the two modes of engagement: we make culture (participation) and culture makes us (reception).

Then there is a vertical distinction that can be made on the basis of creative intensity. The apex is maximum empowered, active and direct creativity, in sharp focus. The base is a directed and mediated engagement with little control in the hands of the engaged (apart from passive choice – and sometimes even that is missing) and little imaginative stimulation.

These splits create quadrants that combine to provide a reasonably comprehensive, realistic and simple way of approaching cultural engagement; it's built on an analysis of what actually happens in the world, it appears (at least to me) to meaningfully reflect real-world events, it offers interesting measurement possibilities; it identifies the mode in which maximum engagement is possible. All these, particularly the last, should make it a very useful planning and evaluation tool.

The grey areas separating, or joining, the quadrants symbolise the overlaps, simultaneities and constant transformations between the modes.

Creative participation is the key to cultural vitality and the key to universal creative participation is access. I don't mean access to products and services (what could be called passive access) but access to the tools of production and the levers of power (that is, active access).

What are these tools?

In order for communities to achieve maximum engagement in creative participation, they need widespread and easy access to:

- **Time:** there are many options; for example – a shorter working week, mandatory arts elements in educational programs, paid time for cultural activities as a part of enterprise agreements;
- **Networks:** of common interest and experience, of support and sharing – networks that facilitate discovery, dissemination and promotion;

- **Information:** examples and models, guidelines to best practice, contact details;
- **Equipment:** the tangible materials and tools with which to make stuff;
- **Sites:** in which to work, to practice, to play, to experiment, to make and to show;
- **Facilitation:** people who are really good at liberating the creativity of others;
- **Skill development:** decentralised and local ownership of an ongoing skill-base;
- **Continuity:** 'access to continuity' may sound strange, but it is meaningful; communities need to be able to experience ongoing cultural engagement – stop-start projects can be counter-productive; and, finally,
- **Money:** although, if all of the foregoing resources were available to communities at a minimal cost to them, then perhaps money wouldn't be an issue at all.

Most communities could not hope to accumulate resources like this on their own: interventions are clearly needed.

The challenge for agents of governance is to ensure that the distribution of these resources is achieved in ways that make them accessible, productively used and, as far as possible, locally owned and sustainable.

If the tools of cultural production were to become universally accessible, the results would not simply be the universal and democratic exercise of cultural rights, but also a massive outburst of creativity.

And finally, tenth:

There are problems with the triple bottom line as an evaluation system. Without a fourth 'bottom line' - a cultural perspective - the TBL remains just an attempt to 'economise' social and environmental factors.

I have been trying to introduce the idea that an extra perspective, a cultural perspective, should be added to the triple bottom line. When I first began making this argument, I accepted the triple bottom line as a reasonable concept, simply requiring the addition of a fourth line to make it work effectively. What I have realised since writing *The Fourth Pillar* is that the triple bottom line is, in reality, a spectacular scam.

Its rhetoric sounds like a profound development from the singular perspective of the economic fundamentalists, but in fact, all it really is is an attempt to bring social and environmental issues into an economic context - unless the workers and consumers are comfy, business will not be able to achieve maximum performance; unless the environment is still there, business will be unable to continue to make a profit from it. Humanising the market, yes, but simultaneously, marketising the human.

Thanks for listening.