

Regional Arts And Social Impact
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CASE STUDY SHOREWELL PRESENTS

The Regional Arts and Social Impact research project

The Role of the Creative Arts in Regional Australia: A Social Impact Model is an Australian Research Council Linkage Project which addresses the challenge to effectively target regional arts funding to programs and activities that build capacity and have lasting impact for end-users. It delivers a framework for evaluating the arts, to argue for the arts to be included in a broader understanding of community and national wellbeing and success. This framework will position Australia as an international leader in articulating and responding to the social impact of the arts.

The project is being delivered in the remote and geographically dispersed regions of Central Western Queensland and the Northwest Corridor of Tasmania. Both communities have active and unique arts ecosystems while also experiencing significant economic disadvantage and social isolation. The Central Western Queensland site comprises seven local government areas and has the highest rate of youth unemployment in the country at 28.4%. Burnie in Northwest Tasmania is a recognised area of social disadvantage, with 45% of young people not completing high school. Both communities are much more than these statistics, and their capacity and challenges are reflected throughout much of regional and remote Australia.

The following case study from Burnie exemplifies how communities are embracing art, culture and creativity to address profound and seemingly intractable challenges such as social isolation and loneliness. Arts, cultural and creative programs and activities that are place-specific and responsive to the needs of specific communities provide nuanced and inclusive tools and spaces for enhancing social cohesion and supporting wellbeing for individuals and entire communities. As the case of Shorewell Presents demonstrates, avenues for meaningful social connection and increased sense of belonging and cohesion may be generated through co-ordinated and sustained arts and cultural programs which centre the voices of community members and recognise and enhance local creative capacities.

Case study: Shorewell Presents



'We have each other': billboard produced for the Shorewell Presents project installed in the community in 2021.

Shorewell Presents is a series of arts-based projects and activities designed to engage and connect community members, and support social inclusion and collective wellbeing within an underserved and marginalised suburb in Northwest Tasmania. A multi-year collaboration between the residents of Shorewell Park in Burnie, Sydney-based company Urban Theatre Projects (Utp), peak Tasmanian

arts festival *Ten Days on the Island*, and Burnie Community House, Shorewell Presents highlights the value of community-led art and creativity for building community cohesion and pride, and the importance of authentic relationships for achieving maximum success in collaborative art. This case study focuses its discussion on the three creative outcomes of this collaboration: a community dinner event; the *Dear Friend* letter writing program; and the outdoor installation *Gallery of Hopes and Dreams*. This discussion draws on data produced through community consultation workshops and field observations during site visits to Burnie in March 2021, individual interviews, and analysis of social and mainstream media coverage of Shorewell Presents.

‘Connecting the city’

Northwest Tasmania is one of the lowest socio-economic electorates in the poorest state in Australia, and the suburb of Shorewell Park is one of the most underserved and marginalised communities in this region. Shorewell Park was established in the 1970s as a social housing estate and continues to face stigma in the city of Burnie. In 2018, biennial arts festival *Ten Days on the Island* contracted Utp to develop a community-led project with the Shorewell Park community for their 2019 festival program. Based in Shorewell Park and providing a range of critical services to those residents, Burnie Community House became a key collaborator and worked with Utp to design and deliver a project with the community. Although the Community House had never partnered with an arts organisation nor delivered arts-led programs, Utp’s respectful, community-led approach complemented the Community House’s social inclusion values. The collaboration provided the Community House an opportunity to trial a new approach to supporting community participation, cohesion and belonging (interviewee B013).

The community and Utp knew they wanted to deliver a quality event which made the people and place visible and challenged some of the views which had stigmatised their suburb since its development. Utp co-created with Burnie Community House and the Shorewell Park community an outdoor community dinner in the park beside the community house. Utp described the event as “part dinner party, part blind date, part outdoor celebration under the stars. An opportunity to explore the history and future of Shorewell Park over a killer three-course menu” (Urban Theatre Projects 2019). As part of the 2019 *Ten Days on the Island* festival, guests (50 from Shorewell Park and 50 from the rest of Burnie, plus local dignitaries) were selected by ballot to attend the community dinner. Attendees co-mingled in a gala style ambient setting of fairy lights, good food, performances and live entertainment with card prompts as conversation starters.

The concept of the dinner party was developed by Utp in collaboration with the community and takes a performative approach to bringing Burnie to Shorewell Park, whereby Shorewell Park residents were primarily in control their own representation and identity narrative. A Burnie resident who attended the dinner described their city as comprising two distinct and separate communities: Shorewell Park and the rest of Burnie. However, “what that arts event did was connect the two parts of the city ... only arts can do that” (community consultation participant, Burnie, 9 March 2021). By creating an opportunity for the Shorewell Park community’s self-representation, and for connecting two seemingly disparate groups, the event highlights the value of art, culture and creativity for fulfilling “that function of community unification, community pride, community identity, community conversations” (interviewee B001).

Arts-based processes, activities and events provide some of the most powerful tools, techniques and settings for facilitating conversation, collaboration, and the co-construction of meanings within and across diverse communities, which are precursors to greater social cohesion and less community fragmentation and exclusion.

The United Nations' Department of Economic and Social Affairs, for instance, outlines a range of approaches to facilitating dialogue with the aim to support co-existence and collaboration such as town hall meetings and focus groups (Marsh 2019, 312; United Nations 2005, 5; 2007, 95-96). However, for achieving the most desirable level of social inclusion – that of cohesion – it notes the power of metaphor, humour and storytelling “to explore peace and conflict in ways not always possible through rational analysis and decision-making”, for giving voice to underserved cohorts, discovering already existing commonalities, shared meanings and values, and exploring alternative ways of being and relating (United Nations 2007, 95-96). For the Shorewell Park community, the dinner event provided an occasion and informal setting for the community to lead a meaningful dialogue with broader Burnie, on their own terms, potentially uncovering shared hopes for their communities and initiating greater understanding across the ‘two parts’ of the city.



"Part dinner party, part blind date, part outdoor celebration": the Shorewell Presents dinner event described on Utp's website <https://utp.org.au/event/shorewell-presents-2>

The event was a highly positive experience for Shorewell Park residents and Burnie Community House and “a beautiful start” to the collaboration with Utp (interviewee B013). A House social enterprise catered the event and community members were involved in the set up and pack down. An interviewee highlighted the sense of achievement the dinner provided these community members, stating “the community really rose to the challenge and I think they very much felt like they did it, they owned it” (interviewee B013). Reflecting Brownnett (2018, 73),

actively co-creating and developing communal experiences such as arts festivals and events can provide opportunities for communities to develop and deepen strong bonds and relational ties.

Through collaboratively designing, organising and delivering events for their community, people can develop a sense of connection both to each other and the event (Brownett 2018, 75). While the dinner event only involved a small number of Shorewell Park residents and was hence “both exclusive and inclusive” (interviewee B013), it successfully laid the groundwork for future iterations of Shorewell Presents. As the interviewee described “the people who did not go really saw it as a beautiful event, the ones that watched on. And so it did create in the community a desire for more” (interviewee B013). The event cemented the community’s affiliation and trust with Utp and supported continued collaboration between *Ten Days on the Island*, Utp, Burnie Community House, and the Shorewell Park community in 2020-2021.

Addressing social isolation and loneliness

The dinner party event provided insights and learning opportunities about what the next iteration of Shorewell Presents should be. For instance, “the community very much post the dinner was very, very clear that they wanted a lasting legacy and they wanted something that involved all community ... while it was a beautiful start the next iteration needed to be inclusive of community” (interviewee B013). The intention for the next project was for the Shorewell Park community to work with filmmakers and artist facilitators to author a series of short films to be shown across Burnie in a series of pop-up drive-in theatres. The benefits of this proposed project were skills development in the community and the outcomes would be shared widely across the region. When COVID-19 hit in March 2020, however, Burnie was one of the first clusters in Australia and endured a strict early lockdown. The filmmaking model relied on Utp and facilitators being on the ground with the community, which would not be possible for the foreseeable future, and a new project and new ways of engaging with the community needed to be designed.



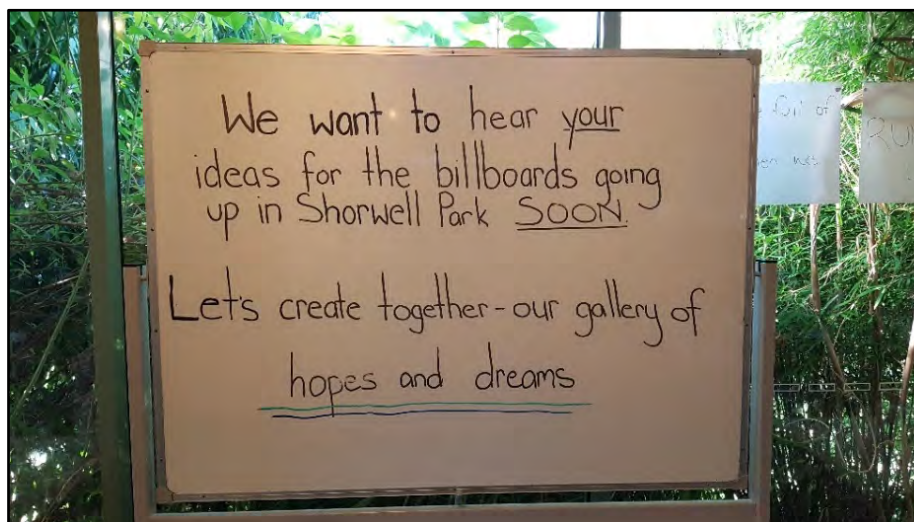
Dear Friend information and mailbox at the Burnie Community House in Shorewell Park.

The Shorewell Park participants knew they wanted a project that could promote connection at a time of increased social isolation, and that online activities presented multiple barriers to participation and access for their community. A letter writing program called *Dear Friend* was conceived and designed so that any resident from Shorewell Park could write a letter and put it in a physical mailbox outside Burnie Community House. For residents who were not able to write a

letter, a free-call 1800 number was set up so they could leave a voice message. To begin the pen-pal relationship, Utp posted a letter to all residents of Shorewell Park describing how they could participate. They also recorded a short video reintroducing their team following the dinner event of 2019 and describing their process of collaborating with the Shorewell Park community, emphasising “we think that every single person is creative. That’s why a big part of what we do at the company is work with local communities to help tell their stories” (Burnie Community House – Hilltop Central, 2020).

Dear Friend’s intention and potential was to cultivate new connections and dialogue in order to address social isolation and support people to feel connected to others, and positively towards and hopeful about their community.

The project brief was to imagine and share hopes and dreams of an optimistic community future beyond COVID-19 lockdowns, and the letters and messages were sent to one of three artists involved in the project. In this way artists, and creative and imaginative processes, were positioned as critical assets and tools for connecting with community members, while also researching their visions for their suburb (Sonke et al. 2019, 26). Through ameliorating a sense of isolation from others, fostering interaction and connection with others, greater participation in society, and an increased sense of shared identity and belonging, arts, cultural and creative processes support social cohesion (Brownnett 2018, 77; Fancourt and Finn 2019, 9). In fact, the social benefits of arts engagement most commonly linked to health pertain to decreased loneliness and social isolation, which are essential for enhancing collective wellbeing (Fancourt 2017). Burnie Community House project coordinator Shandel Pile stated *Dear Friend* was about “extending the relationships” forged between people at the dinner (Bennett 2020). The stories, ideas and emotions conveyed through the letters would inform the development of a new artwork which would reflect “what is uncovered in the stories, what people want to share and what the community wants” (ibid.). The voices, perspectives and needs of the community were as such centred from the outset.

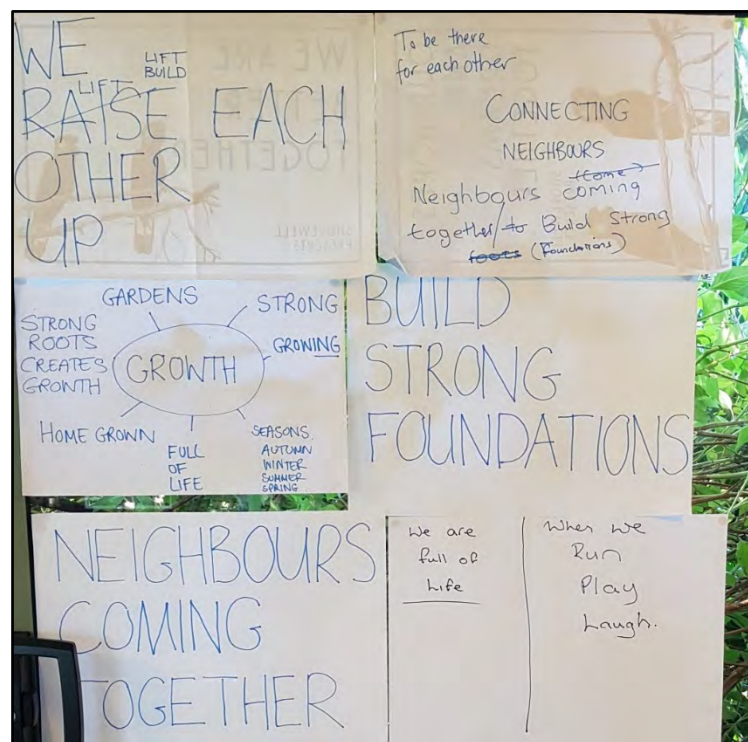


Burnie Community House's invitation to community members.

Dear Friend letters were collected for six months. The intention was that artists would draw from them a series of themes and ideas that would be brought to life in a mural project called *Gallery of Hopes and Dreams* which would feature in the 2021 *Ten Days on the Island Festival*. Once COVID-19 lockdown restrictions eased, *Gallery of Hopes and Dreams* was further developed during an eight-week community engagement process led by Burnie Community House. In describing this process, an interviewee demonstrated how *Gallery of Hopes and Dreams* evolved and was re-envisioned as community members made the concept and project meaningful to them.

We started to ask everybody that came through the door what was important to them. Look, hopes and dreams is a fairly middle-class luxury in some ways, and so we were interested to see how that sat with people just generally coming through the door. And it sat relatively well but possibly not the way – it was more about visuals and things in the neighbourhood that actually gave you hope in the moment ... It was not for the future. It was for the survival of the day, or the week, or the next month (interviewee B013).

Signs were placed at the entry of the Community House to remind staff to ask Shorewell Park residents what was important to them, and long tables with butcher's paper and coloured pens were spread throughout the reception area so people could write or draw responses. Weekly meetings were held so residents could share their thoughts about words and images for the murals. Through these avenues, community members took a great deal of ownership over the project and reimagined or "switched" the idea of hopes and dreams "to make it relevant to where they were right there and now, and it absolutely worked beautifully" (interviewee B103). Similar to *Dear Friend*, these flexible, responsive and place-based creative processes highlight the value of art, culture and creativity for supporting "the 'drivers' of social cohesion—the ways in which people become closer to one another, more connected to the place in which they live, more likely to engage in civic life, and more likely to hold aspirations for improving the common good" (Sonke et al. 2019, 26).



Shorewell Park community members shared their ideas for the billboards at Burnie Community House.

Gallery of Hopes and Dreams resulted in a series of public billboards which are visually striking and are easily understood by the passing public. It was important to the community that the images and words were inclusive of everyone, including children and young people. This meant the choice of phrases used was a participatory, deeply thoughtful process, and the community gave careful consideration to all aspects of design – including background, borders and symbols, and wording. All the billboards feature black cockatoos which are the totem of the local First Nations peoples, the palawa, and commonly seen in the area. To reflect the closeness of their community and valued relationships, the community determined that no bird should be depicted alone; as such all billboards feature at least two cockatoos. While the outcome of this project may not have been

entirely the one Utp envisaged, the flexibility of the project brief and simple, conversational prompts by which Burnie Community House engaged community members supported Shorewell Park residents to collaboratively realise an outcome that was authentic to them.

During the *Ten Days on the Island* festival in 2021, project participants from Shorewell Park hosted guided tours through their suburb so festival attendees could view the billboards. Guides described the Shorewell Presents projects, the gala dinner, the letter writing activity, and the creation of the *Gallery of Hopes and Dreams*. Our research team participated in a tour, and our guide shared their personal story and articulated what Shorewell Presents had done personally for their self-esteem, social confidence and wellbeing within their community. They also expressed how important it was for their mental health living in a diverse, often challenged community, to stay connected and supportive of each other through COVID-19 with activities as simple as *Dear Friend* and *Gallery of Hopes and Dreams*. In articulating their experiences, our guide revealed how the process of participating in the projects generated wellbeing outcomes that were personal or individual, as well as a collective experience of pride and belonging they shared with others. Lett, Fox and Le von der Borch (2014, 210) refer to this as “what is meant by process being of value, since it can serve personal integration and sense of coherence and build interpersonal relationships”. For marginalised and under-represented cohorts, participation in arts and cultural activities provide opportunities for developing a sense of belonging with others, and in this instance a sense of belonging in the wider Burnie community. Arts and culture expand the ways people may communicate with each other, develop, make sense of and express experiences, beyond merely verbal communication (as demonstrated in studies by Marsh 2019 and Lee et al. 2020). *The Gallery of Hopes and Dreams* certainly had this intention at its core.



Gallery of Hopes and Dreams billboards outside the Burnie Community House in Shorewell Park.

Dear Friend and *Gallery of Hopes and Dreams* evidence the potential for arts and cultural activities to foster social connectedness and wellbeing on both individual and collective levels, through empowering people to identify their personal hopes for their community, then collaborating with others to articulate the values and strengths which they collectively share.

Arts and cultural programs and activities that are place-specific and responsive to the needs of specific communities provide nuanced and inclusive tools for recognising and supporting this close relationship between individual and collective wellbeing.

The non-prescriptive and open nature of *Gallery of Hopes and Dreams*, in particular, provided room for community members to exercise a great deal of control and shape the project in a way that responded to their specific cares and concerns. This project had a relatively low barrier to access and provided various avenues for participation, and therefore supported people to be personally invested and affected, while also feeling connected to others as they collaboratively produced the outcome. An interviewee described a Shorewell Presents participant who felt a great deal of pride in what they had personally achieved, one of the outcomes of which was “he begins to think about himself, his life, his community, his place in quite a different way” (interviewee B001). That is, the Shorewell Park community “is not a place of impoverishment ... in fact they [community members] can aspire to extraordinariness as well” (ibid.).

Legacy

Shorewell Presents – and in particular the *Gallery of Hopes and Dreams* project – has resulted in increased participation in health and social inclusion promoting activities at Burnie Community House, particularly amongst men. An interviewee described that one surprising outcome of the projects was that the weekly *Gallery of Hopes and Dreams* meetings were attended mostly by men who became deeply invested in the project (interviewee B013). Engaging men in health programs had been a long-term challenge for the House; however, *Gallery of Hopes and Dreams* provided a catalyst for men to connect with each other and engage more actively with the Community House’s programs. It also provided the Community House with an opportunity to connect more meaningfully with men in the community and develop a new program that specifically engaged them. According to an interviewee, “I can’t imagine not having had *Gallery of Hopes and Dreams* to make that such a successful program” (interviewee B013).

While research participants seemed to frame *Gallery of Hopes and Dreams* as the most impactful of the three components of Shorewell Presents, it is important to note the significance of the dinner event and *Dear Friend* in enabling the success of this final iteration. The dinner event and *Dear Friend* were each individually impactful as separate projects. As part of a three-year creative collaboration, though, they enabled Utp, Burnie Community House and Shorewell Park residents to establish relationships of trust, and enabled Utp and the Community House to better understand the ways the community wanted to engage with arts-based projects. Mackney and Young (2021, 6) note the value of longer term ‘slower’ projects for supporting meaningful community engagement and maximum impact for participants. They write “practice that takes place over time, and with an understanding of place and context, both enables individual participants to be supported as part of a process of transitional development and allows organisations to build meaningful and embedded relationships with local communities” (Mackney and Young 2021, 6). The success of *Gallery of Hopes and Dreams* can largely be attributed to the fact this was the final product of a long-term collaboration between Burnie Community House, Ten Days on the Island and Utp. The three-year engagement supported the community’s developing engagement with and interest in Utp and Shorewell Presents, and their developing sense of ownership of the project.

Following Shorewell Presents, Shorewell Park residents articulated a desire to continue creating art-based projects to both address the issues in their community and to share their strengths with wider Burnie community. While Utp completed their contract with *Ten Days on the Island* in 2021, Burnie Community House has approached the festival to request inclusion in the 2023 festival program and are in the process of securing funding for a community filmmaking project

and regional film tour. Rather than view arts and culture as something ‘not for them’, more residents also expressed interest in visiting the local art gallery for inspiration for *Gallery of Hopes and Dreams* and potential future projects (interviewee B013). A research participant noted the inclusiveness and accessibility of Shorewell Presents, and the importance of supporting people to be creative on their own terms rather than imposing projects and activities on communities (community consultation participant, Burnie, 10 March 2021). Symons and Hurley (2018, 122-123) find that marginalised and underserved cohorts are often not recognised as creative producers in their own right and are instead often the recipients of prescribed sets of arts and cultural activities produced by others. However, broadening engagement in and enthusiasm for arts and culture requires greater sensitivity to local dynamics to understand and support the diversity of ways people find benefit in and want to engage in creative activity (Symons and Hurley 2018, 124).

Adaptive and flexible projects such as Gallery of Hopes and Dreams enable people to realise their own ideas about art and culture and support them to realise new opportunities for themselves and their community.

Read and hear more

Presentation: Gattenhof, S., & Hancox, D. (2021) *Thriving Communities*. Australian Performing Arts Exchange, 9 September 2021. <https://www.apax.org.au/talks/thriving-communities>

Presentation: Gattenhof, S., & Hancox, D. (2021) *Cultural and Creative Engagement as Enablers of Wellbeing and Social Inclusion*. CREATE Centre Webinar, University of Sydney, 23 September 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q09Vfd6ocow>

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