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Seminars for Arts Professionals

## FEBRUARY SEMINAR SUMMARY

### **Making Space for Creative Communities**

**Monday 22 February, 2010**

**Australia Council: 372 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills**

#### **Chair**

Kiersten Fishburn, Manager of Culture and Libraries, City of Sydney Council  
([www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au](http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au))

#### **Panel**

Penelope Benton, co-founder of The Red Rattler Theatre, Marrickville ([www.redrattler.org](http://www.redrattler.org))

Tugi Balog, founder of the May Lane Art Project, Marrickville ([www.mays.org.au](http://www.mays.org.au))

Marcus Westbury, founder of Renew Newcastle ([www.renewnewcastle.org](http://www.renewnewcastle.org))

The creative use and reinterpretation of urban spaces can provide accessible and affordable spaces for artists and opportunities to reinvigorate city spaces, build communities, and enhance safety.

#### **City of Sydney Council**

For City of Sydney Council the use of vacant spaces within the city is both a controversial issue and an exciting opportunity. For many artists it is too expensive to work in Sydney and, as part of the *Sustainable Sydney 2030* plan, the Council is looking at what it can do to bring art and artists into the city.

Sydney City Council has two main strategies. The first is to work with developers to make spaces available for arts use while they are empty e.g. the Carlton United Brewery site at Broadway. The second is to make use of Council owned buildings: firstly those that are empty e.g. Queen Street Studio is using Heffron Hall as a new rehearsal facility, and secondly, creating new uses for existing spaces e.g. the 2009 "By George" laneway project and the writers in residence program in Sydney City Libraries.

There are a number of important issues faced by Council when making spaces available for creative uses. There are currently very few legally constituted entities to negotiate with; it is very difficult for Council to negotiate with twenty individual artists and to administer the agreements. Projects need to be financially viable to ensure they don't need ongoing financial support from Council. Organisations and individual using spaces need to be able to meet the requirements of owners, most importantly this means vacating the premises when asked. They should also understand the motivation of the owner so the proposed use of the space is attractive to the owner, e.g. at the Carlton United Brewery site Queen Street Studios has helped the owners, Frasers Property Australia, build their relationship with the local Chippendale community. Addressing all of these issues will help change the perception that artists are poor tenants, and will potentially make more spaces available for creative uses.

Fishburn notes the many benefits of having creative interventions in the city's parks and lane-ways, saying they make an important contribution to the sense of community and safety in the city.

Fishburn calls on the arts community to participate in debates about the use of public spaces in Sydney e.g. by commenting on development applications for new buildings and the redevelopment of public spaces. She also encourages organisations and artists to apply for grants and contact Council to discuss their needs and suggest collaborative projects.

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A cooperative and participative approach is likely to lead to more creative activity and spaces becoming available, fulfilling Council's vision of the city "as a canvas and a stage."

### **The Red Rattler Theatre in Marrickville**

Tired of being moved from venue to venue, Benton and four other women decided to buy a warehouse in Marrickville to set up their own "creative playground". The Red Rattler Theatre opened in May 2009 with two studios, a garden and theatre space with capacity for 300 people.

Benton describes the large number of council and other requirements that the group had to meet and nominates trying to work out what was required, both from consultants and authorities, as the biggest challenge. As a result of her experience, Benton advocates the establishment of a specialised organisation that can help groups and artists wanting to set up their own venue.

There are also significant costs in setting up and maintaining a venue e.g. \$100,000 for fire safety. The Red Rattler relies on income from the bar and the work of a large group of volunteers to ensure their ongoing viability.

Despite the hard work, Benton feels a great sense of pride in having been able to realise an idea and continue to manage and develop the Red Rattler as an environmentally friendly space.

### **May Lane Art Project, Marrickville**

Tugi Balog set up his graphic design business in May Lane in Marrickville in 1999. As he got to know the people using the lane he developed an interest in the graffiti art and its subculture, and decided to develop the laneway as a space for graffiti art.

Each month artists from Sydney, Melbourne, and around the world come to work in May Lane. A website provides a record of the work created. Bathurst Regional Art Gallery is mounting a national tour of panels from May Lane and Balog is in discussions regarding a permanent exhibition at Cockatoo Island. Balog also provides further training and job opportunities for some of the artists and has developed education resources for schools and colleges.

The May Lane Art Project has evolved through one individual's passion and the development of strong relationships and trust with the artists.

### **Renew Newcastle**

Aerial maps show the 150 buildings that were empty in the Newcastle CBD in early 2008.

For Marcus Westbury the empty, vandalised and often degraded buildings provided an opportunity to create something exciting. Renew Newcastle is a not-for-profit, intermediary organisation established to create "permanent structures for temporary things". A Board comprising people with a range of skills, including architects, lawyers, and business people, have developed a business model that provides artists with access to temporary studios, performance spaces and premises to run businesses. Renew Newcastle works directly with private property owners to provide access to spaces through a license agreement. Each artist or creative enterprise has a rolling 30-day agreement to use the space, addressing owner's concerns about

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being able to sell or lease their property at short notice. Renew Newcastle provides insurance coverage and helps to maintain and, in some cases, renovates the spaces. Nearly 40 projects have been supported through Renew Newcastle.

Renew Newcastle has developed an approach that provides benefits for both artists and property owners. The focus is on flexibility, matching the needs of artists, property owners, councils and communities, and finding ways to overcome barriers: "inventing new systems to try new things".

Commercial tenants are now returning to the CBD and the project contributes significantly to the cultural life and profile of Newcastle, nationally and internationally. Most tellingly, a photograph of a Renew Newcastle event in the local paper elicited the comment: "this is a fake picture of a crowd in Hunter Street."

Renew Newcastle is now working with Arts NSW to assist other artists, organisations and governments to make use of empty spaces for creative uses. A discussion paper/guide by Westbury is available on the Arts NSW website ([www.arts.nsw.gov.au](http://www.arts.nsw.gov.au)).

Arts NSW recognises the potential of using empty urban spaces and is working with Westbury and others to develop a package of information (including Westbury's paper and a planning guide from the NSW Department of Planning) and other resources to assist organisations to set up what Arts NSW is calling Creative Enterprise Hubs. Kim Spinks, Manager, Capacity and Development, Arts NSW, reports that Arts NSW is holding a series of briefings in February and March 2010 in Lismore, Parramatta, the Central West, Leichardt/Marrickville, Wollongong and Gosford. Information about the Creative Enterprise Hubs project is available from the Arts NSW website.

Support from councils, the establishment of intermediary organisations that can work with councils and property owners, and the development of resources by Arts NSW to support the creative use of urban spaces will benefit artists, businesses, property owners, local councils and the broader community.

As we have heard, the key to invigorating urban spaces is flexibility, responsiveness, participation, collaboration and finding ways to overcome barriers: as Westbury notes "inventing new systems to try new things".

by: Sarah Evans

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