



## PLACE ACTIVATION:

Understanding creative placemaking in Bundaberg

### Abstract

The arts are increasingly recognised as being able to contribute to health promotion. This research outlined an evaluation of place activation projects in Bundaberg, driven by the aim of enhancing social connectedness. Primarily based on interviews with five artists and five funders involved in the projects, three themes were identified: inclusive communities; challenges and opportunities; and creative contributions now and beyond. The research has highlighted the need to take into account both tangible and intangible outcomes and impacts when considering place activation. It also distinguishes between one-off, transient events and more permanent or on-going activations; that while there are benefits associated with all, social and health benefits are more likely to be found in events that are longer-lasting

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## **Introduction**

Over the past two decades, there has been an increasing collaboration between the arts and health promotion disciplines. A number of health promotion interventions have been arts-based, such as performing arts to change adolescent health behaviours (Daykin, et al., 2008), using museums and art galleries as sites to encourage social inclusion and challenge narratives of inequities (Camic & Chatterjee, 2013), and community choir singing to enhance social connectedness and wellbeing (Clift, 2012). However, the relationship between the arts and health promotion is still in its infancy. While there has been growing evidence as to the effectiveness of arts interventions as a means of promoting health and wellbeing since 2006 (Staricoff, 2006), there remain several fundamental points of contention grounded in different worldviews between the two disciplines. Health promotion, as part of public health, has had a long association with the measuring quantifiable objects, whereas the arts have been strongly influenced by qualitative expression. This has resulted in differences as to what is considered to be 'evidence' and varying ways in approaching evaluation (Belfiore, 2016).

In this paper, I report on a research project that reflects many of these differences. The evaluation is a retrospective case study of place activation projects located in Bundaberg. The projects were instigated by Creative Regions, a not-for-profit, socially-engaged arts-production company. Ten artists and funders were interviewed in order to gain their perspectives of place activation. Three themes were identified in the analysis: inclusive communities; challenges and opportunities; and creative contributions now and beyond. The results highlight the need to take into account tangible and intangible outcomes and impacts of place activation, and in doing so, to distinguish between those short-term events that are likely to generate material benefits (art products, economic turnover) and those longer-term events more likely to be associated with social and health benefits such as increased social inclusion.

## **Literature review**

Working from the premise that health is supported through social connections and community resilience (Davidson, 2015; Kawachi & Berkman, 2014), place activation hosts a range of creative processes to change the way people perceive a space, to reconnect to that space in a new way, and in doing so, to help them connect to each other and thus provide social support to each other. This focus on social connectedness, social support and community resilience corresponds to several health promotion objectives (Keleher, 2016).

Place activation is a part of a field of study called 'creative placemaking', which has historical roots in various arts economic development movements since the mid-nineteenth century (Johnson Ashley, 2015). While the definition of creative placemaking has shifted slightly, Markusen (2013) defines it as a process whereby various partners shape the physical and social character of a place around arts and cultural activities. How creative placemaking plays out in any one location varies substantially. However, in terms of how placemaking is understood and enacted, there are two general approaches: 1) the art itself could be in the form of a 'flagship' project such as a large public art installation, museum or gallery; or 2) may

take the form of a community-led participatory project (Hall & Robertson, 2001). Flagship projects are aimed at urban renewal and cultural tourism as a way to boost the economic competitiveness of a city or town, whereas community-led projects are aimed at grass-roots social change (Hall & Robertson, 2001). It is this focus on community development and connection that aligns community-led creative placemaking with health promotion. Hence, community-led creative placemaking will form the focus of this report.

Hall and Robertson (2001) claim arts-based interventions have been used to increase a sense of identity, sense of place, civic identity and decrease social exclusion as part of promoting social change since at least the 1980s. This has occurred in the USA, Europe and the United Kingdom (UK), the latter of which has been specifically part of a social exclusion agenda (Lees & Melhuish, 2015). There is considerable criticism associated with this approach around governments using the arts as a way of diverting attention away from structural inequity (Crawshaw, 2015; Foulkes, 2015; Lees & Melhuish, 2015). Grass-roots projects are less likely to be criticised on these grounds. There are a number of premises on which the community-led creative placemaking approach is based, including the effects of collaborative decision-making in terms of changing perspectives and decreasing social exclusion, increasing social capital, empowerment and possible economic outcomes (Burnell, 2012; Grodach, 2011; Hayden, 1988; Thomas, et al., 2015).

## **Context**

All place activation projects included in this research took place in Bundaberg. In 2014, Creative Regions commenced several place activation projects that were identified in a community 'think tank' in September 2013. A second 'think tank' was undertaken in March 2015. The four projects focused on in this research came out of these community engagement processes (see Table 1).

Most of the place activation projects undertaken by Creative Regions are temporary, with the exception of the mural and the community garden. However, they fall under the broad umbrella of creative placemaking because they are centred on engaging the community and connecting them to a specific place through the arts or aesthetics. Primarily, the events have been about connecting people to each other and creating a sense of belonging to their local place. This can be clearly seen, for example, in the objectives outlined for the Gavin Street Community Garden, which are to enhance:

- community cohesiveness and participation;
- sustainability;
- a sense of belonging in the suburb;
- street aesthetics;
- opportunities for learning and developing skills;
- better health through increasing knowledge of fresh food (Gavin Street Community Garden Plan of Management, no date).

Date	Project name	Brief description
November 2014	Flicks on the Bricks	A mural was painted on a wall facing a car park in North Bundaberg, which included a television screen. The evening event included a band playing and movies being projected onto the television screen part of the mural.
March-May 2015	Take it to the Streets	Four North Bundaberg food businesses agreed to have art installations in their outdoor spaces to encourage more outdoor eating. A tour of these businesses was held one evening, showcasing the art, food and the businesses.
October 2015	ReSTAMPED	Post Office Lane, an unattractive lane in Bundaberg CBD, was transformed as part of an evening pop-up event with music, art and craft stalls, and food stalls. The lane and a small park are adjacent to the Bundaberg Regional Art Gallery.
August 2016-current	Gavin Street Community Garden	A vacant block of land in North Bundaberg was transformed into a community garden through: 1) architectural design; 2) engagement with community members to plant and attend the garden. The garden is across the road of one of the businesses that took part in Take it to the Streets.

**Table 1 Selection of place activation projects undertaken by Creative Regions**

This aligns closely with the community-led approach to creative placemaking. The place activation projects are seen as important contributors to meeting the community mission of Creative Regions. The agenda is about using the arts to bring people together and to encourage engagement with the arts to enhance community wellbeing.

### **Research method**

The aim of this research is to inform place activation implementation and evaluation in order to understand what works for whom, why and in what circumstances, with a particular focus on artists and funders who have worked with Creative Regions in the Bundaberg area. The research questions include:

- What factors influence artists' and funders' involvement in place activation projects?
- How have artists and funders been impacted through their involvement in place activation projects?
- From the perspective of artists and funders, what health and wellbeing implications are associated with place activation projects?

Ethical clearance was obtained from CQUniversity Human Research Ethics Committee (H1606-097). The primary data consisted of digitally recorded telephone or face-to-face interviews with five artists and five funders undertaken throughout August 2017. Whilst the aim was to interview participants in person, telephone interviews were occasionally conducted when necessary to accommodate the participant's availability. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed.

In addition to the interview data, artefacts and other documentary data were also considered. These data consisted specifically of:

- previous survey results from individual projects (often fragmented and incomplete);
- Creative Regions Strategic Plans (2014-2016; 2017-2020);
- Creative Regions web site;
- planning documents (Think Tank summaries);
- media reports (2014-2017);
- my hand-written field notes and reflective journal entries (2016-2017).



## Findings

Three major themes are identified across the interview data. These are: inclusive communities; challenges and opportunities; and creative contributions now and beyond. While there are overlaps between the various themes, and indeed, between the various sub-themes that make up each theme, each theme will be explored separately before

consideration is given to how these themes relate to each other.

### Theme 1: Inclusive communities

The inclusive communities theme is comprised of four sub-themes: collaboration; connectivity; creating space for community; and giving back. These sub-themes provide insight into mechanisms associated with people participating and engaging in community activities with the aim of building stronger, more socially inclusive communities. As such, while most of the ideas contained in these sub-themes relate to mechanisms or processes, there is some reference to the end result of more inclusive communities, specifically around a sense of belonging, connection to place and each other.

The importance of collaboration was particularly identified by the artists who value the opportunity to work together on place activation projects. For example:

*And I enjoyed working with an ex-manual arts teacher that I've worked. (Artist 2)*

However, both artists and funders recognise place activation projects promote connectivity: of people to art; to each other; and to place. This includes both process and outcome aspects. Firstly, place activation events provide opportunities to connect people with art:

*We often try to do is take art out of the four walls because that can be a bit of a softer approach for people who maybe aren't as used to being inside gallery spaces. (Funder 2)*

Secondly, place activation events provide opportunities for people to connect with each other: artists with other artists; community members with each other; but also the knowledge and skills these people bring with them.

*Kind of getting together and I think that it's probably the most important part and being exposed to projects that we wouldn't normally have taken on or produced ourselves. (Artist 1)*

*They [Creative Regions] also know regulation, legislation, they know business. And so bringing that whole circle of knowledge to the table of Council to explain how, where and why is really so helpful. (Funder 3)*

Finally, place activation events provide opportunities for people to connect with place.

*So making people feel good about where they lived and how they lived, and that it was a good place to live, just reinforcing that. (Funder 3)*

As suggested by the last quote, connectivity relates to a definable space. Creating space for community focuses on the effects of place activation to create inclusive, inviting, fun atmospheres within the physical spaces being activated. While most of the physical spaces do not permanently change, with the exception of the community garden, the idea behind place activation is to change the relationship people have with that space, to see it in a different way as a result of the activity that was there. There are three aspects to this. The first relates to the changing the physical space:

*I think they have a huge effect, not only just the local community that see it, but they create the place for people to talk about, but it also creates the place for tourists to visit. (Artist 4)*

The second aspect relates to changing the social perceptions regarding a particular physical space:

*I think activities like that, to get people to view their environment in a different way. (Funder 1)*

*The other things too is, it's fun. That creates a memory of that place being fun. (Funder 1)*

The third aspect is somewhat broader in nature and relates to building a stronger emotional connection to the geographical community more generally.

*Maybe that builds community pride, or you feel more connected to your community because you've done activities in those spaces. (Funder 2)*

*They sort of get a bit of ownership of it, or I hope they do. (Funder 4)*

Finally, place activation provides an avenue for giving back, of allowing people to give back to their community in some capacity. Clearly related to civic mindedness, giving back is a process that is well recognised as emanating from, but also

contributing to, a sense of belonging and connections to people and place as well as the level of social inclusion of a community (Kumar, et al., 2012; McHenry, 2009; Shortall, 2008). This includes contributions made by individuals as well as businesses.

*If I think it's something good, I would be willing to put my time, resources and energy into helping people into worthwhile projects.*  
(Artist 3)

*And actually then reasoning and getting people on board who actually want to do something different, want to make a change, and want to actually feel good about what they give back to the community.* (Funder 3)

This first theme contains insights into the context of the community related to a sense of belonging, a sense of place and of social inclusion. It also highlights a number of mechanisms related to experiencing events together, of connecting with each other and acts of altruism, which in turn, enhance the sense of belonging to place and community. This is consistent with the emerging literature related to social inclusion. Although not as well understood as social exclusion (Cameron, 2006; Labonte, 2004), there is a growing interest in the relationships and differences between social inclusion, civic engagement and social support (Kumar, et al., 2012; Shortall, 2008).

However, it is this somewhat sanitised view of creative placemaking that over-emphasises positive characteristics such as social inclusion and altruism that has been criticised as being used as a political cover-up for deficiencies in addressing structural inequities and other social determinants of health (Crawshaw, 2015; Foulkes, 2015; Lees & Melhuish, 2015). Furthermore, understanding context in a holistic way necessitates understanding the interdependencies of social, economic, cultural, historical and environmental factors within the whole community. In this case, North Bundaberg is not a coherent community. Indeed, one of the funders commented on the courage of Creative Regions in trying to establish a community garden in a community that isn't really a community (Funder 5). I highlight this in the next theme that examines a number of processes that play out simultaneously, often pulling in opposite directions.

### **4.3 Theme 2: Challenges and Opportunities**

The second theme is comprised of three sub-themes: involvement; new ideas; and learning. All of the sub-themes are strongly related to process elements. However, while some identified elements clearly facilitate place activation projects, several are inhibitory.

Involvement, or in many instances the lack of involvement, of community members, businesses, Council and other organisations, emphasises that without people being willing to participate, events such as place activation could not take place. Moreover, that the quality of the experience for all is dependent on people willing to get involved in some capacity, through attending or contributing in a more active way:

*It seems to work a lot better in the world and in the community if you can get everybody on board with it. (Artist 4)*

However, there is an inhibitory effect associated with a lack of involvement on the part of members of the community in arts-related events:

*We don't have a society that embraces art readily. (Artist 2)*

*You couldn't ask for a better opportunity for your business to participate and it was kind of like they turned their back on it. (Funder 1)*

One of the inhibitory ways is that of red tape that seems to be associated with a conservative community that resists change, as illustrated below:

*We are a fairly conservative kind of lot. (Funder 3)*

*The red tape is just soul destroying. That's the other reason you need a really long lead time... To just be prepared to keep on wading through the endless blockages and dead ends to be able to make it happen. (Funder 1)*

The issue of involvement points to a resistance to new ideas and ways of doing things. The conservatism within the community is present but there is also a desire on the part of some artists and funders to approach things in a creative and innovative manner:

*It's created that idea for other communities to do it. (Funder 5)*

*And it's a bit quirky and I think Creative Regions have pushed the boundaries. (Funder 3)*

On the whole, however, a strong inertia is apparent: within the general public, businesses and Council.

*It [new idea] was met with huge opposition, and it never changed. (Artist 2)*

*The few business that took part in it, it wouldn't have been an easy thing for Creative Regions 'cause some of these business have been around for a really, really long time and it's really hard to change the mindset of some of those older generation business owners. (Funder 5)*

As a result, there is recognition that the process of change and accepting new ideas is a very slow one:

*But I think it's really important to allow for that talking time and that motivation time, and to have enough bodies on the ground to physically go and talk to every business and get them excited about it. (Funder 1)*

Given this conservative environment, it is not surprising several learnings are evident in the interviews, although more so for the artists than funders. This relates to the artists gaining a better understanding of creating art for public spaces:

*Unfortunately they weren't quite robust enough I think, the pieces, so I've learned a bit of a lesson from that. (Artist 1)*

Early career artists especially learn as a result of being involved in place activation events:

*I've also learned a lot as well, working with [lists several names]. All of those people have really helped me push to where I need to be, and really shown me how to do it in a humble way. (Artist 4)*

*You can see, when you go to events, you can see ... what's working, and what's not working. What can be improved, and what can be adjusted. (Artist 3)*

However, the learning also extends to the general community as they change their perspectives as a result of being engaged in the place activation projects.

*So to be able to try and open a community garden in amongst all of that when none of us had any idea how it was gonna work, oh we're all learning. (Funder 5)*

This theme points to conservatism within the community as an important factor contributing to several inhibitory mechanisms, be that red tape, a lack of openness to hearing new ideas or a lack of willingness to try different ways of doing things. Unfortunately, few published evaluations focus on why people do *not* attend events or why events are *not* realised. Markusen and Gadwa (2010) note regulatory hurdles as one of the challenges associated with creative placemaking, but few other processes or mechanisms are identified or investigated. Bureaucracy, closed-mindedness and collective apathy are not often investigated, yet they clearly have implications for those wanting to implement community-based interventions. In contrast to these inhibitory mechanisms, across the interviews, it is also clear there are facilitating mechanisms associated with learning and a willingness to embrace new ideas on the part of some; of wanting to use creativity and innovation to alter mindsets and to promote careers. This is explored further in the final theme.

#### **4.4 Theme 3: Creative contributions now and beyond**

Three sub-themes make up this theme: art product; outcomes; and impact beyond initial project. The results of place activation projects contain both tangible and intangible aspects and these are explored throughout this theme.

The art products associated with place activation relate to the physical manifestations of the projects. Some of these are meant to be ephemeral, some are accepted as naturally deteriorating over time, some are vandalised, others are expected to be ongoing. All have a physical presence at some point, regardless of how temporary.



*A number of these projects have, in fact, disappeared. And some of them are only meant to be very temporary, in the first place. (Artist 2)*

*It [outdoor artwork] lasted for a good year and a half and then it started to damage a little bit, but we've taken a major part of it and now hung it on the fence. (Funder 5).*

Arts products can be considered to be a specific output of some creative placemaking projects. Other outcomes relate to planned and unplanned expectations associated with place activation projects. Some of these are material, even quantifiable, others are more ethereal. Most of the tangible aspects are associated with traditional evaluation tools, such as numbers of people attending, and economic turnover, and tend to occupy the attention of funders:

*We did, we had several hundred people come into the gallery. So, it was a success for us in terms of the whole economic, having another staff member and being open longer was worth it, definitely for us. (Funder 2)*

*Council actually has an economic development tool which is given to anyone having an event, and they can use it as a template. And it actually evaluates every dollar spent per person in a project and actually comes down to where do you come from? Where do you stay?... So this adds the checks and balances. (Funder 3)*

Consistent with community-led creative placemaking, intangible aspects are also identified as outcomes:

*Everyone just got in and enjoyed, the market, the buzz, the lights, just that amazing feel of goodness and wellness. So for Council, we want to be socially-inclusive. (Funder 3)*

*There's always been a stigma over the north side of Bundaberg and I think it helped break down that particular stigma. (Funder 5)*

Most people implementing community projects would hope for some ongoing effect, some sort of social change that takes hold after the project has been completed. For some of the artists, their involvement in place activation occurred very early in their careers and they went on to be involved in other work as a direct result. For the community in general, there is evidence new perspectives and ideas are taken up elsewhere by other community members and of people connecting to others in the community, creating a potential for other outcomes. Thus, like outcomes, some impacts are more materially perceptible. These included direct benefits for the artists:

*I've gotten a lot of personal notice of myself, to be able to grow in my own career art-wise ... but again, it goes back to place activation. I wouldn't know how to do these sorts of things, or go and speak to these people or work with them, without that. (Artist 4)*

*They [couple who ran an art show] contacted me after the show and asked if I would want to submit some of my paintings. (Artist 5)*

While for funders, they see or hear evidence of the more distal effects of place activation projects:

*One of the places [neighbours] actually painted their fence as coloured pencils. (Funder 3)*

The more indefinable examples include:

*Some of them really enjoyed the experience so much and it opened up a bit of a new world to them. (Artist 1).*

*And then they become the greatest champions or advocates for place activation on your behalf in your community. (Funder 3)*

Thus far, I have outlined the tangible and intangible outcomes and impacts separately. However, it is likely they are intrinsically linked depending on the project. In projects that are one-off events lasting a few hours, measurable outcomes and impacts are more likely to be evident. For example, exposure of art or the artist to the public resulted in further work becoming available for at least two of the artists interviewed. Some of the businesses who participated in events such as ReSTAMPED sold out of food before the event ended, so from an economic perspective the event was successful. It is likely those who attended continue to have memories of these events, but the short term nature of these events is unlikely to contribute to the sort of interpersonal and person-place connectivity required for changing one's sense of belonging or social inclusion as outlined above. On the other hand, the Gavin Street Community Garden, which is a more permanent activation appears to be bringing people together on a regular basis and provides a space for cooperation, connection and ongoing shared experiences. It is a tangible product that is leading to more intangible outcomes and impacts.

In many ways, the issue of tangible and intangible outputs, outcomes and impacts lies at the heart of debates surrounding cultural evaluation in general, and creative placemaking specifically, and this is highlighted in this theme. Acknowledging those outcomes and impacts that are not readily observed or measured as being just as important is fundamental in paving a path towards more comprehensive evaluation and truly understanding how place activation projects may be able to contribute to promoting community health and wellbeing. While art products and economic turnover can be quantified, capturing evidence of social inclusion, changes in outlooks, even joy, is also required. From a health promotion perspective, it is the latter that are more likely to then contribute to healthy communities, but the two approaches need not be mutually exclusive (Clift, 2012). Taking a more holistic approach to evaluation provides a way to capture a number of tangible *and* intangible outcomes as well as consideration of the processes or mechanisms that may be involved in bringing about the outcomes.

### **Implications for practice**

Arts-based health promotion interventions are quite common and there is an increasing evidence base that demonstrates attendance of, and participation in, cultural events and activities is associated with lower mortality (Clift, 2012). However, when considering the implications for practice of place activation, and creative

placemaking in general, I need to make a clear distinction between arts practice and health promotion practice. Putland (2008) outlines the arguments for and against the partnership between the arts and health, one of which relates to the risk of devaluation of the arts by forcing it into the instrumentalist models of health promotion; of reducing the arts to their 'health' outcomes, whether they be health behaviours, determinants of health or social capital.

This research has demonstrated tangible outcomes and impacts of place activation events for artists. Two of the artists interviewed were young and participated in place activation events very early in their careers. In one instance, the artist went on to make community-based art the focus of his work. Place activation events that promote the work of artists, especially emerging artists, contribute to community as the arts have always done: by disrupting our perspectives through creativity; of providing outlets for aesthetic expression; by providing an avenue for economic turnover (Putland, 2008). These may not have direct health implications, although from a strengths-based, holistic perspective of health, even these can be considered as contributors to health.



In regards to health promotion practice, this research highlights a number of implications for practitioners. First, if the aim of the creative placemaking intervention is to increase social capital, sense of belonging and connection to place and each other, and to increase social inclusiveness, then consideration needs to be given to the temporal nature of the intervention. Activation projects that

remain in the one place for some time (months and possibly years) are more likely to bring sufficient numbers of people to a place for long enough in order to create shared experiences that could lead to a local change in context. The example in this research is the Gavin Street Community Garden, although clearly more research is required in order to determine the broader effects of this on the community.

Second, this implies the art products need to be robust enough to withstand public use for the time period of the project. The destruction of the art work in two of the Take it to the Streets sites provides an example of where such robustness was not evident. Third, when implementing creative placemaking into areas that have not experienced much in the way of community arts beforehand, considerable time is likely to be required to build partnerships with the local government authority, businesses and local community organisations; to 'warm' them to the idea so they become willing to participate and make the event a success. Time is also needed to negotiate the regulations and restrictions on community events. Fourth, having the skills and knowledge to build the necessary partnerships and to work through the red tape is essential. One of the interviewees for this research commented on the ability of Creative Regions in being able to bring business acumen as well as creativity to the table of negotiation as a key in its success. Finally, taking a holistic approach to

evaluation would allow the capture of tangible as well as intangible outcomes and impacts of creative placemaking, but in order to capitalise on this, tight alignment would be required between setting the objectives and aims of any project and devising tools and processes that target evidence of changes in these.

## **Conclusion**

Considering the findings of this research echoes much of what is already in the creative placemaking literature. The projects offer opportunities for various participants (artists, funders, community members) to collaborate, connect with each other, create a space for community and to give back in order generate a stronger sense of belonging and connection to place and each other. However, I also highlight an aspect that is mostly missing from the literature; those mechanisms that facilitate or inhibit a place activation project occurring in the first place. As such, a number of implications for arts and health practitioners have been identified, especially the need to allow considerable time to introduce innovative ideas into conservative communities, and for creative placemaking projects to take place over extended periods of time in order for the more intangible outcomes and impacts to become more evident. This research has allowed me to confirm the necessity of any place activation project having clearly stated objectives and that any evaluation undertaken needs to be closely aligned with these objectives. I also advocate it is possible to capture tangible and intangible outcomes and impacts through more holistic models of evaluation which allow arts-based interventions to be incorporated into health promotion. Finally, I highlight the need for evaluation to be grounded in the reality of a particular place and time. All creative placemaking projects are unique. They occur in response to the events and context of a community while they also contribute to (hopefully) changing the context of that community. Thus, while we can learn much from the experiences of others who have implemented creative placemaking projects, ultimately, placemaking is an opportunity to learn about ourselves and how we can influence the health and wellbeing in our neighbourhoods and communities.

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