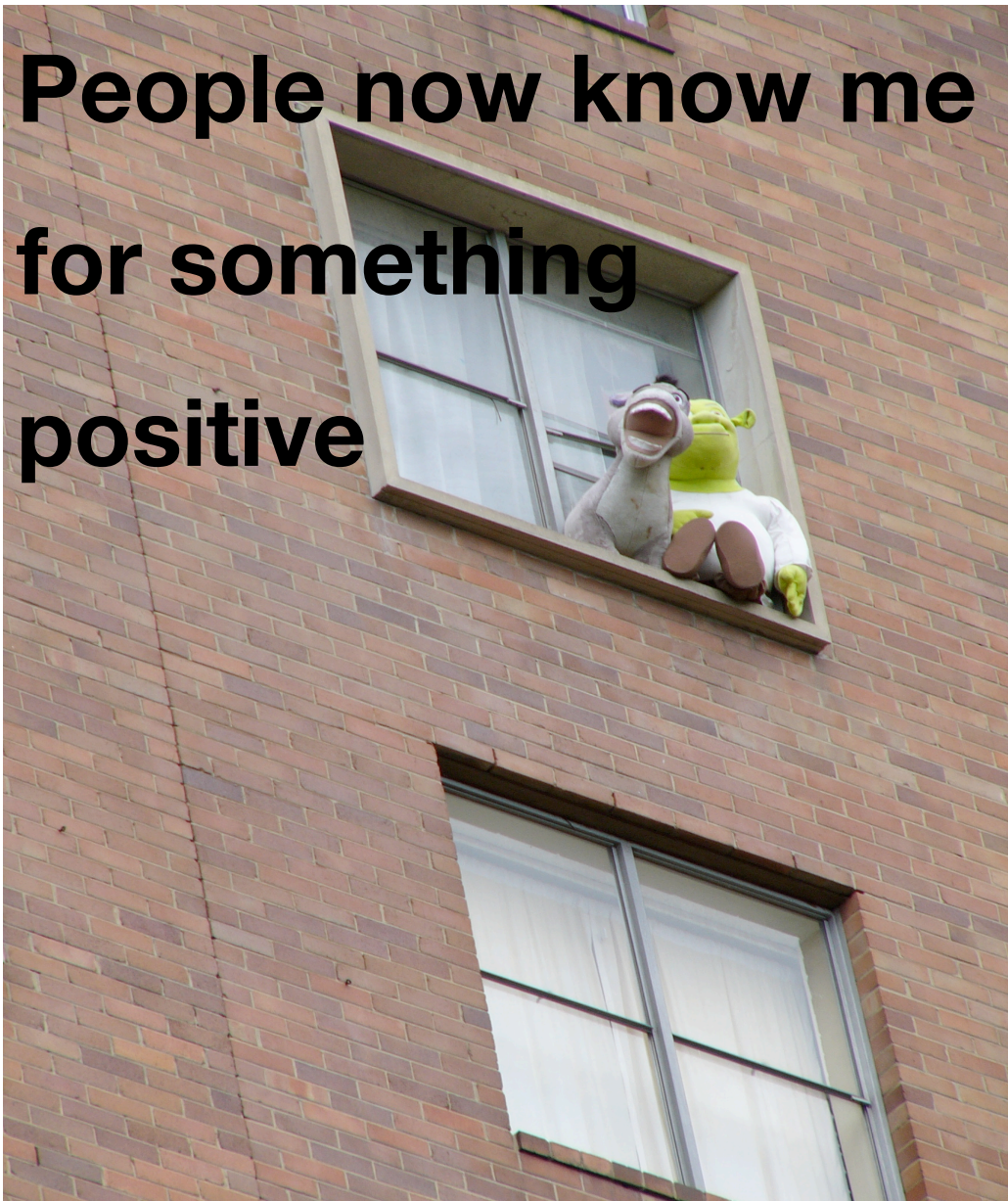


**People now know me
for something
positive**



An Evaluation of Big *h*ART's work at the John Northcott Estate

Peter Wright

David Palmer



**“People now know me for something
positive”: An Evaluation of Big *h*ART’s
work at the John Northcott Estate**

**Peter Wright
David Palmer
Murdoch University
2007**

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Section One

Introduction

The following report provides a review of Big *h*ART's work in the Northcott Estate since 2002. From this time, Big *h*ART in association with project partners carried out a series of community cultural development projects that culminated in the production of photographic portrait work, music, geo-spatial maps, performance theatre, filmmaking, narrative and writing pieces, and a series of other performance and arts-based activities. The intention of Big *h*ART was to help 'empower' and assist tenants of Northcott to tell their stories, help build people's sense of community, and encourage conditions that decrease violence and isolation. The *Northcott Narratives Project* is the title used to encompass all the separate but related projects undertaken by Big *h*ART at the Northcott Estate from the period 2002-2007.

This report does two things. Section one describes the purposes of the evaluation and considers the aims and aspirations of Big *h*ART and its two major funding partners against the evidence. This section involves an 'audit review' of the work¹. The second section draws on recent scholarship within the field to make a series of observations about how this was achieved and the approaches used by Big *h*ART and its partners. This section involves an 'open inquiry' into the personal, social and organisational changes and benefits brought about by Big *h*ART. It is the combination of both of these approaches that not only describes the social impacts of the arts in relation to the Northcott Narratives Project, but how they can be better understood and built on (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007).

¹ See Appendix for the full list of objectives as outlined in the key funding applications.

The Evaluation Methodology

Much of Big *h*ART's work is well documented in reports, the media, funding applications and many of the creative materials produced. This work, in part, informs the evaluation. In addition, the evaluation employs a range of other methodological devices to assess the performance of Big *h*ART and their involvement with a variety of partners associated with the Northcott Estate.

The evaluation team's approach involved both carrying out a combination of 'audit review' and 'open inquiry' investigations. These have been both summative and formative and are concerned with both seeking evidence and understanding respectively. The audit review elements of the evaluation principally drew on the stated aims and objectives as outlined in three related sets of plans:

- (1) Big *h*ART's plans for the Northcott Narratives work.
- (2) Plans as articulated in the application for funds from The National Community Crime Prevention Program (NCCPP) - "The Northcott Public Housing Community Wellbeing Work".
- (3) Plans as articulated in the application for funds to the Australia Council for the Arts (OZCO)- "Going Public"².

Methodologically, the evaluation involved:

- comparing outcomes against the plans and aspirations as articulated by the organisation, its partners and funding bodies.
- reviewing relevant quantitative data concerned with the changes and impacts shaped by Big *h*ART's work.
- carrying out a series of consultations with tenants, participants, Big *h*ART staff, performers, artists and trainers, community workers and service providers, other local stakeholders, and those who had viewed some of the artistic products and associated documentaries.

² See Appendix

- carrying out, for comparative purposes, a limited analysis of community cultural development programs and models used in other places.
- identifying factors contributing to the successful implementation of various projects carried out, factors that may have hindered the implementation of the various projects, and assessing other outcomes from the Northcott Narratives that were unintended but socially productive.

In order to better understand and contextualise the work of Big *hART* a brief synopsis of the organisation and Northcott estate is provided.

Background to Big *hART*

Big *hART* is a multiple national award winning arts company who use theatre, film, television, paintings, photography, dance, radio and a range of other creative processes to support groups and communities who lack opportunities. It combines multiple art forms to help achieve both art **of** substance and community **with** substance. Big *hART* projects start from the knowledge that the creative process used in arts-based work helps draw out both people's stories and their ability to make connections with others.

Typically Big *hART* spends 150 weeks in a community. During this time they create opportunities for participants to: learn new skills; tell their story; develop performance work that has both local and national exposure; impact positively on the lives of others; and build relationships with those participants who would not otherwise have met.

Founded in 1992, the organisation has worked directly with more than 4,200 individuals in over 30 rural and remote communities. Through arts-based practices Big *hART* has worked with these communities to assist them address social problems such as domestic violence, drugs misuse, suicide, low levels of literacy, motor accident

prevention, truancy, intergenerational addiction and homelessness³.

Background to the work at the John Northcott Public Housing Estate

Northcott Public Housing Estate was opened in 1961 as the New South Wales' first high rise public housing estate in Surry Hills, an inner city Sydney suburb. It was driven by the efforts of the architects of post-war reconstruction who sought to clear the social problems associated with razor gangs, sly shops, organised crime and life in slum neighbourhoods. So thrilled were the government with this experiment in inner city social planning they invited the Queen to officially open it two years later (Keating, 1991 p. 96-97).

The estate is the largest residential development in the southern hemisphere comprising 591 apartments. The 14 storey main building overlooks Sydney Central Business District. Most of the apartments are one or two bedrooms with a small lounge room adjacent to a kitchen preparation area. There are over 1000 people who live at Northcott (Mayo, 2005 p. 22).

Over the past 15 years the great hopes of those who described it as social policy 'light on the hill', saw it turn into a chaotic nightmare (Mayo, 2005 p. 22-24). Indeed, when Big *h*ART started its work in 2002 Northcott had become synonymous with crime, violence, anti-social behaviour, a hangout for drug dealers and a place associated with murder and suicide. The building had also become physically difficult to maintain and posed security problems for tenants. As a consequence of negative media reporting, the name "Suicide Towers" began to stick.

Tenant's backgrounds also changed dramatically since it was built. Currently, more than two thirds are single, 95% received aged or disability pensions, and tenant's average age is 58. Initially the estate was designed for workers on low incomes, returned service personnel,

³ c.f. www.bighART.org.au

and others in need of public housing. As well as a short-term transient population, there are also residents of 20 to 46 years standing. Since the estate opened it has attracted tenants who have migrated from 50 countries. It has also become home for many suffering from various mental health problems, alcohol and drug addictions, unemployment and disabilities, those with periods of homelessness, and a number who have spent time in prison (Mayo, 2005 p. 22).

In 2002 Big *hART*, prompted by a series of crimes and damning media reports that devastated Northcott, offered support to the community. From then until early 2007 they assisted tenants and combined with other partners such as the Department of Housing's (DoH) Community Development team and the Surry Hills Police Crime Prevention Officers to help transform the estate and many tenants within it. Together they developed, rehearsed and produced photographic exhibitions. Collaboratively, they created music, dance and film. They reinvigorated the local community centre, helped bring others in to run programs and make the estate a centre for many transformations. Big *hART* worked with others to develop arts and cultural productions recognised for their ability to move people. For example, the *StickybrickS* performance for the 2006 Sydney Festival was performed four times to sell out audiences in the car-park of the estate using the building's 14 storeys as a back-drop.

What they achieved against what they said they'd achieve: Review of Big *hART*'s work against plans

What follows is an 'audit review' of the evidence in relation to each of the key objectives as outlined in the plans of Big *hART* and other organisations involved in the Northcott Narratives Project.

Aims of Northcott Narratives inventions:

Northcott Narratives Aim One: Use skills based initiatives in film, text, music, sound and photography to facilitate tenants telling their stories, increasing their sense of community, resulting in a decrease in violence and isolation and an increase in feelings of safety.

Notwithstanding the challenges associated with the idea of a 'sense of community', this aim identifies clearly the intention of Big *h*ART to use arts-based work to impact positively on the lives of people living at Northcott. In particular, Big *h*ART set out to use photography, music, film and other forms of multimedia as a way to express ideas and experiences, encourage individuals to get involved in activities with others, form social connections of the kind that could help decrease the incidence of violence crime, and assist people to feel safer in and around their homes.

Big *h*ART was clearly successful in the first part of this aim. One striking feature of their work was the number of arts-based activities run and the success in attracting tenants' participation in telling stories and getting these accounts into the press. As Table One demonstrates, there was an astonishing range of arts and cultural production activity made available to tenants.

Table One: Arts-based events and workshops

Type of activity	Workshops	Numbers involved	Other features	Outcomes
Music: 3 Days in November 2004	14 professional musicians ran 14 workshops	30 tenants; 150 attend final night	Media: Tim Bailey weather report	11 songs written and recorded
Music: 3 Days in November 2005	Workshops with Peter O'Doherty and Leon Ewing coaching, writing and recording Songs.	Sara, Shannon, Cheryl and two others	7 professionals came to run workshops. Concert performed with 35 tenants	Recorded Sara's tracks
Photography: Tenant by Tenant	Approximately 150 workshops with 2-3 tenants. 50 planning workshops, 49 follow-up workshops	71 tenants involved in taking pictures. 15 Russian, 10 Chinese 33 Russian, 27 Chinese plus others	Received media attention; Included in Northcott Narratives Box distributed to all tenants.	5 exhibitions: Community Centre; Australia Council for the Arts; Walking the Streets, Newtown presentation; Slot Gallery; Museum of Sydney.
Performance: StickybrickS	25 storytelling workshops. 15 rehearsals for StickybrickS	5-14 tenants attending each workshop. 34 participate through volunteering their stories. 49 tenants in StickybrickS cast	Featured in ABC documentary '900 Neighbours'	4 performances of StickybrickS as part of 2006 Sydney Festival. 1194 people attend to packed sell-out houses.
Dance: StickybrickS	4 dance nights. 10 dance rehearsal workshops	70 tenants attending; 15 tenant dancers in performance	Dance a key element in StickybrickS performance	4 performances of StickybrickS
Oral history: Recording 2002-2003	35 workshops with professional historians Vanessa Bates, Phil Mar, Briony Dunn	43 tenants involved	This material formed the foundations for much of the performance and narrative work	75 hours of recorded material
Film making	18 workshops in scripting, filming, performing (2002). Many workshops by Briony Dunn (2003). Brendon Fletcher 12 workshops in script writing; 21 days of filming	35 tenants involved in workshops. 13 tenants involved in making of '14 Storeys'	Much of the earlier work was drawn on in StickybrickS and 900 Neighbours	'Can You Hear Them' production. 'The Grey Room' production. '14 Storeys' production. '900 Neighbours' documentary. 'StickybrickS' documentary.

There is also evidence of success in relation to the second part of this aim, that of impacting on tenant's sense of community and safety in

and around Northcott. This will be discussed in more detail later in the report as the reduction of crime is the defining set of objectives in element of the work funded by the Commonwealth Attorney General's Department.

However, as this later discussion demonstrates, there is considerable evidence that extraordinary things have happened at Northcott in relation to crime and safety. For example, according to the Crime Prevention Officer of the Surry Hills Police, there has been a "marked decrease in crimes, particularly violent crimes at Northcott" (Surry Hills Tenants Association at al, 2006 p. 13). The Surry Hills Police report that "crime is down, people feel safer" and the project has been so successful that a second Crime Prevention Officer was appointed (Mayo 2004, p. 13). According to the then Assistant Police Commissioner "serious crime has now reduced [at Northcott]" (Surry Hills Tenants Association et al, 2006 np). Police, DoH Staff, and local government officials responsible for community safety also reported a series of indicators of both reduced crime and improved security, including evidence of improvements in security of premises, reduced incidents of crime at night, and an increase in the reporting of crime (Surry Hills Tenants Association at al, 2006 p. 16).

Northcott Narratives Aim Two: Create an opportunity for the life experiences of tenants to be validated, empowering them to move into the next phase of their lives with increased personal skills to make choices and therefore avoid the atrophy that can be triggered by a culture of dependency.

The success in achieving the first element of this aim is also substantial. Not only did the range of arts-based projects help bring people together, they also provided many powerful means through which they could 'give voice' to their experiences, ideas and aspirations. Indeed, the consistent and defining feature of the Northcott productions is that they literally tell the stories of tenants, in the language of tenants, often with the voices of tenants, at the instruction of tenants, and drawing on tenant's everyday experiences. To paraphrase Scott Rankin—Big hART artistic director—those who

see a Northcott production get to ‘make celebration out of the [participants] everyday lives’.

Particularly in *Tenant by Tenant*, *900 Neighbours*, *Can You Hear Them*, *The Grey Room*, *3 Days in November*, *Light on the Hill* and *StickybrickS*⁴ the viewer gets a profound insight into the lives of many who at Northcott have “travelled from many parts of the world ... found shelter and been in love and loved others” [StickybrickS].

Perhaps most extraordinary in this regard is that Big *hART* have provided the opportunity to move beyond a ‘translation’ or mediated presentation of tenant’s experiences. Unlike many traditional forms of arts and community development practice, Big *hART* facilitated tenants to use **their** voices, words, bodies, music and creative abilities. Often these accounts were presented ‘as is’ without rendering, interference or adjusting the language to suit some preconceived purpose.

This was most strikingly in evidence when the evaluation team visited and heard tenants providing eloquent, persuasive and prosaic accounts of their involvement in Big *hART* projects. It was also evident in the moving and powerful presentations by tenant representatives to the media. In particular, towards the end of Big *hART*’s time at Northcott tenants began to take the lead role in the public arena, hosting conference presentations, organising delegations to politicians, and acting as expert speakers at professional events.

This element of Big *hART*’s work did not simply involve the telling of tales of misfortune, social ‘atrophy’ and hard times at Northcott. As important and impressive as this part of the Northcott story was, of equal importance were two other kinds of accounts; stories of the normality and routineness of life at Northcott—the fact that for many at Northcott life is as life is for the rest of the world—and stories of profound individual and community transformation.

⁴ Each of these individual arts-based projects contributed to the Northcott Narratives Project as a whole.

Northcott Narratives Aim Three: Create high quality artworks for national arts forums.

The success of Big *hART*'s work with the community at Northcott was also in part a reflection of its success in producing high quality artworks and its ability to attract local, national and international attention. The following table lists the art and other work produced and indicates the extent to which it was recognized as of the highest quality.

Table two: Evidence of quality in arts production

Event/performance	Review/award/recognition
Tenant by Tenant	Portraits exhibited in Newtown's <i>Walking the Streets Festival</i> Awarded the <i>Art Critics Award</i> by the Museum of Contemporary Art Portraits exhibited in Redfern's <i>Slot Gallery</i> 18,000 visitors at the exhibition at <i>Museum of Sydney</i> Purchasing of some of Tenant by Tenant collection by <i>Sydney Museum</i> Critical acclaim reviews in media
3 Days in November	Tim Bailey reporting weather from Community Centre during music festival on Channel 10. Attracted participation of professional songwriters and musicians (Lindy Morrison, Peter O'Doherty, Jackie Orszaczky and Luke Vassella)
Light on the Hill	Reading at Belvoir Theatre – over 200 people attend
StickybrickS	National screening February 2007 1200 sell-out audiences over 4 nights Played at <i>Sydney Festival</i> Attracted the participation of nationally recognized actors and artists (<i>Kerry Armstrong, Leah Purcell, Lex Merinos, Glynn Nicholas, Kerry Walker, Sara Luther</i>) Attracted acclaimed painter <i>Robert Hannaford</i> Successful pitch for ABC documentary – national screening in March 2007. Critical acclaim reviews in media
Northcott Narratives	ABC TVs 7.30 Report x 2
900 Neighbours	2,000 at premiere at the <i>Sydney Film Festival</i> National screening on ABC TV in February 2007 Critical acclaim reviews in media
The Grey Room	Screening at Belvoir Theatre Guest speakers including Brian Brown, Neil Armfield, Minister for Housing
Can You Hear Them	Screening at Belvoir Theatre Guest speakers including Brian Brown, Neil Armfield, Minister for Housing Won <i>People's Choice Award</i> at the Surry Hills Festival
14 Storeys	National screening ABC TV (Sunday Arts) February-April 2007
Say Hello (Resource Box)	Published and distributed

The high quality of the cultural and performance-based activities carried out by Big *hART* at Northcott was important in both prompting

a wide audience to 'listen' to the accounts of Northcott residents, and providing tenants with the sense that their lives were taken seriously by others. In this way, the high quality of the work provided the impetus for what governments often describe as 'engagement' and 'participation' by the tenants and greater community.

The quality of the work produced was also the subject of critical acclaim. Following are a series of quotes from reviews of the various performances. These are indicative of sentiments expressed by arts reviewers in well-recognized public media organisations.

... this is not oral history or tenant life narrative. It's rather a facade-cracking and joyous slice of life, a self portrait in hope, possibility and pop songs.

Review of StickybrickS

Sydney Morning Herald 14 -15 January 2006

It's hard to resist a community show that so joyfully welcomes the public in to gawp... best are the memories that seem to leak out of the brickwork and windows of this extraordinary place...

Review of StickybrickS

The Australian 16 January 2006

This is a golden opportunity for the highlighting of positive outcomes... for all parties to this unique project. This 'coal face' showcase opportunity in itself is daunting to the ivory tower mindset of officialdom.

South Sydney Herald October 2005

Tenant photographers and subjects, under the mentorship of a professional photographer, are sharing their experiences of being in a project with each other, at forums and in mainstream galleries.

Review of Tenant by Tenant

Inner City Voice Spring 2005

StickybrickS is a grand multimedia production-cum-celebration in a transformed car park at Northcott ... If Linehan was looking for resonance StickybrickS has so much it's almost bouncing off the walls.

Review of StickybrickS

The Australian January 12 2006.

Northcott Narratives Aim Four: Affect social and departmental policy in regards to the community

development, partnership and service delivery for tenants of public housing.

The Northcott Narratives project was not simply concerned with transforming the lives of many Northcott tenants. It has also had an impact on a range of organisations, funding bodies, community leaders, policy regimes and professionals. Indeed one of the stand out features of many of the interviews with government and other partner representatives was their claim that involvement in the Northcott Narratives project had an important impact on their work practices, procedures and programmes. For example, the DoH has made appointments, committed resources, and undergone change as a consequence of the Big *h*ART experience. Further details in this regard are provided in the following table.

Table three: The impact of Northcott Narratives on others

Individual/organisation	Impact and evidence
NSW Dept of Housing (DOH)	Initially the Department committed to funding the Community Development Worker [CDW] at Northcott for six months. As a result of successes and lobbying this was steadily increased. The CDW position will be funded for an additional two years until June 2008 (Mike Allen Director General NSW DOH). The Department has committed resources for the appointment of a further 14 community workers in other site across the state.
Mike Allen (Director General NSW Dept of Housing)	Reports that: "We will have less reservations and more courage when it comes to this kind of work". The Department appreciates more strongly the value of Community Development (CD) work. CD is now part of the core business of the Department. "The strongest measure of the influence of the work is that we would do it again – absolutely yes". Demonstrated the value of arts-based projects in getting practical benefits. Large Departmental projects now have community engagement processes built in. Big hART's work demonstrated how to create positive media coverage for public housing estates.
Minister of Housing	Chose to launch the 'Being a Good Neighbour' campaign at Northcott. Used the Northcott Narrative pitch 'Say Hello' throughout the campaign.
DoH staff	Realised the benefits of arts in helping gain more presence of Client Services Team Project helped workers get a 'bigger picture' of the lives of people living in the estate and what the work of the Department involves. Helped demonstrate the value of a different way of working – not 'top down.' Helped provide a concrete way of building relationships with tenants through tagging along in projects. Personally helped professional development particularly in relation to: professional patience, working in environments where there is an element of chaos, understanding value of process as well as outcomes.
Crime Prevention Officer – Surry Hills Police	The success of this role has led to other positions being created in other areas. In addition, the skills and knowledge learnt by the Crime Prevention Projection Officer has been used to mentor other police officers.
Northcott Tenants Association	Reformation of Association to manage Community Centre Now regular consultations between tenants, DoH, Police, local member and others Use of centre from 3-5 per day to 150 or more a day Now only community centre in NSW to be staff entirely by volunteers and open 9-5 every weekday. Now has 'open door' policy (encouraging people to meet neighbours while doing activities)
Northcott Estate	Community Works Program Increase in attendance at Neighbourhood Advisory Board Meetings Upgrade project at Northcott Police Consultation Days World Health Organization (WHO) Safety Community Accreditation Northcott community directory Operations of community centre

	Renumbering of the estate Launch and distribution of Resource Kits Community Safety Ambassadors attend forums and give presentations
'Partnerships'	The major agencies involved since Big <i>h</i> ART's work include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department of Ageing Disability and Home Care • NSW Police • Department of Health • St Vincent Community Health • Department of Housing • Department of Education Employment and Training • Department of Community Services • The City of Sydney Council • Local Member of Parliament • Older Women's Network • Surry Hills Neighbourhood Centre • Ultimo TAFE Outreach • Central Sydney Community Transport • Redfern Inner City Home Support Service • Hope Street Urban Compassion • Brown Sisters'

In addition to impacting on other organisations Big *h*ART helped others make their own work more successful. For example, in the view of an evaluation of the DoH's community development work (c.f. Twyford 2006) Big *h*ART, along with the Surry Hills Police, was an important partner in making "a significant difference" to the work of DoH (Twyford, 2006 p. 2). According to a previous Assistant Commissioner of Police, Big *h*ART's partnership with the Surry Hills Crime Prevention Officer and DoH Community Development Worker helped make possible better policing at Northcott (Mahoney letter of support, August 2006).

Without qualification Northcott tenants recognized the pivotal role Big *h*ART and partners played in the many achievements and transformations that have happened at Northcott. Members of the executive of the Tenants Association made it clear that Big *h*ART and the many arts and performance-based projects they led were instrumental in helping regenerate the Community Centre. As a consequence the Centre has become a site of intense activity and the Association an organisation that has generated much positive work. Charmaine Jones—a resident and now community leader—in

describing Big *hART*'s influence in the renaissance of the community centre said:

By using the Community Centre as the focal point for the newly developed partnerships, as a meeting place for Big *hART*'s projects, police liaisons and community development work, the community became inspired to elect a new committee and reclaim the centre as a space for all tenants. A meeting was called, to which ninety enthusiastic tenants attended, the new committee was elected and a new inclusive constitution was approved. The Surry Hills Public Tenants Association (SHPTA) was born (Big *hART*, 2006).

The Northcott Public Housing Community Wellbeing Project and crime prevention

The Northcott Public Housing Community Wellbeing Project was also supported by the Commonwealth Attorney General's Department from 2005 to 2007. Given the interests of the funding body the objectives of this element of work at Northcott focused principally on crime prevention and the creation of a safer estate.

One challenge the evaluation team encountered in assessing the success of this project was the lack of quantitative data available from the police specifically in relation to the Northcott Estate. This is understandable given the Surry Hills Police have reporting systems that do not allow them to isolate patterns of criminal activity to the Northcott Estate — this data being aggregated by geographic area rather than specific location.

Notwithstanding this lack of estate specific data, given the level of police presence and activity at Northcott over the past 10 years and throughout the duration of this project, it is reasonable to accept their assessment that crime, particularly violent crime, had radically declined during the period under investigation. Furthermore, the assessment of the Surry Hills Police has been confirmed by tenants and the range of other groups involved. Indeed, the overwhelming and unequivocal message from those with whom the evaluation team spoke was that Northcott had experienced a profound change in criminal activity. In

addition, a range of practical projects, processes and new mechanisms for generating improved safety have been created through Big *h*ART's work.

This element of the project has received considerable recognition. For example, Northcott Estate has been accredited as a World Health Organization (WHO) Safe Community, the first public housing estate to have achieved such official endorsement. Together with the Tenant's Association, Big *h*ART was awarded a national crime prevention award from the Institute of Criminology.

In addition to evidence that Northcott is a safer place to be, a range of other practical measures have occurred that help buttress the work of agencies such as the NSW Police. These include:

- the provision of safety information to tenants by a range of partners including the Tenants Association;
- the establishment of a number of health and physical agility programs for seniors (run by St Vincent's Community Health) to help prevent risks associated with the loss of physical dexterity;
- the presence of two Crime Prevention Officers;
- a Memorandum of Understanding between the Police and DoH in relation to the sharing of information on safety and crime prevention on the Estate;
- the establishment of the Northcott Safety Audit (which is reviewed every 3 years) by a range of partners including the Tenants Association;
- the implementation of a Local Allocation Strategy by the DoH, designed to carefully assess the mix of tenants so as to maintain a supported, healthy and safe population on the Estate.

Perhaps the most striking commendations of Big *h*ART's work comes from tenants themselves. In their words:

"Big *h*ART has brought people together and still bring them together even though they have finished their work".

"We will never go back to the way things were before. We have seen what we can do. We know that it can be different. They have helped generate hope".

"We have got so many people here who are capable for turning things around. We needed someone to give us a UBD so we could find our way around a bit to get rid of the crime, the drugs, the dangerous stuff. Big *h*ART, and Dominic (DoH

worker) and Brett (Police Crime Prevention Officer) gave us the UBD” [Street Directory].

“Before all this happened (Big *h*ART got involved) because of all the shit that went on people wouldn’t want to come and live at Northcott, now they announce ... I live at Northcott”.

Other evidence of Big *h*ART’s involvement in making Northcott a safer place is provided in the following table.

Table four: Success in relation to safety and crime prevention

Intended Safety and Crime Prevention Benefits	Evidence
Reduction of criminal incidents including murder, assault, drug-related, vandalism & theft	Police unequivocal in claiming that crime, particularly violent crime decreased. They attributed this to various measures developed in partnership with Community Development Worker, Big <i>hART</i> projects and the Tenants Association. All tenants interviewed assessed that crime had declined. All partners interviewed concurred that crime was on the decrease. Accreditation as WHO Safe Community
Decrease in inappropriate calls to police	Police report that both inappropriate calls declined and more appropriate calls increased. Also report improvement in cooperation and intelligence gathered as a consequence of more direct contact between police and tenants at events such as police consultation days and Big <i>hART</i> activities.
Decrease in costs associated with damages to the building	DoH data indicate improved vacancy rates and less cases to Tribunal (in part a reflection of less damage). DoH staff reported improvements against all measures concerned with property maintenance. Safety audit led to improved response to maintenance and property problems.
Improved response times in emergencies	Police report improvements in intelligence gathering from tenants assisting in response times. Tenants report confidence with Police leading to more reporting and communication in emergency and other incidents. Initiation of volunteer safety ambassadors taking on responsibility of reporting incidents. Some tenants claim this was in part because of events such as police consultation days occurring each month.
Reduction in feelings of isolation and increased sense of connection to the community	Consistent view expressed in interviews with tenants Tenant led reformation of Tenant's Association Dramatic increase in level of activities in Community Centre. Community Centre staffed entirely by voluntary tenants. Meeting in August 2006 in response to 2 suicides in the same week after no suicide for 2 years. 90 members of community choosing to deal with it in a positive way (inviting Police to attend an emergency community meeting) indicative of their increased sense of ownership of crime and safety issues. Police counsellor in attendance reports she has never seen a community respond in such a positive way to incidents of this magnitude. In response to high use and dealing of the drug Ice at Northcott, tenant representatives organize a workshop facilitated by a drug and alcohol counsellor from St Vincent's Hospital. Clear messages of community solidarity in productions such as StickybrickS. References to community connection in 900 Neighbours. Observation and assessment of significant 'outsiders' such as Member for Bligh, Director General of DoH and Crime Prevention Officer. Senior tenants reported that the Community Centre has "improved tremendously".
Improved knowledge and	Community Centre now venue for a range of community

access to community resources and services	<p>services to use and promote their services.</p> <p>Northcott Narratives Box includes information about services and is disseminated to all new residents. Of those boxes printed, the library in the Community Centre has run out of stock and there requests for more.</p> <p>Quarterly community meetings between Member for Bligh and tenants.</p> <p>Regular consultation meeting between DoH staff and tenants.</p> <p>Dramatic increase in activities and programs at Community Centre.</p> <p>Evidence from interviews with tenants reveals a depth of knowledge of range of service providers and programs.</p>
Positive changes around identity and wellbeing	<p>Interviews with tenants indicate many positive changes in attitude.</p> <p>This confirmed by interviews with other partners.</p>
Reduction in police investigative time	<p>Police reported substantial improvements in their capacity to respond to incidents largely due to the quality of intelligence from tenants and cooperation from people such as Ambassadors and familiarity with the lives of many tenants.</p> <p>Tenants interviewed concurred that police investigation times have been improved.</p>
Increase in intelligence and reporting to police	<p>Police report improvements in intelligence gathering from tenants.</p> <p>Tenants report confidence with Police leading to more reporting and communication in emergency and other incidents.</p> <p>Initiation of volunteer safety ambassadors taken on responsibility of reporting incidents.</p> <p>Police consultation days occur once a month. Police report this event as very helpful with intelligence gathering.</p>
Reduction in antisocial behaviour	<p>Senior tenants (those who have lived at Northcott for many years) claim recent activity has helped make the estate a much safer place.</p> <p>Other tenants spoke about how relationships formed “help people help each other and make each other feel safer” during times when there is anti-social and threatening behaviour</p>
Reduction in risk-taking behaviour	As in criminal behaviour
Relationships of trust formed and sustained	<p>Interviews with Participants and Partners indicates very strong social bonds have been established</p> <p>Tenants reported that Big hART’s work “helped bring more people together”.</p> <p>Director General of DoH reported that the work of Big hART helped not only bring more tenants together for more activities but also “impacted on what happened when they were at meetings, helping transform people into those who were more receptive to others and those who sought to make changes”</p>
Increase in community interaction and participation	<p>Renaissance of Community Centre as a place that few used to a place that is open from 9-5 weekdays and is attended by hundreds who can participate in a range of programs.</p> <p>Tenants run Association</p> <p>Tenant involvement in Big hART performances, workshops and other events</p> <p>Tenants now acting as spokespeople in media and for government bodies</p> <p>Tenant ambassadors mentored to provide community support and promote safety and crime prevention.</p> <p>Tenants represent the community at conferences and forums</p>

	Tenants manage and staff the community centre Tenants are acting to represent various sections of the estate Tenants are part of the NAB
Change in the public perception of Northcott	National and International positive media profile for Northcott and partners through exposure of productions and exhibitions, media and WHO accreditation As evidence in attendance and reviews of the number, quality and popularity of various productions (Tenant by Tenant, 900 Neighbours, 14 Storeys, StickybrickS etc) The fact that so many people from the wider community attended events, performances and exhibitions at least indicates that a wide-ranging audience has been exposed to a story of Northcott that contrasts with the perception that it is simply a dangerous place of excessive and chaotic crime.

The Australia Council's 'Going Public' Project

The other major funding commitment for Big *h*ART and the communities work at Northcott came from the Australia Council for the Arts 'Going Public' Program. In addition to providing resources, this allowed Big *h*ART to concentrate attention on the important part that arts-practice plays in transforming people's lives.

A challenge the evaluation team encountered in assessing the success of this project in this regard was that they were not able to physically attend any of the live performances (coming late by invitation to the project). However, the team were able to see and carefully study the recorded production pieces, including documentaries, music, photographic work and other video productions. In addition, focus groups and interviews were also conducted with those who did see this work.

One of the most significant elements of the project was the breadth and depth of production material that came to exist. This material not only featured as important 'outcomes' or 'products' but also acted as important evaluative tools, giving independent outsiders concrete and visual experiences of the many activities that took place.

As is evident in table five, another important and impressive element of the work at Northcott has been the quality and depth of the art and cultural production that occurred. Like the crime prevention activities, this element of the work has received considerable recognition and evidence in this regard is robust. For example, tenants and others

involved in the Northcott Estate have succeeded in attracting the attention of well respected members of the Australian arts community, hosted a range of performances, production and exhibitions in high profile festivals, galleries and public broadcasting venues, have been awarded a number of prestigious prizes, and succeeded in attracting additional funding for the work from organisations such as the ABC.

Table five: Success in relation to the Australia Council for the Arts ‘Going Public’ Project

Intentions of ‘Going Public’ Project	Evidence
Publicizing the positive community harmony outcomes from the successful engagement of tenants at Northcott.	Over 100 newspaper articles, radio stories, website, mass emails, speeches in parliament, government promotions. Conference presentations since 2004 (eg. UTS Popular Education Community and Cultural Education seminar, Launch of Art and Wellbeing, NSW Premier’s Department Building Stronger and Safer Communities) Productions (eg. Tenant by Tenant, StickybrickS, 900 Neighbours) Northcott Narratives Box
Working with the DoH to recognize the importance of arts-based interventions and to adopt a policy of support for the replication of projects across NSW.	Director General DoH said outcomes included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidence of Dept in supporting Urban Theatre Project in Mt Druitt • Community development now part of core business • Further funding of CD position at Northcott for 2 years • Employing a series of CD positions in other areas • Writing and adoption of the Northcott Estate Community Development Plan 2006-2008 • Adoption of Dept’s ‘Community Regeneration Strategy’ and ‘Central Sydney Division’s High Rise Strategy’
Using the high public profile of a performance work based on tenants stories staged locally, to create high exposure for the Wellbeing Agenda.	<i>StickybrickS</i> was successfully performed as part of the Sydney Festival to sell out audiences and critical acclaim.
Creating a documentary for ABC TV that draws attention to the project.	<i>900 Neighbours</i> was successfully screened on the ABC.
Publishing a boxed set of information, DVD, written material and photographs created by the tenants as a key tool in the community, in government and in the philanthropic sector to promote the Wellbeing Agenda.	1500 copies of Northcott Narratives Box published and disseminated to all tenants, government departments, partners and being sold through book distributor.
Using the Northcott Report as a tool to communicate the success of the project as an example of the Wellbeing Agenda.	The work is still being used by project partners to help in their wider work.
Working closely with the NSW Cabinet Secretary, the Premier and Heads of Departments to open doors across government to promotion	Connections built and in the process of renewal in light of cabinet changes.
Organizing a 30 min presentation to Director Generals and Heads of Department within government.	Invitation to present at NSW Premiers Dept and Dept of Health “Building Stronger and Safer Communities” conference at Powerhouse Museum.
Building support at a Federal level for these strategies	Attorney General’s crime prevention workshop and keynote address at conference in Canberra 2006.
Disseminating information and training	Big <i>hART</i> using knowledge generated from the

for others in the field who may wish to adopt these approaches.	work at Northcott in their other projects across the country. New projects carried out by DoH have been informed by evidence contained within the Northcott Box. The Box being used in University teaching courses in Education and Community Development courses.
Nominating for a World Health Organization Safer Community Award – an international first for a public housing estate.	Nomination report produced Nomination successful Media articles promoting the success of the nomination.

Emergent markers of quality

A scan of contemporary scholarship and research on the social impact of the arts undertaken for this evaluation revealed 11 markers of quality that have been supported internationally in the field (c.f. Cowling, 2004). Through considering evidence of Big *h*ART's work at Northcott against each of these criteria enables the evaluation team to observe that Big *h*ART meets, and in some cases, exceeds international indicators of quality and has produced some of the best work we have seen. This evidence is presented in Table Six.

Table six: A consideration of Big hART's work against established markers of quality

Individuals/organisation	Criteria	Evidence
Artists	Having flexible and adaptable working methods	Were responsive to working with an older population who had restricted physical abilities.
	Working collaboratively with participants	Worked with tenants and their stories to portray them to a wider population.
	Pursuing quality (process and outcome)	Reflected in critical acclaim by reviewers and award winning.
	Responding to individual needs	Able to work with skills already existing with the community as well as developing confidence and skills in others.
Big hART	Building in time to plan and research projects	This not only occurred at the commencement of the project but also was a distinguishing feature of how the project evolved.
	Setting clear and realistic aims and objectives	The project drew on established Big hART principles where goals were achievable.
	Supporting people's participation by meeting their practical needs	Instituted protocols such as supplying food and refreshments when working.
	Building robust partnerships	Substantial relationships were established with DoH, Police, St Vincent's Community Health, tenants and others.
	Ensuring sustainability, or alternatively exit strategies	Project began with an established timeline and clear exit strategy so that dependency was not encouraged.
	Having a clear evaluation strategy	An evaluation strategy was developed that involved both internal and external forms of appraisal.
	Where appropriate creating a working structure that supports the effective work of freelance artists	Leading artists were sought and supported by Big hART to provide leadership, role models and mentorship to project participants.

Discussion of major challenges

It would be remiss to conclude this component of the evaluation without considering the elements of the work at Northcott that presented challenges. While much was achieved, a number of hurdles confronted the Big *h*ART team and its partners. Indeed, one of the most remarkable things about the work was the regularity with which the Northcott Narratives story involved adversity, problems, tensions and difficulties. These problems, and the way they were dealt with, will now be considered.

One of the key objectives of Big *h*ART involved responding to the difficulties and hard times of many tenants living at Northcott. As previously mentioned, these problems were often of enormous magnitude and placed considerable pressure on the Estate and agencies such as the Police and NSW Public Housing Authority. These problems were in no way resolved the day that Big *h*ART began their work. Indeed, the very thing that prompted Big *h*ART and others to create the project, **the day-to-day struggles of tenants**, was the issue that presented the project with the greatest challenges. As one tenant reflected, “there was not a single day or single event that went without a crisis of some kind”. As a consequence, Big *h*ART staff were routinely confronted with social problems and episodes of calamity. For example, they had to deal with the chaos that came with regular media ‘beat-ups’. This demanded attention on managing the interest of the media in ‘bad news stories’ such as: the death of an isolated elderly man; Northcott as a key site of Ice (amphetamine) use; and a number of suicides. Big *h*ART workers had to try and encourage participation from tenants who alternately felt excited about their participation and fearful of assault, felt captive, reluctant to trust outsiders or loath to leave their homes. One specific moment was working with the pandemonium created by violence moments before the opening night of the premier performance *StickybrickS*.

The Northcott Estate is home to an enormous **diversity of tenants**. This presented Big *hART* with an array of practical challenges. For example, English is a second language for a significant group of tenants. Drawing Russian and Chinese speaking tenants into Northcott Narratives was particularly difficult. The fact that so many tenants suffer from mental health issues resulted in some disruption. Some, particularly those tenants who had been resident at Northcott for many years, felt that their interests were very different from those who were more forthcoming in demanding attention. According to one or two interviewed, a little too much time and emphasis being placed in Northcott as “a mad place”. As two senior women said,

[t]he people from Big *hART* were just marvellous ... but seeing as you're asking us, maybe there could have been a little less emphasis on 'shooting up' and 'problems' ... we could have had a little more 'normal' people featuring.

The complex and often demanding needs of different groups understandably created some tensions. It is to be expected and is unavoidable that satisfying one group results in disaffection for another. For example, while many were overjoyed to see *StickybrickS* performed in the grounds of Northcott others reflected that some were disturbed by the noise, lighting and the activity produced during rehearsals and the four performances. Some took the view that the decision to incorporate food into *StickybrickS* was a great success. However, one or two tenants said they were embarrassed by the size of the food offered. Many spoke with considerable pride about the fact that Northcott had been successfully nominated as a 'Safe Community' and quite reasonably saw this as recognition of the work being carried out by the Tenants Association. On the other hand, one or two were critical of this claiming that it sends an erroneous message about a place where “terrible things still happen”. One person suggested that the problems of the Estate have been “whitewashed” by the positive attention given through Big *hART*'s work.

It would be naive and quite wrong to expect that **all agree and are satisfied** with a project the magnitude of Northcott Narratives. It would

also be unrealistic to expect that every tenant ‘participated’ in equal measure and felt their ‘voices heard.’ One person interviewed certainly claimed that they felt an “element of exploitation”. Another was not convinced that the work “was successful in its reach”. Others did not particularly like one or other of the component projects. A couple of people also had some specific suggestions about the timing and scheduling of certain events (eg “pension day is no good for getting things done”).

However, this **chaos, conflict and turmoil was not simply a problem to be overcome**—it also was one of the important constituent factors that helped create opportunities. For example, stories of adversity became the staple for Big *hART* productions. The everyday pain and anguish experienced by tenants became the content around which both creative production and community building workshops were organised. Participant’s shared stories of pain brought some tenants together to form groups and projects. As one Big *hART* person said, “artists often understand that the creative process demands some level of crisis and pain. I think through Northcott Narratives we have also begun to see the value for communities in using people’s difficulties as a way to help get things done”. Expressing similar sentiments another said:

[C]onflict, dare I say at times chaos, has been important in the model that we have developed here ... what we have created is a space for people to work out and work through this conflict and tension, sometimes literally and sometimes through creative spaces like the theatre.

Another important challenge confronting the project was the sometimes subtle but important **difference in the values, organisational culture, language and political context of the different groups involved**. In particular, representatives from Big *hART* expressed some frustration with the bureaucratic culture of NSW Department of Housing. A number of those interviewed expressed the view that the Department “seemed to be worried that things would get out of control”. Another observed that the bureaucratic obligations of

government had a tendency to work against Big *hART*'s mode of operating observing that, "government organisations demand assurances, almost guarantees that certain outcomes will be achieved. They want to know ahead of time what will happen ... this is both not possible nor the way that art and creative processes work". As another remarked, "this kind of work demands that people take risks ... governments seem to be in the business of trying to control all the risks ... what they are doing is working at cross purposes, sucking out the imagination". However, some within government recognised these constraints. Indeed, when discussing what might be done differently in the future, the Director General of NSW Department of Housing said that, "in future we will have less reservations and more courage when it comes to this kind of work". At times this created considerable uncertainty and some conflict for those involved in Northcott Narratives. For example, the regular threat to the tenure of the Community Development worker made it difficult to forward plan with any kind of certainty.

At the same time, some representatives from government felt that others did not always appreciate the obligations and challenges facing public authorities. For example, one senior government official remarked that he was a little disappointed that the Department of Housing Client Services Team "did not get much credit for the behind the scenes work they did". As another remarked, "it might be right to say that this kind of work demands more than a 9-5 mentality so you can build intimacy with community members. However, there are also legal and statutory demands on government staff".

The final major challenge confronting the Big *hART* team involved **leaving Northcott Estate**. When asked, many tenants would have liked to see Big *hART* stay for a longer period of time. As one tenant put it, "the only thing I would change is to have them stay longer ... it was marvellous having them here, both as friends and as people who helped us achieve so much ... they were beautiful". This meant that

some went through a process of grief when Big *hART* left Northcott. This was perhaps magnified because two other **key** figures, the Crime Prevention Officer and the Community Development Officer left at a similar time. Although these two officers were replaced, the loss was poignantly felt because this occurred within a short period of time.

With the benefit of hindsight and more control over people's life circumstances perhaps it may have been helpful to plan for different players to 'spread out' when they moved on from Northcott. As one tenant put it, "I appreciate it was a little out of their control but maybe they could have staggered when each of the main people left".

What these challenges reveal is four important principles.

1. That it is important to develop an understanding of why a program works and what can be done to improve it. Consequently this is elaborated in section two of this report.
2. That it is important to develop an understanding of what can go wrong with a program and how to correct it. Hence, there must be opportunities for mid-course reflections and corrections.
3. That there must be opportunities for the lead organisation—Big *hART*—to reflect on the work as a whole and its effects.
4. That in order for a program to improve, there must be a community-wide investment in improving it; this includes both a micro (individual program) and macro (partnership wide) commitment.

Consequently, the evaluation team was able to observe that as a result of the work at Northcott different lessons emerged for different groups. For example, there was learning for participants, Big *hART*, the community, and partner organisations.

For **participants** there were-

- increasing levels of involvement for many that lead to changes. This included such long term changes as returning or turning to education for the first time and providing leadership within the community.

For **Big hART** there were-

- increasing levels of understanding and skill development in working with different communities such as the aged and infirm, and the networking required to support such communities. Long term this builds the knowledge and skills base with the organisation.

For the **Northcott community** there were-

- increasingly apparent levels of confidence, ability, and interactions with others. Long term this builds local democracy and an increased capacity for the community to advocate on their own behalf.

For **partner organisations** there were-

- increasing levels of trust that arts-based practice, despite being neither “curative” nor circumscribed by predetermined outcomes, has an important contribution to make in building human capacity.

It is this evidence that enables the evaluation team to observe that Big hART is a ‘pillar organisation’ with a capacity to leverage a community’s creative resources for positive change, thereby building richer community life. Big hART is indeed exemplary in its ability to use culture to build a better life for a community. Northcott Narratives exemplifies Walter-Kuhne’s comments that:

[T]he arts... in today’s society cross cultural and ethnic boundaries and allows people to transcend their differences. Today, more than ever, the need to clarify misunderstandings, erase social strife and celebrate diversity is vividly apparent. It is through understanding our diversity that we can appreciate our shared humanity (2005 pp. xiii-xiv).

Section Two

Northcott Narratives – some features of the Big *h*ART approach

In addition to auditing and comparing project achievements with project plans it was also critical that the evaluation examine other elements of the work including any additional achievements that were not necessarily anticipated, how the work was able to be accomplished and the unique features of Big *h*ART's approach.

The second section will then buttress the earlier discussion with the literature on community cultural development and make a series of observations about the features of Big *h*ART's mode of operating. This section is based on an 'open inquiry' into the methods and practice adopted by Big *h*ART and its partners to bring about personal, social and organisational change at Northcott.

This task, of understanding the work of Big *h*ART, is not an easy one. At times it demands tools well beyond the limitations of language and social research. As Adams and Goldbard (2001, p. 38) remind us, this kind of work—community cultural development—is an **art**, not a **science**. “The most skilled practitioners rely on qualities of sensitivity and intuition that cannot be quantified or standardized. Indeed, those who focus too closely on ‘models’, ‘replicability’ and ‘best practice’ tend to produce dull work, lacking depth and heart”. As Mattessich et al (2007) drawing on Einstein note—*not all things that count can be counted*.

Another challenge confronting researchers and practitioners of community cultural development is the inclination to rely on ideas generated from elsewhere or abstracting from conceptual terrain and theoretical traditions that are distant from the practice itself. Or as Adams and Goldbard (2001, p. 21) put it, “real development consists in involving and drawing upon people's own cultures, not imposing middle-class culture”.

On the other hand, there were times we were reminded of what others have said about similar work. There were also many moments

when we noticed Big *h*ART workers, tenants and others using theoretical ideas and conceptual devices that we recognised from the literature. So at other times in our interviews we also realised that some of our ideas, although taken from elsewhere, seemed to be of some value and relevance to people involved in the work at Northcott.

What follows then is discussion of ideas that are ‘grounded’ in the interviews we had with people at Northcott but also come from our reading of the literature concerned with scholarly fields relevant to the work.

Art and cultural development

The first and most obvious observation about the work at Northcott is that its success was in large part because of Big *h*ART’s use of arts practice in combination with community development. Indeed the work at Northcott was often characterised by Big *h*ART and others as an example of ‘community cultural development’. In this style of community practice artists, performers, community organizers, funding bodies and participants join in order to use creativity, arts practice and cultural expression to help people make changes in their community setting. Artists and performers use a range of visual, theatrical, digital, musical and textual forms and choose mediums that are relevant and interesting to community (Sonn, Drew & Kasat, 2002 p. 12). The intention is to help draw out people’s taken-for-granted—or tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1967)—and help them plan for a better future using creativity and imagination (Kins & Peddie, 1996). Not only can this help to transform the lives of individuals but arts and cultural development often shifts people beyond the limitations of their own self-interests and motivates them to work in relationship with others (Adams & Goldbard, 2002 p. 33). In this way art becomes both a means through which communities can help work on their own lives and social conditions, and also creates cultural ‘productions’ to help make public the stories of those who have ‘had it hard’ (Thomas & Rappaport 1996).

In other words, part of the success of the work at Northcott was due to the fact that they used the poetics available at Northcott to help create changes in people's lives. As Big *hART* founders put it, the work helps create new work from "the naive, ugly originality found when people on the fringes of the society are given the opportunity for self-expression, access to an arts mentor and advocacy in national arts forums" (Bates & Rankin, 1996 p. 28).

Big *hART*'s active use of arts-based work also helped people at Northcott, particularly those who had little background in formal governmental processes, re-evaluate and expose themselves to "previously unimaginable ideas which challenge their modes of operation". Importantly they also helped people confront outsiders with some of the not so palatable details of their lives providing evocative means through which to influence decision-making (Matarasso 1997).

This style of working with a community was critical as it also helped effect a multitude of changes with a range of people. By using a number of artistic methods and arranging many different projects over the four years at Northcott, Big *hART* helped encourage the participation of a diverse number of people. As arts practice was often seen as non-threatening and 'light', this method of working also helped those who had not met feel able to work together. At the same time, arts and cultural development allowed Big *hART* and its partners to work across and make connections between a range of otherwise truncated social policy 'issues' and portfolio areas. For example, it was used to encourage better health and wellbeing, improve the public amenity at the Estate, educate people, encourage more active citizenship, help tenants plan their future and record history. It also helped with achieving different outcomes for different organisations, both allowing instrumental (implementing a range of DoH policies and assisting with policing) and transformational (changing and reconfiguring the Tenants Association) (Mills and Brown, 2004 p. 9).

Cultural vitality—presence, participation, support

Big *hART*'s attention to the cultural dimensions of Northcott was another feature of its work. Increasingly the 'cultural' elements of community life has increasingly been recognized as important to planning, for quality of life, health and wellbeing and in helping sustain social relationships and build bridges between groups. Hawkes (2001), for example, identifies culture as one of the four (along with the economy, the ecology and the social) 'pillars of sustainability'. In so doing he positions the 'cultural milieu' of a community as one of the foremost shapers of and a vital element in its future.

Recently the work of those interested in 'cultural vitality' has emerged in an attempt to understand the factors that help create healthy community life. In part this work has derived from the US Urban Institute's Arts and Culture Indicators Project (ACIP) and reflects an attempt to establish "evidence of creating, disseminating, validating, and supporting arts and culture as a dimension of everyday life in communities" (Jackson, Kabwasa-Green, & Herranz, 2006 p. 4). In addition, this work has also helped others recognize that "arts and culture are also resources that come out of communities rather merely resources that are 'brought to' communities from the outside" (Jackson et al., 2006 p. 13).

According to the Urban Institute, there are three dimensions that help produce cultural vitality. The first is **presence** of opportunities for cultural participation. In the case of the Northcott Narratives project these opportunities were provided through developmental workshops in music, oral history, film, drama, and performance leading to the award winning "Tennant by Tenant" photography exhibition, "3 days in November" concert that featured original song writing by Northcott residents, the award winning performances of "StickybrickS" at the Sydney Festival, and the development of the nationally televised and award winning documentary "900 Neighbours". It is the presence of opportunities that are a precursor to any benefits that might accrue

from involvement with such projects that Big *h*ART provided. Consequently Big *h*ART can be thought of as a ‘pillar organisation’ in ACIP’s terms as they were the key catalyst to such opportunities being presented and as particularly significant in “fostering diverse kinds of cultural activity and participation” (Jackson et al., 2006 p. 4).

The second dimension of cultural vitality is **participation**, that is cultural participation itself. Traditionally the notion of participation in arts and culture has been relatively narrow and often assumed to mean viewing or purchasing professional arts. What the notion of cultural vitality reveals, and reflected in the Northcott Narratives project, is that people participate in many different ways, with various skill levels; individually and collectively, and on a regular or intermittent basis. For example, some individuals contributed original material to performances or exhibitions, others attended skills-based workshops, saw exhibitions and performances, and performed or created arts products themselves. In addition, many residents also participated through the ‘open crowd’⁵ techniques used by community workers and Big *h*ART.

What this meant was that when activity was occurring there would be both direct and indirect involvement by tenants. For example, while some may be creating music, others would be watching from nearby and gradually building both the confidence and ability to participate in the future. Still others participated vicariously through watching from windows or over balconies, either unable or less willing to be directly involved but engaged by what was happening nonetheless.

Participants in these activities highlighted that there was intrinsic value in the activities in and of themselves, that both social and arts-based skills were learnt and developed—including problem solving, and leadership skills—that their creativity was nurtured, as well as the

⁵ The open crowd technique was first developed and elaborated in community cultural development by John Bakes, co-founder of Big *h*ART. Dominic Grenot used this technique to great effect, also noting “interruptions **are** my work”.

social networks developed through them. This could be described as building both social⁶- and cultural capital⁷ where collective art making, collective arts experience and critical discussion are important for thinking about new ways of living (Bourdieu, 1992). Importantly, it is Big *h*ART's commitment to both process and high quality arts practices that provides participants with the means for participants to express their creativity—that which makes us human.

The third dimension of cultural vitality is **support** for cultural participation. Traditionally, support has included attendance at arts events, or tax incentives for support of cultural institutions. However, in the case of Northcott support for participation comes from such pragmatic details such as Big *h*ART actually being 'present' in the community, the way that Big *h*ART provided food for participants to enable them to participate, introduced professional artists as role models, exemplars and mentors for participants, catered for individual levels of confidence and ability when making art, and increasing potential support through the generation of positive media, goodwill, and influencing policy development in a number of partner organisations.

In short, Big *h*ART promotes what Goldbard (2006) describes as 'new creative communities' through developing works that "provoke discourse, stimulate participation and encourage action" (p. 11). In the Northcott Narratives project this was reflected in (i) the astonishing number of 'good news' media stories—134 print media and 16 TV—generated across print, radio and TV; (ii) through the numbers of residents directly (or indirectly) involved in each of the high profile art works produced, and (iii) the way that the community has subsequently taken action on its own account to some difficulties faced—each of

⁶ Williams (1997 p. 10) defines 'social capital' as "the capacity for mutual cooperation towards the collective well-being within a community or wider society".

⁷ 'Cultural capital' is a term popularised by Bourdieu (1986) and refers to knowledge that enables an individual to interpret particular cultural codes.

these, residents and partner organisations report, were not conceivable before Big *h*ART came to Northcott. In addition, the critique of the Northcott Narratives arts products that has occurred through the media is a form of cultural participation **in and of itself** and both validates the project and promotes further participation.

Linking individuals and community

There is also important evidence that Northcott Narratives created opportunities for powerful links to be made between individuals and their broader social environment. For example, the individual stories of people from Northcott were critical in framing many of the performances. Many audience members—including funding partners, festival goers and general community members—were emotionally moved by the individual stories told. This was made most evident in the fact that StickybrickS performances were all sold out, each receiving a standing ovation and critical acclaim.

This evaluation revealed evidence that Big *h*ART also helped develop skills in individuals, not only knowledge-orientated but also in relation to the art of living one's life. There is evidence that residents developed certain competencies. These include the ability to act autonomously, function in socially heterogeneous groups, use tools interactively and build artistic and cultural competencies. One resident, for example, described how the work helped “bring you in touch with different parts of yourself and your life”.

In many cases people spoke about how the work helped them feel more positive about themselves, enriching their esteem as those who had ‘copped a lot because we live at Northcott’. In the words of one resident, “what the project taught me was that it doesn’t mean that you are less of a citizen because you live in public housing”; another echoed: “it doesn’t mean you are a nothing, you are a something”.

However, the work of Northcott Narratives was not simply a solitary process: Big *h*ART also helped create ‘social development’, actively encouraging people to move beyond their own self-interests and

explore how they can become more fully a part of the lives of others. In a way project participants were provided with opportunities and supported to go inwards to access and develop their own inner resources as a precursor to going outward to others. For example, one resident related, “some people had talents they never knew”. To borrow from Guignon (2005, p. 163): the work “has a social dimension insofar as it brings with it a sense of belongingness and indebtedness to the wider social context that makes it possible”.

Consequently, Big *h*ART helped individuals, many of whom had not previously met, explore how their personal and individual identities and life situations can be used to make connections with others living at Northcott. As one resident noted, “what Big *h*ART did was to get people out of their doors”.

What is different about Big *h*ART’s arts-based practice to other forms of intervention is that a cultural space was created that gave tenants a chance to encounter each other as human beings, to know each other’s stories and so to build community—StickybrickS being one example where a new and different space was created for this to happen. It is this process of taking the lives and stories of Northcott residents, and making powerful art with a positive social statement informed by these stories “that enlarges [for residents] a vision of possibility” (Goldbard, 2006 p. 54). As one resident described: “people are coping better, they can part of the community, they don’t have to be on their own”.

At its simplest level, participants who took part in the art-making and story-collecting worked on something positive that nurtured trust and brought people together. This required active participation, residents actually getting out from their flats and doing something that involved positively interacting with others. It is these people particularly who became a source of hope for the community. This was reflected in increased leadership by the re-invigorated tenant’s association, the changes within the community centre, the larger numbers of volunteers

who work there, the bigger number and diverse nature of the programs now run through it, and the increased levels of participation by residents within the community. This whole idea was encapsulated in Big *hART*'S philosophy at Northcott of "saying hello". As one resident reports, "we can change what happens in our space but not the broader problems", and another described how Northcott is "now a softer place to land".

Big *hART* also helped create relationships between tenants and others. As Big *hART* put it, this was the "life-blood" of the work. These relationships include building connections and rapport with funding partners, program partners such as various government and non-government agencies—including in the case of Northcott the NSW Police, Department of Housing, St Vincent's Health, Sydney City Council—and project participants themselves.

Whatever else it is reputed to breed, "familiarity [in this form of practice] seems to engender awareness and often caring" (Goldbard, 2006 p. 42). In this way the project developed 'bonding' amongst residents. For example, after a performance of StickybrickS one participant described how she saw the "feelings of pride and elation [on people's faces]. We did it altogether, it will stay with me forever". Another agreed: "The feeling I got was one of elation, we've really done something here".

Working in threes

Another intriguing feature of the work at Northcott, and one that is undoubtedly connected to the success in relation to community building and social development, was that often things happened in triads (the involvement of three or more elements to make something work). For example, when asked to explain why they thought things worked so well, many referred to the three-way working relationship between Big *hART*, the Surry Hills Police and the Department of Housing. In particular, people associated the strength of the work with the three leading figures that represented the face of these

organisations: Chris Saunders, Brett Degenhardt and Dominic Grenot respectively. Specifically, one tenant involved in the Community Centre attributed much of the success to the “devotion of Brett, Dom and Chris”. Another said that “75% of the success had to do with the goodwill, personality and relationship between Brett, Dom and Chris”.

From the project’s inception the three organisations carried out the work together, literally door knocking together, planning events together, helping to resource and support projects together, helping write media releases together and helping to support the establishment of the reformed Tenant’s Association. In talk about community development and capacity there is much rhetoric about the importance of ‘partnerships’. In the work at Northcott the idea of ‘partnership’ was realised in very practical and concrete ways, most importantly working together in triads.

The evaluation team also saw this three-way working relationship in the Tenant by Tenant project. Initially Keith Saunders was invited to work ‘one-on-one’ with tenants to produce photographic portraits. In this way he would have been involved in a dyad relationship simply working with the tenant who was the subject of his chosen photographic shots. Instead Keith intuitively created with tenants a triangulated set of relationships through acting as a person bringing two others to work together. In the Tenant by Tenant project Keith created the chance for one tenant to invite another to be the subject of their portrait. In this simple but powerful act Keith gave people a tool for entering into a relationship with another without the fear and trepidation often associated with first meetings. Keith helped this occur by running a series of training workshops helping novices work out the composition, lighting and location, frame shots and edit proofs. Not only did this help produce splendid photographic work, the challenge of trying to capture a sense of people lives and personalities helped lead people into discussions about family, background, hopes and

dreams and levels of intimacy that would be difficult in other circumstances.

Those with whom we spoke concurred with Big *hART*'s claim that this project helped create "great moments of connection" amongst those who otherwise might never have met, let alone worked together. As Keith reported, the act of portrait making provided the conditions where "there is a sense of shared intimacy in creating a portrait, the portrait-maker must really look at their subject; engage them, and listen to them, to truly capture them ... in that half to three quarters of hour three people are talking together about things you wouldn't ordinarily be able to".

The video production "14 Storeys" was carried out in a similar fashion to the approach used in *Tenant by Tenant*. Here Big *hART* workers mentored 14 tenants who took on the role of filmmaker to create a story about another tenant. Again, this encouraged strong relationships and bonds being built between three people; the filmmaker (a tenant), the subject of the story (another tenant) and the mentor (Big *hART* worker).

The stage production 'StickybrickS' was also made possible through the involvement of three types of people; tenants, professional actors recruited by Big *hART* and the Big *hART* production team. In this way they were also able to invite to this triad an additional element; outsider audiences. There were a number of moments during the performance when three or more production medium were used in tandem; for example stage acting, dance, music and video. During the presentation of awards, featured at different intervals in the performance, three types of tenants were involved; those who presented the award (symbolized by the presentation of a portrait painting), the subject of the portrait and a person accepting the award. All three sets of people were acknowledged and celebrated for their achievements.

A similar technique instigated by Dominic Grenot involved the creation of triad relationships. Dominic reported that in the early stages of his work he, Chris Saunders and Brett Degenherdt began by door-knocking and chatting with people along the walkways, lift-wells and in the car park of the estate. As they made people's acquaintance and built up their contacts they would take on the practice of stopping someone other than the person they were chatting with, asking them "have you met such and such before". "Initially", said Dominic, "most people were shy and would just simple shake the hand of the other tenant or say hello. However, the next time they would stop and join in the conversation until eventually they started doing it together themselves".

These triad models have their roots in Big hART's work elsewhere where at least two key people, an arts mentor and an organiser or producer, get together with those from a host community. The arts mentor combines their skills in stagecraft or other arts practice with the skill of the organizer in getting some of the practical arrangements done. Together they share these skills and help produce art and performance with those from a community setting with a story to tell.

To make this observation, said the sociologist Georg Simmel, is to understand that a triad establishes the conditions for a fundamentally different set of social relationships than does a dyad. In a dyad the individuality and established identity of the social actor (individual or organisation) is more likely to be preserved and less likely to be challenged or transformed. This is because "each of the two feels himself confronted only by the other, not by a collectivity above him" (Simmel, 1950 p. 60). So in a dyad we are less likely to see conditions that prompt change and 'community' beyond the individuals. In a triad people are more likely to have to negotiate with others, consider new ideas and suppress their individual interests for the interests of those beyond themselves. In other words, in the triad we have the simplest

structure in which people are forced to move beyond themselves and into 'community' (Coser, 1971).

By involving people in social relationships with two others (or two other groups) Big *h*ART moved people beyond the immediacy of their own circumstances, created conditions for people to start to work things out with others. This created a range of social possibilities where people began to make contact and work together with those they had not met on things they would not have imagined possible. It also allowed Big *h*ART to step back from its involvement without completely undoing the achievements of four years, confident that the work would keep going (now with the addition of the Tenants Association).

Social democracy and community participation

The work at Northcott also has much in common with the community participatory tradition. Indeed routinely Big *h*ART drew upon methods that could be described as falling under the broad rubric of Participatory Learning Analysis (PLA) or Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). These methods are prompted by claims that top-down development or governance has serious shortcomings. The view is that externally imposed and expert-driven forms of policy and community governance have serious limitations, particularly for groups who traditionally have poor access to decision-making processes (Cooke and Kothari, 2001 p. 5). The central motivation of adopting participatory methods is to allow the concerns of "the people", particularly those who otherwise are marginal to decision-making, to become paramount in any attempts to plan and manage matters that affect them. Implicit in this work is the supposition that the knowledge and active involvement of "the people" will transform planning and lead to improved outcomes (Mosse, 2001 p. 16).

Arguably in this form of cultural participation "people can bring all they are and all they value to the work: their minds and bodies, their histories and relationships, their deepest meanings and beliefs... to

make something meaningful to themselves and to the whole community". In the words of Goldbard, "this foreshadows true democracy and full, vibrant citizenship" (2006 p. 14), and the Department of Housing particularly noted how there was now a "stronger local democracy" at work in Northcott. It is the combination of presence, participation and support that make possible a fuller understanding of the impact of Big *h*ART's intervention.

Unintended consequences

As has already been demonstrated, there is much evidence that project objectives and other plans were carried out with a great deal of success. However, the successes of the Northcott Narratives Project did not end here. In addition to meeting objectives such as the reduction of crime, impacting on the quality of life in the Estate and producing good art a string of other things happened. Indeed one of the most impressive features of the Big *h*ART work was that a great many unintended and positive consequences occurred during the course of their time at Northcott.

For example, the renaissance of the community centre at Northcott was not something directly planned at the beginning of Big *h*ART's involvement. Nor could it have been predicted that so much depth and frequency of activity would occur at the Centre. Rather the Centre, poorly used at the beginning of Northcott Narratives, was initially seen simply as one potential space to use to gathering interest from tenants and use for various workshops. However, as all of the different groups acknowledge, the formation of the Surry Hills Tenants Association, the energy of key tenants, the concerted efforts on the part of Dominic and Brett and the popularity of initial Big *h*ART events all combined to make the Centre a space that would continue to become more important in the daily lives of tenants and the Estate.

Likewise much of the production work occurred as a consequence of Big *h*ART's style, goodwill and time spent at Northcott rather than reflecting specific and carefully prearranged plans at the beginning of

their work. This is not to imply that production occurred by accident or in spite of planning. Rather Big *hART*'s approach was to carefully allow projects and performance to successfully emerge from the richness of their relationships with people and the everyday involvement in life at Northcott. As previously mentioned, the 'Tenant by Tenant' project started with an invitation to Keith Saunders to produce portrait work of tenants and became a project that was actively 'directed' by tenant photographers. In a similar way in the early days of work at Northcott the initial idea was to have Belvoir Theatre produce a stage production with the Theatre telling the stories of tenants (it became 'The Light on the Hill'). So too the World Health Organisation accreditation of Northcott as a Safe Community was not something that had been imagined until relatively late in Big *hART*'s involvement.

The scale and number of creative projects was also something that was not so much unintentional as unexpected. As one Big *hART* staff remarked, "we didn't imagine that we'd get so many production works going ... we started with the idea that perhaps we could do one thing with Belvoir ... of course it is the Big *hART* way, we start with a seed and often many things grow".

A series of more personal consequences were not specifically planned. In response to a question about the impact Big *hART*'s work had on her this person recounted that as a consequence of a disability at 21 years of age she was told she would never walk again. She rhetorically asked, "who's not going to walk again? And here I was dancing on a stage with 2000 people watching. I wish my Mum was here to there, I danced in the Sydney Festival!" Another man involved in StickybrickS told of how proud he was of being involved in a performance that moved others in such powerful ways. Satisfied with the ability of StickybrickS to tell the story of Northcott he recounted, "at the end of the performance grown men came up to me and said they had tears in their eyes ... we were able to make grown men weep by telling them our story".

Emergent practice and improvisation in community work

The ability to allow this to happen reminded us that Big *h*ART's approach has much in common with the emphasis on 'emergent practice' in the Reggio Emilia educational tradition. LeBlanc (2007) describes those following this tradition in the town of Reggio Emilia in Italy as people who consciously embrace the element of surprise, of not-too-much-certainty and an acknowledgement that as life itself is unpredictable, so must education and community practice be. In much the same way Big *h*ART adopted a way of working that consciously and carefully avoided over-prescribing outcomes, rather keener on allowing planning to emerge from a combination of deep relationships, respectful recording of tenant's accounts in their language and courageously allowing projects to 'emerge' from the richness of normal and everyday life at Northcott. In this sense, a guiding principle of Big *h*ART's work is that it is processual.

As a consequence, the work of Northcott Narratives involved building on what was of interest, of value and in forms that were meaningful to tenants of Northcott. Much like the Reggio Emilia teacher (c.f. Schiller 1995) Big *h*ART workers started by establishing from the experience of tenants the topics, the themes and the language that would become the content of the work they did. Through door-knocking, community barbeques, workshops and the various projects Big *h*ART workers recorded, drew, collected oral histories, wrote songs, took photos and 'mapped' life at Northcott. So rather than involving a great deal of formalizing and formularising 'interventions', Big *h*ART workers acted as a provocation and reference point for things that grew out of what might be called the 'rich normality' of people's lives (LeBlanc 2007).

This also demonstrated the important part that 'improvisational performance' played in Big *h*ART's method. According to Farmer (2005, p. 1) in improvisation actors are taught to free themselves of the need to have complete control over the performance. Far from being a

hindrance that needs to be fixed, managed, immediately resolved or perhaps covered up, the experience of ‘not knowing’ is precisely what is necessary for improvisational performance.

In improvisation actors are also taught that their response in a performance depends entirely on context. This means that the very act of improvisation mitigates against a script that might be generated in a formalistic way. Actors need to be skilled in relating ‘with regard’ to the previous speaker and those around them. Each speaker or actor has to see the utterances and actions of those who come before as “a good offer” to be built upon.

Not only did Big *hART* use improvisation in the various performance and creative projects, it also applied an improvisational approach in its work with the Northcott community. As Farmer (2005, p. 1) suggests, it could be helpful to see the whole Northcott Narrative project as “improvisational performance”.

In contrast to much of the community work that we have seen, Big *hART* and others they worked with were more prepared to step outside their official roles and functions as ‘directors’, instead literally and metaphorically sharing the stage with the community. Although the work at Northcott was partly shaped by obligations to ‘deliver’ outcomes promised to funding bodies, the story of what was achieved is not of an organisation tightly bound by a script. Rather, acting on the ‘good offer’ of the Northcott community Big *hART* staff and others such as the Community Development and Crime Prevention Officers drew people together as performers, encouraging new relationships and situations, thus creating a performatory environment (Farmer, 2005 p. 4). In no way could Big *hART* people have known too far in advance who would be involved and how they would come together. Yet this uncertainty, this unknown, was precisely the ingredient Big *hART* worked with to help push people to go beyond established relationships and ways of doing things. Indeed, this is one of the defining characteristics of arts practice—that people shape ‘materials’

as they are being shaped by them, bringing forth that which is not yet fully known (Greene, 1995).

No only did Big *h*ART help create performances and productions, they also routinely drew on performance metaphors to speak about life and encourage transformation at Northcott. People talked about giving tenants 'centre stage', helping them 'find their voices' and encouraging them to 'act out dramas'. As Farmer (2005, p. 2) argues, this powerfully created the conditions that encourage people to imagine how things might be different, to test out and experiment with identities, representations of self and community and play out new roles and possibilities. On and off the stage, in and out of the various productions Northcott tenants had a go at doing what they perhaps may never have done before or could not imagine ever achieving. In other words, to see things as if they could be otherwise (Greene, 2001). In this way participants were encouraged to do what the Russian educational psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1987, p. 213) calls, "performing ahead of themselves". This helped them to speak up and build their accounts of life at Northcott. As one tenant suggested, "it helped people get out of their places, get together and telling their stories". It also helped them try new things, going beyond themselves, experimenting with new roles and taking on new challenges. This approach to community work as improvisation prompts what the Russian actor and director Nicolas Evreinoff (1927, p. 22-23) described as "the instinct of theatricalization ... the desire to be 'different', to do something that is 'different', to imagine oneself in surroundings that are 'different' from the commonplace surroundings of our everyday life". It is through this process of embodying someone different to ourselves and immersing ourselves in it that we reflect on who we are. This leads to an understanding that "identity is a process, not a fixity" (Haskell cited in *The Australian* July 25, 2007).

Storytelling

Another important reason for the success at Northcott was because of Big *hART*'s decision to make storytelling or narrative central. Storytelling was important in a number of ways. Combining storytelling with tactile and active work (eg. while at music workshops and carrying out story telling as part of filming or the Tenant by Tenant photographic work) both helped people recall their lives and give life to the various projects. In this way story telling mixed with performance and production work acted as a form of mnemonics, improving and bringing to a public forum people's memory of life at Northcott and shaping the very subject matter in the performance work (Horsley, 2007 p. 1).

Storytelling also acted to help people within Northcott to build the confidence and trust necessary to talk with each other despite the fact that many were frightened and scared about having contact with people outside the confines of their units. There is much rhetorical stock placed in the idea of 'building community engagement' in public policy and community development language. Involving people in storytelling was an important practical way of putting substance to this idea of 'engagement', helping Big *hART* to breach or challenge people's tendency to recoil from social interaction. By creating spaces for people to tell their stories Big *hART* helped tenants extend their contacts. In other settings people might describe this act as network building, coming together with others as a consequence of a shared experience of a story. Cleverly early on in the project Big *hART* and their friends began using the grab "its harder to hurt someone if you know their story" as a way to signal the powerful part that storytelling had in their work.

Narrative work was also successful because of its ability to call forth and help people contend with emotions, trauma and situations in a safe way. Combining storytelling with theatre (playing out story amongst a community of fellow actors) also allowed for tenants to start

to grapple with difficult situations. For example, it gave many a repertoire to contend with awful events such as the two deaths of those who jumped from the building in the later stages of Big *hART*'s time at Northcott. As Horlsey (2007 p. 266) suggests, in this way storytelling allows a community to safely examine otherwise hidden troubles and solutions can be sought for the plight of characters who are real but narrativised.

Storytelling also worked because it is a very helpful method for helping people evoke in others (an audience outside of Northcott) a range of emotions and sentiments that they otherwise would not be exposed to or necessarily comprehend. Storytelling functioned as a way of getting into the heads and hearts of a range influential people. Thus for many 'outsiders' associated with Northcott it was the personal stories of tenants lives that they remembered and cited when we interviewed them. In fact, one noticeable feature of the interviews with politicians and senior bureaucrats was their ability to speak with intimacy of the personal stories and everyday situations of Northcott tenants. People whose brief was enormous, whose constituency was as large as any in the country, when asked to reflect on the achievements of the project drew directly on the stories of tenants.

Perhaps part of Big *hART*'s success is a consequence of the fact that the genre of storytelling is both familiar and popular as a tool of persuasion in politics. According to people like Lakoff (2004), there is no more important skill in modern politics than the art of narrative, particularly the use of metaphor and short picture making 'grabs' to convey meaning. Because narrative 'frames' a political message so powerfully it has the ability to "raise the status and influence of the storyteller". The choice to 'frame' the project as narrative allowed Big *hART* to lift the collective political status of the Northcott Estate and tenants.

Use of local language, metaphors and figurative speaking

Critical here was the fact that Big *h*ART staff put great stock in spending time listening carefully to accounts of life at Northcott. They listened not only to what people said but how they spoke about their lives. As one Big *h*ART worker explained, “during the first year or year and a half our main emphasis was in listening and recording people’s stories so that this could form the basis of what we did and how we did it”. Instead of relying on what Don Watson (2002) has called ‘New Public Language’, weasel words or the rhetoric of community service and government professionals, Big *h*ART consciously sought out the tenant’s ways of speaking about life at Northcott. Big *h*ART workers listened intently and recorded copiously the ideas and stories of Northcott tenants in their own language, particularly seeking out colloquial and idiomatic expressions and carefully noting the lexicon of Northcott. These words became the basis for much of production work. Big *h*ART also took many of the great one-liners that tenants used and adopted them to help frame the language of media releases, promotional material, conference addresses and ways of talking about their work. Often this language drew on metaphors, synonyms, and other picture painting poetics.

As consequence, the language adopted by those involved in the Northcott Narratives was often evocative, in part because it was ‘authentic’ to the experiences of people, in part because it contrasts with the often banal language of public officials, in part because it often involved humour, and in part because it is rooted in figurative speaking. For example, grabs like the following have their genesis in Big *h*ART’s method, listening with regard and choosing to honour what has been said and the way it has been said:

‘Its harder to hurt someone if you know them’,

‘Say hello’

‘StickybrickS’

‘The grand old lady of Surry Hills has seen her fair share of dark days and shady characters’

'Right in the heart of Sydney, abutting the CBD, there's a little village we call home – Northcott'
'We're the audience'
'I moved in with six milk crates, a blanket and a black and white portable TV'
'I grow red geraniums along the corridor'
'My next door neighbour is marvellous, I don't know what I'd do without him'
'I mean there's always been stories flying around in the past ... Suicide Towers and you know. I used to call Northcott 'The Mausoleum', the death house. That was before I started to work at the Community Centre.'
'I'm gonna live to be a hundred and get me a telegram from the Queen. So I hope this old place is still here.'

It is this simple but profound decision to choose local language terminology over professional and often highly abstract conceptual tools that reminds us of the tradition inspired by the work of Paulo Freire. According to this tradition, any attempt at development with a community must begin by community workers bracketing their often reductive and disabling conceptual devices, instead spending time noting what Freire called the 'generative themes' and language forms of a community. Without regard for these 'pregnant images or concepts of great moment' and 'uncoerced self-portraiture', attempts at community transformation are destined to be meaningless (Adams & Goldbard, 2001 p. 28).

The use of building metaphors and the Northcott building as a metaphor serves as perhaps the most poignant example in this regard. The idea of 'StickybrickS' drew on the beautiful metaphor of rendering. According to Chris Saunders the idea for the name of the production came from the act of listening to stories about Northcott. "We look at these bricks and this mortar that's been here for 45 years and we sort of thought, well, there's a lot of story stuck to the walls here, so that idea of the sticky bricks that have got these stories and narratives stuck to them" (Fitzsimmons 2006). In a number of ways it seemed to us that Big hART's work involved rendering. They did this in its most formal sense of giving help or providing a service; as in to render help. As implied earlier, they helped translate for outsiders the lives of

tenants and other at Northcott; as in to render a language. Of course their work portrayed the lives of people in art, literature, music and through acting, as in to render a performance. Their work also helped bring respect to the life and tenants of Northcott; as in to render authority where it is appropriately due. Regularly audiences were challenged to reconsider the way they thought of Northcott; as in to render or submit something for consideration or approval. We can see evidence that people were helped to transform themselves; as in to render something to become something new. At times this involved Big *hART* releasing complete control of their role as directors and reciprocating the generosity of tenants; as in surrendering part of themselves and rendering in exchange. Perhaps too there were moments when the work involved helping strengthen the ‘foundations’ at Northcott; as in rendering a wall with an extra coat to help complete the process of building.

Using spaces and places

Another important element in the work at Northcott was Big *hART*’s sensitivity to and use of space (both physical space and relational space). Much of the performance work involved making connections between the lives of people of Northcott and the place they lived in. As mentioned earlier, Big *hART* helped create a space for the stories of Northcott.

Particularly critical in this regard was a style of working that celebrated the chaotic use of space and the importance of conflict and dissent. As one worker noted, “our model starts with the idea that conflict is not a bad thing. We try and free up spaces that can include chaos and conflict, so people can harness the opportunities that this gives us. We’ve been trying to model for people at Northcott how you can share a living space while still having differences”. As another said, “this work is a little like organised chaos ... we delight in and savour the moments of conflict and disorganisation because it is in these

moments that we see opportunities to build things with the people of Northcott”.

In addition, spaces in and around the Estate were routinely made use of as ‘stages’ and ‘backdrops’ for productions such as StickybrickS and Tenant by Tenant. At one and the same time space was used as a metaphor, a location for meeting, the means for building trust between people, an object to change, a character in performances, a stage, an objective of the project, an art gallery and that which can help contend with people’s differences.

It was obvious that during their time at Northcott Big *h*ART put much attention to the look, feel, architecture and impact of the immediate environment of the Estate. In many ways the building, regularly personified in people’s accounts, was the first and greatest influence on the work. It both shaped the necessity of the project and influenced the practice of Big *h*ART. Perhaps we could steal from the Reggio Emilia tradition who talk of the school environment as the “third teacher” and say that the John Northcott Estate building was the “third director” of the Northcott Narratives work.

The use of the ‘Open Crowd’ technique was also clearly an important part of the method of Big *h*ART and others at Northcott. This method was built on the premise that it is important to organise in such a way as to allow people to move in and out of events and projects, to allow people to attend on the periphery if they wish, recognize that different people have different levels of involvement in different things, and maximize the chance for all if they wish, to become involved. As the Big *h*ART literature puts it, “this method builds a project structure that recognises that not all people will have direct and immediate involvement in all activities and events. Open Crowd method ensures that regardless of any individual’s level of direct involvement, all feel that they have been and can be involve din any activity or event. At Northcott any event or activity is preceded by an invitation to all tenants to become involved in a way they feel they would like to”.

Important in this method was the decision to have most events held in front of the Community Centre, a space that is central, highly visible, easy to get to and open so that there is space for many people and spots for people to be inconspicuous, not immediately obvious or low-key in their involvement. As Big *hART* reported, some people first watched from their balconies. Later they wander through to test things out before joining in or getting involved in a way that was comfortable to them. One account was given of a person who attended performance workshops in the Centre insisting on standing outside the circle of those involved. Each time the workshops would occur this person would stand out of an evermore-larger circle until the room had no space other than inside the circle. At this point the person joined in, remaining an integral part of the performance.

Those interviewed certainly spoke about being comfortable at Big *hART* events. One person reported that the style of workshops, barbeques and other meetings was “a good way of bringing people together, helping people make friends”. Another said that it “brought people together and is still bringing them together”. In particular, it allowed “new tenants and those on the outside to find their way to the Community Centre”. Big *hART* described it in this way:

[t]he open crowd method of intervention allowed for a great increase in the number of tenants coming forward to be involved. Those who participated or told their story felt validated and would go on to tell their neighbours and those they meet about the validation and the experience. Events and activities were highly visible and inviting. Photography shoots took place in lifts, corridors or in the open common areas so as to allow people to see what was going on and test the waters before becoming involved.

Time and timing

The art of time and timing was also vital in the work at Northcott. From the project’s inception Big *hART* was very clear that positive and lasting work could only be achieved if they spent a great deal of time at Northcott. They were adamant that they would spend at least three years at Northcott or not attempt the work at all. To be sure, this has become one of the most important features of the work of Big *hART*.

As Scott Rankin told us, “we will only take something on if we can say to a community, ‘we will be here for a decent amount of time’”. People from Northcott certainly appreciated this fact. As one long time tenant remarked when asked to reflect on the important ingredients for the success of Big *h*ART, “they were here for so long and were here every day to visit us”. Not only was this important for tenants, it also made it possible for Big *h*ART people to develop intimacy and get to know locals. As a consequence, they were seen by people we talked to as “friendly and helpful”, “good on names”, able to “treat people like family” and “involved themselves with everyone and everything while they were here”. Together with and inspired by Dominic and Brett (Big *h*ART’s close working partners) Big *h*ART staff were able to “become part of the furniture” and “as much apart of Northcott as we [tenants] are”. As Dominic Grenot remarked, the fact that Big *h*ART had committed themselves to be at Northcott for an extended time allowed he and the Big *h*ART team to build into their repertoire the art and skill of “just visiting, just dropping in, and seeing if someone is ok, especially if someone’s new to town and doesn’t know the area”.

Careful timing was also something we saw evidence of at Northcott. Regularly in the production work you can see evidence of patience in ample supply. Plans for performance work, the act of walking and meeting tenants and helping establish the Tenants Association all took time and did not emerge at the speed some might desire. As Thompson (2007) suggests, growing a successful community is like tending a delicate flower. Both need to be carefully nurtured but cannot be pushed. Despite what people may want and hope for, both do not develop on demand regardless of the amount of forced attention they receive. Instead it is important to adopt the strategy of “active waiting” (Sull 2005).

Reminiscent of Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh (1991), Big *h*ART’s practice appeared to also involve patches of ‘purposeful meandering’, mindfully stopping from time to time in order to see things more

clearly. Like with the creation of music, where the in-between spaces, silences and gaps are what makes the music, Big *hART* seems to have nurtured the silences and been comfortable with the lack of overt activity. Dominic Grenot put it well when he recalled that he and others in the Northcott Narratives project started to “not talk more and more” (Grenot, 2004).

The phrase ‘loitering with intent’ was regularly used to describe an approach that demanded spending time doing what many may have mistaken for ‘nothing’. Another way of describing this approach was to use the phrase “interruptions are my work”. Northcott’s Community Development Worker Dominic Grenot started to use this term when a colleague questioned his ability to get anything done because of the frequent ‘interruptions’ from tenants who approached him as he walked from his office to another destination. He recalls that at this point he realized that the work demanded a kind of practical patience which “means that I’ve just got to be prepared for interruptions to be my work. I found myself saying to this person, ‘don’t you realize that interruptions are my work’”. The fact was that Big *hART*, Dominic, Brett and others often never knew precisely what was going to happen on any day. As Dominic said, “I didn’t know who I’m going to come across, what’s going to be the drama, what’s going to change, what crisis is going to happen. I try to not consciously plan very much” (Grenot, 2004).

Here again we were reminded of similar work elsewhere. At times Big *hART*’s work had features in common with the International Slow Movement (Honore 2005). This movement has seen the celebration of people who are conscious of the impact speed has in shaping their lives. Some mistakenly claim that this movement involves attempts to slow everything or alter the rate of change. This is not a fair representation of the movement which attempts to value the wisdom of proceeding with care, patience, receptiveness and an unhurried gait. Those involved in this movement emphasise practice that can change

pace to maximize the quality of relationships, food, work, movement, knowledge and relationships. Our contact with tenants provided evidence of a similar capacity by Big hART to change pace. As one tenant said, “they always took things along slowly enough for us to come too”. As Dominic Grenot said “patience was a key ... my advice to people about handling disputes is to be slow”. Whether it was in dealing with tenant complaints about the Department of Housing, police matters on the estate or the creative production of theatre, the pace of the work appears to have operated at what musicians call the *tempo giusto* – the right speed.

As the sociologist Richard Sennett so poetically reminds us, the act of making community is similar to the act of making music. Both demand impeccable timing and the ability to produce both ‘the dominant notes’, ‘the silences’, ‘the minor’ and ‘the harmony’. Sennett cites the performance of the classic Brahms Clarinet Quintet in B Minor, observing that it takes the balancing of dominant and subordinate voices by various musicians. As in this kind of labour, the work of community demands that the various performers “learn to play as one, in unison, but also by learning how to hold back or how to dominate” (Sennett, 2003 p. 213). Both on and off the stage this is what we think frequently happened at Northcott.

Conclusion

Evaluating Social Programs is a challenging undertaking. Nowhere is this more so than in attempts to demonstrate the success of arts practice and cultural development (c.f. Merli 2002). We also now clearly understand that the value or impact of the arts will vary enormously “according to all the factors that make up a person’s identity, including age, class, health, wealth and so on” (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007 p. 137). However, those reviewing the work of Big hART are confronted with an impressive range of material that demonstrates remarkable achievement. The sheer volume of the work, the work produced and the depth of evidence does not allow the evaluation

team to make reference to everything used to draw our conclusions. However, the evidence overwhelmingly supports the conclusion reached by Big *h*ART that “this work has achieved all of its objectives and in most cases exceeded expectations in terms of numbers of people involved and the widespread attention the work has received” (Saunders 2006).

This commendation must also be tempered by an understanding that arts programs, even one with such a profound impact as the Northcott Narratives, is not ‘curative’ or provides a panacea in the way that some might like. Communities that are not well-resourced and buffeted by multiple levels of disadvantage will continue to provide challenges. Consequently, one profound outcome of this evaluation is that the way that the arts affect both individuals and communities is a lot more nuanced than what is currently understood.

In conclusion, the evaluation team found compelling evidence of success in relation to the key objectives as outlined in project plans. In addition, Big *h*ART’s work achieved many other things including having a direct and critical bearing on tenants’ increased involvement in the life of the community, high quality artistic productions beyond the early expectations and increased levels of artistic skills and abilities in project participants. As one tenant proudly announced: “I am growing red geraniums on the eighth floor – I live at Northcott”.

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Appendix

The key plans that shaped the Northcott Narratives project

1. Big hART's Plans for the Northcott Narratives Work.

Big hART Northcott Narratives interventions aim to:

- i) Use skills based initiatives in film, text, music, sound and photography to facilitate tenants telling their stories, increasing their sense of community, resulting in a decrease in violence and isolation and increase in feelings of safety.
- ii) Create an opportunity for the life experiences of tenants to be validated, empowering them to move into the next phase of their lives with increased personal skills to make choices and therefore avoid the atrophy that can be triggered by a culture of dependency.
- iii) Create high quality artworks for national arts forums.
- iv) Affect social and departmental policy in regards to the community development, partnership and service delivery for tenants of public housing.

2. The objectives and proposed benefits of the National Community Crime Prevention Program (NCCPP) - "The Northcott Public Housing Community Wellbeing Work".

Activity Objectives:

- i) To increase individual and community sense of ownership of issues around crime and safety.
- ii) To build community capacity to respond to issues of crime and safety.
- iii) To support and replicate the processes of community development which lead to crime prevention and enhance safety.

Intended Community Safety and Crime Prevention Benefits

- Reduction of criminal incidents including murder, assault, drug-related, vandalism and theft;
- Decrease in inappropriate calls to police;
- Improved response times in emergencies;
- Decrease in costs associated with damages to the building;
- Reduction in feelings of isolation and increased sense of connection to the community;
- Improved knowledge and access to community resources and services;
- Positive changes around identity and well being;
- Reduction in police investigative time;
- Increase in intelligence and reporting to police;
- Reduction in antisocial behaviour;
- Reduction in risk taking behaviour;
- Relationships of trust formed and sustained;
- Increase in community interaction and participation;
- Change in the public perception of Northcott.

3. Objectives for the Australia Council's 'Going Public' Project.

- Publicizing the positive community harmony outcomes from the successful engagement of tenants at Northcott;
- Working with the DoH to recognize the importance of arts-based interventions and to adopt a policy of support for the replication of projects across NSW;
- Using the high public profile of a performance work based on tenants stories staged locally, to create high exposure for the Wellbeing strategy;
- Creating a documentary for ABC TV that draws attention to the project;
- Publishing a boxed set of information, DVD, written material and photographs created by the tenants as a key tool in the community, in government and in the philanthropic sector to promote the Well Being Agenda;
- Using the Northcott Report as a tool to communicate the success of the project as an example of the Well Being Agenda;
- Working closely with the NSW Cabinet Secretary, the Premier and Heads of Departments to open doors across government to promote the Wellbeing strategy;
- Organizing a 30 min presentation to Director Generals and Heads of Department within government;
- Building support at a Federal level for these strategies;
- Disseminating information and training for others in the field who may wish to adopt these approaches;
- Nominating for a World Health Organization Safer Community Award – an international first for a public housing estate.