

# **Can Public Artwork Assist in Remembering, Memorializing and Honoring Events, Heroes and Icons?**

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*Abstract: The presentation will use the Q150 Mosaic Project completed in 2009 as a case study to highlight how remote and often culturally diverse communities can come together to celebrate difference and at the same time unite using the public art project as the catalyst. It will discuss the process used to gather information and how local councils were encouraged to seek out the creative thinkers within their communities, and how they in turn gathered together like-minded creative artists to collaboratively respond to place past and future. The project was completed over a period of about twelve months and involved 73 communities from 73 shires from all over the state of Queensland Australia. The project was intended to encourage communities to look into their past, thoughtfully analyze where they had come from and question their values. From this body of reference they were able to isolate events heroes and icons and make value judgments about their future. Their research manifest as a collection of over 150 panels (individual artworks) covering an area of about 45 square meters.*

**Keywords:** Events, Heroes, Icons, Visions, Remembering, Honoring, Memorializing, Community Values, Consultation, Public Art, Linking Communities



Q150 Mosaic a Work in Progress

## Introduction

**I**N 2009, QUEENSLAND celebrated 150 years of independence from of New South Wales, Australia's first state. This milestone provided a unique opportunity to reflect on and celebrate who Queenslanders were as a people and how they felt about and connected to place.

This milestone presented a unique opportunity for all Queenslanders to reflect on their past achievements and to imagine their collective future. Working in partnership with diverse communities and organizations around the state, the Queensland Government delivered an extensive celebrations program that ran from January to December 2009 and engaged Queenslanders from every shire in the state. The Q150 Mosaic project was initiated in late 2008 and completed in mid 2009, the finished artwork reflects personal interpretations of place past and present and the future in a diversity of media on a three-sided tessellated tile (approx. 90cm x 90cm x 90cm).

The aim of the artist for the Q150 Mosaic, Elise Parups<sup>1</sup>] was to give each shire in Queensland the opportunity to tell the broader community about themselves. Who they were, what their past was all about, and what they thought was in store for the future. The role of the curatorial team was to coordinate the creation of these individual art works. Ultimately bring them together as one art piece made up of many parts and exhibit the collective in a public place for all to enjoy in Queensland's 150<sup>th</sup> year and beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> Elise Parups Is an artist writer and community arts and early childhood educator.



Media file: Press Release Articles

## Place

Carter (1977, p. 158) in his book *The Psychology of Place* states: ‘a place is the result of relationships between actions, conceptions and physical attributes’, he argues that ‘we have not fully identified place until we know:

1. What behavior is associated with, or it is anticipated will be housed in a given locus,
2. What the physical parameters of that setting are, and
3. The descriptions, or conception, which people hold of that behavior in that physical environment.’

The Q150 Mosaic Project is about spirit, culture, community and geographic location. Its about behavior which results from distance at times leading to isolation, which often leads to ignorance of place by others. The latter is a common problem experienced in countries of vast distances like Australia. In these remote regions where physical connection is limited due to the time and expense involved in travel, isolation can, and often does result in a more inward focused and supportive community with stronger local ties and networks.

## Social Capital

According to Rogers (2003)<sup>2]</sup> **social capital** has emerged as a key concept in the re-engagement and revitalization of rural communities. A leading author in social capital Robert Putnam (1993)<sup>3]</sup> describes it as a trust, norms and networks needed to facilitate cooperation. Others

<sup>2</sup> Rogers, M. 2003. Sustainable Enterprise Creation: Making a Difference in Rural Australia and Beyond Maureen Rogers and Rhett Walker. Paper Published in the international Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability (2005). Proceedings of the Sustainability Conference.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Putnam (1993)

such as Cox (1998)<sup>4</sup>] and Bullen and Onyx (1998)<sup>5</sup>] have described it as the ‘glue, which holds society together, created from a myriad of everyday interactions between people’.

Rogers argues that **rural communities** particularly, understand how critical human relationships are to effective mobilization of local skills and resources and that people coming together in various public /community art projects have all identified attributes believed to be essential ingredients of a ‘healthy and socially successful community’. She identifies these common threads as ‘the need for human **warmth**, a feeling of **safety**, a sense of **be-longing** and **connectedness**, a sense of **common purpose** and **identity**, **co-operation**, mutual **respect**, and the ability to **participate**’. Many of these attributes are important parts of the process of creative engagement.

The role of the Q150 Mosaic curatorial team to try to support and acknowledge these attributes long distance was a little more difficult than face- to-face contact. The media and a direct link to the curatorial team meant that participants could seek clarity on any issues, which may have been of concern at any time.

## Diversity

The state of Queensland is made up of 73 shires scattered over an area of 1.73 million square kilometers with about 4.2 million inhabitants. The shires constitute the parameters, the borderlines, which in Queensland work to facilitate manageable administration. The highest percentage of whom lives in the southeast corner of the state.



The State of Queensland, Publicity Reports

As stated earlier this community is an incredibly **diverse** mix, including tropical rainforest dwellers in Cooktown, island communities including Thursday Island off the tip of Cape York Peninsular and Palm Island off Townsville. Some very remote e.g. Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Some shires with populations in the low hundreds, some in the low thousands. Others from desert mining areas like Mount Isa, and the cattle and sheep growing areas of Blackall, Barcalden, Dalby, Longreach and beyond. Others were from the more tourism oriented centre's of the Whitsunday Islands and Cairns, and others from agricultural centre's such as the Darling Downs, and the cotton growers of the out back South

<sup>4</sup> Cox (1998)

<sup>5</sup> Bullen and Onyx (1998)

West. In short the Q150 Mosaic project drew into its cohort of participants the most diverse group of citizens one could imagine both ethnically and geographically.

**Ethnically diverse** and **culturally rich**, each geographic location in its evolution has brought with it many pioneering spirits and untold hardships. These have cultivated unique energies and characters in response to the environment, distance and in some instances personal and geographical isolation. Ethnic origins range from the Indigenous tribes who migrated from South East Asia some 50,000 years ago to the relatively new arrivals in the form of convicts in British Penal Colonies. Then came the rest: the South Sea Islanders the Chinese the Europeans and the more recent arrivals being the Asians Indians and Arab migrants.

With such a mix it is inevitable that some traditions and beliefs have been suppressed, lost and removed and those remaining, to some degree sadly homogenized. But in all this homogeneity/unity there is still the glimmer of hope that what remains in terms of culture and lifestyle is still one worthy of acknowledging and referencing. The Q150 theme was about celebration and in this context it sought out unique characters within local communities. While at the same time it drew the public's attention to the natural wonders of place and peoples' interaction with place.

UNESCO's 2005 'Cultural Diversity Convention'<sup>6]</sup> asserts that cultural diversity is the common heritage of humanity, it takes on diverse forms across time and space and this diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies of humankind.

As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations.

Australia is a country rich in ethnic diversity and as such draws on a wealth of lifestyles, cultures and beliefs to communicate the Australian identity. Over the years more meaningful two-way connections have been established within communities as a result of the sharing of customs and traditional beliefs. Various initiatives have been set up in Australia, which encourage and allow this sharing to happen more effectively. One such highly successful initiative was the Brisbane City Councils' 'Cultural Connections in Libraries Program'.<sup>7]</sup> In this program ethnic minority groups were given an opportunity to showcase their traditions and customs through local libraries over a period of several weeks.

## Cultural Sustainability

In reference to cultural sustainability Fry (2009, p. 114)<sup>8]</sup> draws our attention to issues of dependence and argues that 'Community is a bond that can accommodate differences of age, gender, personality, cultural origin or intellect. It is what passes through and connects us to others, connecting our isolation as individuated subjects'. He argues that 'within this context it needs to be seen within the same frame of futuring, for it provides the collective with a

<sup>6</sup> UNESCO's 2005 Cultural Diversity. Downloaded 6/5/2010 @9am <http://jiel.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/>

<sup>7</sup> Cultural Connections in Libraries: Embracing Cultural Diversity in Brisbane

BCC Community Arts Officer John Jeffrey. Embracing Cultural Diversity in Brisbane. An intercultural program being implemented through Brisbane city, as large and small libraries host expos by culturally diverse and demographically significant communities from their areas.

<sup>8</sup> Fry, T. Focuses specifically on the ways in w

Which concerns for ethics and sustainability can change the practice of design for the 21 century and beyond?

sense of continuity that transcends the measure of mortality that extenstentially inhibits an ability to see beyond a life time. The revitalization of a community is essential in order to cope with the demands of adaptive change, including the provision of social care when state systems fail’.

Australias population has evolved from a culture of migration, rationalized at times but other times from a humanitarian perspective in response to global conflicts. The latter is now and will continue to be a debatable topic however in reality migration will continue, systems will need to be introduced which will support a stronger more meaningful match of the migrant’s experience to place. This will need to happen in an effort to be able to avoid the ongoing problem of urban sprawl and over population of our major capital cities.

What role can/does the artist play in this revitalization, can the creative artist work as the mediator within a community to instigate change at a non political non biased level, can the artist help with the ongoing process of change. According to Kester (2004 p.1) there are a number of contemporary artists and art collectives that have defined their practice precisely around the facilitation of dialogue among diverse communities. He states ‘parting from the traditions of object making, these artists have adopted a performative, process based approach’. He quotes British artist Peter Dunn <sup>9]</sup> who argues they are “**context providers**” rather than “content providers”.

## Briefing Sites

In his/her capacity as a public artist wishing to engaging community the artist needs to be guided by the locals when trying to understand political and cultural barriers/sites/locations. In doing so the artist will endeavor to seek out those sites for community gatherings which are non-political, non-bias and represent inclusivity not exclusivity in an effort to bring the community together in a free and open way. The flow on effect of this it is believed will undoubtedly generate a stronger sense of cohesion within the community of participants and subconsciously promote open discussion.

The awareness of place and its embedded narrative is paramount for the artist to be aware of. The overall aim of the creative exercise is to energize and relax the participants in an effort to allow spontaneous, emotional and unbiased creative energy to be released. When working on the concept for the Childers Backpacker Memorial<sup>10]</sup>, the out-of-town artist was provided with a studio space situated within one of the local council offices in the main street of the town. While this proved to be convenient to both the memorial site and the community, it may have been a place which generated negative thoughts for those members of the community who may have had bad experiences associated with this space. Perhaps through negative connections to council policy, or to council employees who may have worked in this space. As stated above, locations must be carefully considered when embarking on engaging with community, or at least when the artist wishes to motivate the community to become engage. In the case of the Q150 Mosaic the local was the artists studio they chose where the creation would take place, some chose privacy others chose a more public approach.

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Dunn, interview by Grant Kester, London, October 25, 2001

<sup>10</sup> Childers Backpacker Memorial. The memorial was created by Sam Di Mauro in memory of the fifteen backpackers who lost their lives in 2000 when the hostel was burnt to the ground. ‘The visuals emanate memories of sounds from the collection of domestic and travel images. Yet create silence in the space providing a positive affirmation where life and not death is celebrated.

The contact email address of the curatorial team was university based. Without realizing it this in itself may could have be interpreted as bias by some of the participants.

### ***Neutral Space is Important in trying to Negate Difference***

Kester (2004 p. 1) explores the notion of non-political non-biased site or discussion and refers to these as 'performative based art practices' with the 'Floating Dialogues Series'. 'whichinvolved a diverse collection of people including politicians, sex workers and activists from the city of Zurich who had been brought together by the Austrian Arts Collective Wochenklausur as part of the intervention in drug policy. The topic: 'The difficult situation faced by drug addicts in Zurich who had turned to prostitution to support their habits'. Many of the participants in these boat talks would normally have taken opposite sides in the highly charged debate over drug use and prostitution. But in the ritualistic context of an art event, with their statements insulated from direct media scrutiny, they were able to communicate outside the rhetorical demands of their official status and they were able to reach a consensus supporting a modest but concrete outcome. Kester argues that the complex process necessary to bring forward an outcome was itself a creative act a concrete intervention in which the traditional art materials were replaced by "sociopolitical" relationships'. In completing his comparison he states, 'the relevant legacy of modernist art from this perspective is not to be found in the formal conditions of the object but rather in ways in which aesthetic experience can challenge conventional perceptions and the systems of knowledge.

Perhaps exposure to the lateral thinking processes employed by artists can empower the community to interpret more broadly the long-term implications of their decisions.

Goldbard (2009, p. 49) argues that community artists' investigations of cultural difference often reveal deep commonalities within diversity: every culture has ways, however distinct, of encountering the universal in human experience from birth to death, and many of these resonate across cultural barriers. But grasping such commonality always begins by encountering difference-whether based in place, ethnicity, age, orientation or other life condition-and framing is something to treasure. Visitors to the Childers Backpacker Memorial 9] are exposed to this sense of sameness through collections of family photographs supplied to the artist by the parents of the deceased. These visual narratives highlight difference through use of traditional symbols such as the country of origin flag. However the sense of domestic sameness evident in the collection of family photographs in this instance tends to override notions of homeland.

### ***Public Art that Links Communities***

A tenet of **community cultural development** practice in many countries has been to demand public space, support and recognition for the right of excluded communities to assert their place in cultural life and to give expression to their own cultural values and histories. In 1987, "Community Cultural Development" (CCD) became the official label in Australia. The Australian Arts Council until 2006 was seen as the national cultural policy maker most committed to community cultural development. National funding and its cut backs ultimately resulted in the formation of an advocacy group the National Arts and Cultural Alliance (NACA). The structural changes redirected the focus to include:

- Whole-of-government approach to the resourcing and promotion of regional arts.

- With the Australia Council develop an advisory process to represent the interests of regional arts in the development and implementation of policies and programs throughout the Council's range of activities.
- Develop Regional Arts Australia as a strategic partner to the Australia Council and Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts in the delivery and oversight of national regional arts programs and initiatives and in the formulation of Council policy.

The Q150 Mosaic project was not formally a part of any community arts group. It was perhaps through the CCD and NACA that many of the Q150 Mosaic participating artists, particularly in regional areas have been showcased and in turn recognized as the creative thinkers, and perhaps visionary thinkers within their communities.

### ***Working with Remote Communities***

In writing on the Unifying Principles of **community cultural development** Goldbard (2009, p. 43)<sup>11</sup>] states that there is no universal declaration or manifesto which is the ultimate **guide** for those working within this capacity, instead she provides us with seven points which give a multitude of different expressions in practice.

1. Active **participation** in cultural life is essential
2. **Diversity** is a social asset and should be protected
3. All cultures are essentially **equal**
4. Culture is an effective crucible for **social transformation**
5. Cultural **expression** is a means of emancipation its not the product it's the process
6. Culture is **dynamic** there is no value in creating artificial boundaries with in it.
7. **Artists** have roles as **agents of transformation** more socially valuable than mainstream art world roles-certainly equal in legitimacy.

Goldbard continues her argument drawing our attention to the point that it's not the particular achievements of any individual or society, however beautiful or remarkable, but the '**whole** colourful generative, constantly reweaving **complex of cultures**'. The completed artwork for the Q150 Mosaic illustrates this point well. 150+ panels, no two the same, each a reflection on people and place over endless time to the present and beyond.

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<sup>11</sup> Arlene Goldbard states in her book *New Creative Community The Art of Cultural Development* 2009, New Village Press Oakland CAP49





Works in Progress Exhibition ABC Interview for Landline

### ***Who were the Community of Participants***

The Q150 Mosaic project invited the local council to seek out expressions of interest from their communities in an effort to find suitable persons to take on the administrative and/or artistic role to produce the artwork. Some shires chose to work on common knowledge and went straight to a recognized artist within their community while others accessed creativity through arts organizations and local schools. The aim was to generate a strong sense of commitment by the community, which would in turn provide a positive support to the creator of the artwork. Local Shires achieved this in the main through the support of the local media who constantly sought out opportunities to showcase the project. The website created for the Q150 Years of Queensland allocated a space on their site where press releases highlighting the progress of the various shires and updates on how the overall project was progressing were constantly being featured. The initial brief to councils was to speak with their community in an effort to realize community values and an inclusive understanding of place. It was ultimately upto them to seek out and link with the creative thinkers in their respective communities.



Participants: Harvey Bay and Townsville

While many responses were a collective effort both in the research and the creation of the finished artwork, some artists chose to work in relative isolation. Others collaborated with professional artist collectives, tertiary institutions, Secondary and Primary schools and in a couple of instances pre school centres.

### ***The Q150 Mosaic Process/Method***

Communicating long distance to this collection of participants was done in stages. First a representative from The Q150 administration team visited each of the shires informing them of the project and other celebratory events. This initial introduction was followed by a set of guidelines and two blank panels/tiles.

One was to depict the history of their Shire and one to depict their future aspirations. The Guidelines needed to be short sharp and specific and as much as possible devoid of any art and design jargon. This was done in an effort to minimize any possible misinterpretation. Distance imposed limitations in relation to the practicalities of packaging and transportation. To this end a height restriction was imposed in relation to attachments to the face of the artwork allowing panels to be flat packed in the containers provided.

Other technical information including adhesives, preferred surface preparation and surface finishes was provided with the aim of giving longevity to the artwork. Artist statements were called for in an effort to ensure the process and content were carefully considered. This statement would also provide more comprehensive access to the content of the finished artwork and these were included in didactic displays both on site and at the website.

A procedure was included in the guidelines in an effort to offer some suggestions for engaging community and identifying suitable artists to take on the responsibility. These were complemented by a suggested procedure for the creation of the artwork. Realizing that some council may hand over the project to members of their community whom may not have been previously commissioned to complete an artwork for publication the following process with some elaboration was highlighted;

**Step 1 – Research**

**Step 2 – Ideation**

**Step 3 – Layout**

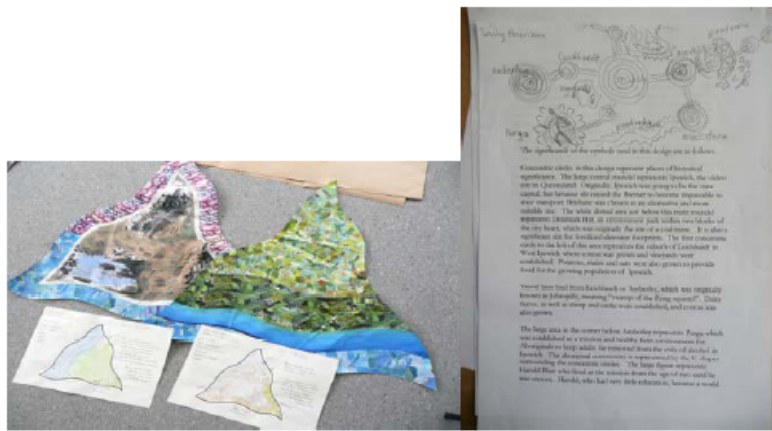
**Step 4 – Template/preliminary sketch design for the panel**

**Step 5 – Receiving curatorial feedback**  
**Step 6 – Fabricating/creating the artwork**  
**Step 7 – Returning the finished art pieces**

The guidelines instructed the participants to embellish two tessellated tile forms, one was to reflect on who the community was, and the other to speak about where they the community saw themselves in the future. The initial feedback to the curatorial team at the concept stage was as diverse as the completed artwork. Most took on the challenge while others questioned what they should do. In the end the work was completed, submitted, compiled and displayed. An interactive website was created and continues to provide the shires and the community with an easily accessible source of reference, not only for them but all other shires in Queensland <http://mosaics.q150.qld.gov.au/home>.

### ***Interpreting Place***

Belonging is about how we define ourselves and situate ourselves in space and time. It is about how we relate to others, how we perceive others, include or exclude them, identify them as one of ‘them’ or ‘us’. Belonging is about a spiritual home or state of mind.<sup>12</sup> This project in its entirety belonged to the people, it was them telling the public about who they were, how they lived and survived in their place. This notion of ownership was continually being reinforced through the entire process.



Concept Sketches

Tuan (2007, p 158) argues that deeply loved places are not necessarily visible, either to us or to others he makes reference to the fact that places can be made visible by a number of means: rivalry or conflict with other places, visual prominence, and the evocative power of art, architecture, ceremonials and rites. Dramatization he argues make human places become vividly real suggesting that, ‘Identity of place is achieved by dramatizing the **aspirations, needs, and functional rhythms of personal and group life**’. To the creative artist the act of dramatization involves in-depth investigations into the meaning of time and place, and

<sup>12</sup> Belonging – A Century Celebrated [www.belonging.org/](http://www.belonging.org/) - retrieved 4 June 2005

through this process he/she evolves a realization of those aspects of place, which give it its identity.

The statement that the artists were asked to write was requested by the curatorial team in an effort to negate the possibility of the finished artwork being interpreted as a collection of superficial 'pretty pictures' with very little integrity. It is through such responses that meanings were clarified and connections to place reinforced. As very little direct discussion was entered into between the curatorial team and the artist these narratives served to provide a greater degree of clarity.

Difference seems to be based in place, ethnicity, age, orientation or other life conditions. Collectively they are the treasured values that make place and its experience over time different to another place and time. A case in point is the response to the request from an indigenous elder in a remote community on Mornington Island.

Elder and artist Thelma Burke painted the tile reflecting the region's past. The colourful tile shows the mission garden, that the artist worked in as a young girl growing and harvesting fruit and vegetables. 'It was hard work and long hours, but it was good to eat fresh fruit and vegetables.'

Thelma Burke also painted the tile reflecting her vision for the region's future. 'The black sections represent the diminishing number of old people and the coloured sections represent the new young people taking the place of the old people, leading Queensland in a new direction.'<sup>13</sup>]



Mornington Island Past and Future

A comparison can be drawn between the reflections of this elder and another indigenous community in Cherbourg in Queensland's South East, their statement read as follows:

<sup>13</sup> Downloaded 19/06/2010, <http://mosaics.q150.qld.gov.au/home>

### Cherbourg Aboriginal Shire Council

‘The past tile represents a time that was not good for local people. Communities share their stories of when they were herded like cattle and moved from their traditional lands. When they were taken away from friends and family to land set aside by the government of the day, to live at an Aboriginal inland mission called Cherbourg. When they were stripped of their traditions, languages, spiritual beliefs and culture, people were bundled together and forced to do whatever the authorities demanded. The people came from all over. Hard labour, poor living and working conditions, and very little rations were some of the hardships the people had to contend with. This tile with its dark moody colours represents their history, showing the assimilation and pain of the people.’

### Cherbourg Aboriginal Shire Council

‘The present and future tile represents a time of change, of trying to come to terms with the past and people moving on with their lives. The artists represent newfound freedom and the changes that have occurred since the referendum. Local people have been given the right to vote and Cherbourg has developed. There is now a hospital, health centre, supermarket, and school. The tile represents positive change. The bright colours of yellows and blues speak of the hope and courage to go forward with strength and pride in their Aboriginality, and the sky and the endless possibilities available to a community of strong, united Aboriginal men, women and children. It speaks of a big vision for the people.’ 13]



### Cherbourg Past and Future

12Tuan (2007, p 159) in his discussions on time and place and its perspective of human experience states ‘Attachment, whether to a person or to a locality, is seldom acquired in passing.’ While the philosopher James K. Feibleman<sup>14</sup> believes that it’s the ‘quality and intensity of the experience that is more significant than the extensivity.’ While the Cherbourg

<sup>14</sup> James K. Feibleman a prolific writer was author of over 39 books ranging from philosophy and sociology, to education and the arts.

community was brought to this place under force and not, like many other communities natives of the district, their experience was at the extreme end of intense and compacted into a short period of time by comparison.

### ***Time and its Impact on the Message/Story***

As Tuan (2007, p 185) argues ‘Many years in one place may leave few memory traces that one can or may wish to recall; an intense experience of short duration, on the other hand, can alter our lives’. This is illustrated in the Cherbourg creation communicating the past. While aspects of duration are paramount, the passage of time to the experience of place, and how it must be measured against the human lifecycle is obviously necessary to take into account. ‘Ten years in childhood are not the same as ten years in youth or manhood. The child knows the world more sensuously than does the adult this is why a native citizen knows his her country in a way that cannot be duplicated by a naturalized citizen who has grown up elsewhere.’ Tuan (2007, p 185) Perhaps this statement can assist with understanding more completely the needs of new arrivals into a community. Perhaps in this way a realization of their needs and how they interpret and understand place can be developed. Tuan continues his argument stating that ‘experienced spans of time, at different stages in life, are not commensurable.’

### **Reflection**

On issues of reflection it is understood that we look back to discover /realize a sense of self and a sense of identity beyond the mere thin present. Tuan argues that; ‘we are what we have, friends, relatives, and ancestors; we have skills and knowledge, and we have done good deeds. But these possessions may be neither visible nor readily accessible. To strengthen our sense of self the past needs to be rescued and made accessible.’ Tuan, p.187) The Q150 celebrations in 2009 aimed to achieve this. Through the ongoing program of activities the coordinators sought to resurrect realities, histories, skills and achievements and in doing so grandstand and showcase these to the broader community. This showcasing was done through exhibition programs, featured case studies and various other cultural events. This smorgasbord of events took interested persons on journeys of rediscovery and encouraged them to look at who they are and where they had come from.

It is understood that our own pasts are made up of bits and pieces while the pasts of our place are collections of reference points. These are physical and/or emotional, environmental or imagined, natural or built, evolved or imposed, permanent or ephemeral, factual or mythical, archival or folklore-like. Each are as Aristides puts it ‘a brick in the building of one’s being, carrying with it memories. He refers to it as ‘a small block of ones personal intellectual history, associations unsolvable in their profusion, but none the less of merit in the evaluation of self in place’.

### ***Objects for Reflection***

Objects anchor time and we can reconstruct our past with brief visits to our neighborhood and our birthplaces and those of our ancestors. No doubt the Q150 Mosaic has and will continue to energize connections for many who are able to access the site both real (Royal



National Association (RNA) Exhibition Grounds in Brisbane), and virtual at the web site <http://mosaics.q150.qld.gov.au>. Visitors will be able to read images, which make reference to age-old traditions and the idiosyncrasies of vernacular culture ritual and place. Like the River Reflections<sup>15</sup>] public artwork in Far North Queensland visitors are provided with glimpses into vernacular culture. This artwork by the author is a ceramic tapestry weaving and connecting the collected stories of multicultural youth and older folk in the Johnstone Shire. Like the Q150 Mosaic it endeavors through its inclusivity, to break down prejudices for the future. It also addresses endangered cultures that are new or fragile. The intention of the artwork was to include almost every ethnic group in the Shire.

As can be read into the contributions of the younger school aged participants of the Q150 Mosaic project, what they do rather than what they possess defines their sense of selfhood. At times they can and do look back at their own short lives and feel nostalgic. Some of us try hard at times to recapture the past while others try to efface it thinking it a burden like material possessions. Attachment to things and veneration of the past often go hand in hand. In contrast Tuan argues that one who disdains possessions and the past is probably a 'rationalist or a mystic, and unsympathetic to clutter', this he states encourages the belief that the 'good life is simple enough for the mind to design independently of tradition and custom, and that indeed tradition and custom can cloud the prism of rational thought'. While this argument stands true for many with a more minimalist approach to place, culture and lifestyle, what may be interpreted as clutter and excess to some is debatable by others. These objects/references/milestones may in fact be valued connections to the vanishing threads, which link to a former time, culture or event in the life of the possessor of such time markers. In this context the object itself becomes less important than what it represents and where it takes the mind. The public artist may wish to take a minimalist almost subliminal approach to the representation of the culture and history of place. However the inclusion of the occasional point of reference may serve as a connection point for those members of the community less able to read through the abstract meaning.

Neil McGregor (2003, p. 8)<sup>16</sup>] Director of the British Museum states: 'for individuals as for communities, it may be said that 'memory is identity'. At the very least it is an essential part of it. All societies have therefore devised systems and structures, objects and rituals to help them remember those things that are needful if the community is to be strong - the individuals and the moments that have shaped the past, the beliefs and the habits which should determine the future. These monuments and aides-memoires point not only to what we were, but also to what we want to be. History has depth, and time bestows value. These ideas are perhaps more likely to develop in people who live surrounded by artifacts that they have taken a long time to make and or acquire.

Continuing this argument McGregor proposes that the relations between the production of art, of objects, and the production of memory - is a vast and fundamental one. It is tied up with some of the most crucial and definitive of human questions: a sense of being, issues of identity, of relationships and community, and of posterity. To provide an opportunity for community to contribute to and participate in the creation of an artwork, particularly one,

<sup>15</sup> Eight panels placed on the esplanade in Innisfail are finished with mosaics of clay tiles, terrazzo, inlaid glass brass and bronze. The core motif is the Johnstone River, in eight sections, overlaid with dozens of stories of migration, to reflect the rich cultural diversity of the Johnstone Shire. The panels are the work of artist Sam Di Mauro. Kellett P. River Reflections, p3

<sup>16</sup> Neil McGregor Director of the British Museum The Museum of the Mind 2003 p.8

which remains permanently in a publicly accessible site, will no doubt provide for many a sense of identity and connection. Those who have had some experience of the place will through the collection of carefully choreographed references be able to revisit place in their memory, relive their experiences and share them with others, providing in a sense longevity to place.

In the case of the Childers Backpacker Memorial 9] actions and comments made by the parents of the deceased at the opening of the memorial more than reassured the artist, that his move to feature the life of the individual through multiple images supplied to him by the parents was in the long term a positive one. The artist's idea to tell the story of each of the individuals was in a sense, negating ethnic and cultural divides by featuring their sameness through reference to the simplicity of their domestic lives as part of a family. The 8m x3m slab of glass, which made up the major part of the memorial unified the 15 as a family of backpackers while each box united them to their individual families back in their own homeland. The images in this context move the mind towards thoughts of a life lived and not towards the negative aspects of the disaster which consumed them.

It is evident in the following statement that our multicultural qualities are highly valued by the broader community and that perhaps through this positive attitude there is a sense of longevity in relation to culture values and place in present and future Australia.

### **Logan Shire: The Future**

'250,000 people with more than 58,000 residents ...migrants and refugees coming from more than 170 different cultural backgrounds. The colourful figures represent the diversity of cultures coming together in the future as a community sharing ideas and cultural backgrounds in a harmonious, loving and caring way, a city free of prejudice, discrimination and jealousy. .... Children were also invited to think about aspects of the local environment and how it might be affected by change, time and technology. Young people took care to consider how to protect and conserve their local areas in a positive, passionate and caring way. ...issues such as pollution, solar power, eco-friendly vehicles, water conservation and preservation, energy saving initiatives and lifestyles. Some innovative and creative ideas were thought through by our young residents – the future of our city is in safe hands!' 13]



Logan Past and Future



## Success or failure

Realizing that not every community would have artists or creative practitioners who would be confident enough to take on the task the curatorial team felt it important to try and free up any preconceived ideas which they may have had about their limited skills. The team also highlighted the fact that the artwork was open for interpretation and, that with limited skills a satisfactory response could be achieved. All this coupled with an open book approach to the content of their artwork may have been a major contributing factor to the popularity of the finished artwork.

Max-Neef (1987)<sup>17]</sup> argues that the inadequate satisfaction of any of the fundamental needs results in collective pathologies – such as widespread distrust, fear and cynicism about the future. The Q150 Mosaic project was successful in providing a vehicle for expressing long held concerns and differences of opinion. While one indigenous artist painted a past full of happiness, another indigenous community saw the past as horrific and harmful. The opportunity to participate 'no-holes-barred' in such a creation brought out certain qualities and renewed confidences in many communities as well as individuals. As Rogers [18] states 'creative arts endeavors seem to capture all the essential elements of a sustainable/resilient society including often overlooked factors like the need to foster creativity, cultural diversity, freedom of expression, and inclusion by the disadvantaged. Rogers believes that the crux of rural sustainability lies in our ability to be innovative; these elements would seem most critical in terms of building community capacity.

## Engaging Community

### *Townsville Past*

'The artists created drawings and wrote phrases, enticing the passing public to add their own words and images to demonstrate how they saw the spirit of Townsville. The group attempted to encapsulate the 'spirit of place' and the harsh beauty of the dry tropics and often-violent beauty of the landscape. The art celebrates and remembers the men and women who have lived in the city, the resilience of the original inhabitants and those who have come since. 13]



Townsville Past and Future

<sup>17</sup> Max-Neef postulates that basic needs are finite, few and classifiable and that they are the same in all cultures and classifiable. Downloaded 20/08/2010

The process engaged community in the preliminary stages of research and then on an ongoing basis through ideation and fabrication. The community used this methodology to reinforce and encourage ownership of the creation. In this context Rogers 18] draws the following conclusions: ‘the importance of social dimension to environment and economic performance is more acutely apparent in the small rural community context than it might be in the larger urban metropolitan context. People are recognized as their most important resource.’ The sustainable future of these communities largely depends on the social dimension, and therefore, they may need assistance in understanding how to make the most of what they have and the artist/creative thinker is perhaps the best person qualified to make this happen. Perhaps the Q150 Mosaic project has identified and grandstanded community members who may not have had the chance to express their creativity in the past.

Many exemplary initiatives are continually proving to be successful in this area of public art as a catalyst in the process of linking communities and celebrating difference. Still in the main they remain city-centric and seldom draw in those ethnic minority groups in more remote rural areas. Needless to say this demographic will increase in numbers as we face the challenge of global warming, human displacement and forced migration. To this end the need to bring these communities together is paramount. It can be argued that the soft approach to this dilemma through non political non-biased creative art and design practices will only generate a more harmonious user-friendly community in the long term.



The Completed Mosaic

## Conclusion

In conclusion the following is the response by Cairns Regional Council’s collaborative team that celebrates the creation of the artwork and its true spirit of community engagement:

‘Cairns has created two tiles with one theme – hope. The vision for these stories is that through understanding people can move forward as one. Treading lightly, sharing country and history on the journey of life. Unity, one direction, one step.

The list of participants is testament to the collaborative nature of this project:

The Cairns region's tiles were created by a group of community participants: Andrew McPhee and Jeanette Yarr from the **Art House Port Douglas**; Carol Laing and Jacqueline Waters from the **Cairns Arts Society**; Deb Clarke; Kevin Edmonstone from the **ATSI and Yarrabah unit of TAFE**; Sally Anne Tucker, Priscilla Ahkee, Molly Anderson, Janelle Williams and Justin Matid from **Trinity Bay High School**; John Mast and Cynthia Volger from **Cairns TAFE**; Sheryl Burchill, Cecilia Rosskelly, Tahlia Burchill, Julie Williams, Lorna Shaun, Linda Burchill, Roberta Henning and Andrew Gibson from **Mossman**; Cecily Musumeci, Anne Wonga and Susanna Job from **Babinda** and Janelle Williams from **Trinity Bay High**.<sup>13]</sup>



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## About the Author

*Salvatore M. Di Mauro*

Di Mauros' approach to art and design is one of investigating, discovering, analysing and materialising those cultural values, which are built on a strong sense of history and shaped to support a contemporary lifestyle. Since the 1980s, his art and design practice has been informed by the relationship between vernacular culture, object and environment. Since 1997, he has focused less on the exhibition of his artwork in a gallery context and more in working with local communities to develop public artwork which responds to the history and culture of place. He finds the opportunity to work with communities and creative thinkers/artists/crafts persons/designers and local industry, both challenging and rewarding.