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Making arts central in a regional Australian community

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Cover image courtesy of Central Goldfields Shire.



Central Goldfields, Australia



# Making arts central in a regional Australian community

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**An innovative and multi-disciplinary arts program is working to build a vibrant and culturally active community in central Victoria, Australia.**

Art Central is a three-year cultural development project in the Central Goldfields Shire, located in regional Victoria, Australia. A high-quality, innovative and multi-disciplinary arts program, it is working to build a vibrant and culturally active community. As with many Australian regional communities, the shire has faced various adversities over recent decades including droughts, bushfires and sharp declines in employment. Art Central aims to shift a deeply embedded survivor mentality associated with a community toughing out hard times, to one in which hope and aspiration are valued and achievement is considered possible.

Art Central is supported by the Cultural Development Network, Central Goldfields Shire Council, Go Goldfields (a Victorian State government initiative) and the Australian Council of the Arts. Its activities have been extended across the shire community, including the arts, health, education, recreation and business sectors. The Central Goldfields Shire is one of the most recent additions to the Cities Programme, becoming a Global Compact signatory city in 2014.

## From resilience to optimism

The Central Goldfields Shire is located in central Victoria, one hour's drive from the regional cities of Ballarat and Bendigo and about a two-and-a-half hour drive northwest of Melbourne, the capital city of Victoria. The Central Goldfields region has a unique combination of natural environment, with significant manufacturing, retail and tourism potential. The shire has a population of over 12,500 people, a rich gold rush history and relatively cheap housing. It is celebrated for tourist attractions, including stunning heritage buildings, wineries, the historical Maryborough station and farmer's markets. Other prominent townships in the shire include Bealiba, Carisbrook, Dunolly and Talbot. Maryborough is the shire's main business centre with a population of approximately 7,500.

For the past few decades, townships in the Central Goldfields Shire have been one of the state of Victoria's most socio-economically disadvantaged (ABS 2011). Maryborough is suffering from the effects of entrenched poverty, where unemployment rates are double the state average and food security and education attainment are the among the lowest (Vinson 2007). While rural and regional Victorian towns are no strangers to the cycles of 'booms' and 'busts' of droughts, bushfires and global economic fluctuations, these events eventually take a hard toll on their communities. Decline of industrial employers over the past few decades has left a legacy of unemployment and a constant flow of people accessing public housing in the Shire; a situation compounded by limited access to higher educational opportunities in the area.

In 2007, as part of a whole-of-community planning and development initiative, Council commissioned a study on the shire's economic, social and educational challenges (Perry 2008). The Council's vision is to build a highly desirable community to live, learn, work and visit. The study highlighted not only socio-economic problems but also revealed challenges in community identity and values. The community has become 'resilient' after decades of 'toughing out the hard times', but its culture lacked a sense of aspiration, achievement or positive future visioning (ibid). A shift in community culture was needed, one where the future would not mirror the past.

The work and research of the Cultural Development Network, an Australian not-for-profit organization, has demonstrated that the arts play a key role in the cultural vitality of communities of all kinds, and the key to animating the culture is to tap into ideas, activities and values that lie within existing institutional and community organizations.

## Project partnerships

The idea for a cultural development project had been in discussion for over two years between the Cultural

Development Network and local government, artists, businesses, sports associations, schools and a diverse range of not-for-profit organizations before funding for Art Central was finally secured in 2012. Council led the project and provided the significant infrastructure and support required. Apart from the Central Goldfields Shire Art Gallery, Art Central is the first multi-year arts-based Council investment, via Go Goldfields funding – another key Art Central project partner. As one of the Victorian Government’s Great Outcomes Action Plan for Families initiative, the timely commencement of Go Goldfields’ Shire-wide work on youth and literacy provided an opportunity for direct observation of the unique role community plays in linking and creating partnerships.

### Community leaders’ role in cultural sustainability

The fundamental philosophy and goal of the Art Central project was to create a lasting impact (beyond the life of funded programs) in the lives of participants, community leaders and their communities. Community leaders are often influential individuals who have the capacity to champion community arts in their communities and organizations. Art Central intends to help leaders to understand and embrace the value of arts in their own organizations, in their partnerships and sponsorships with their communities.

Recognizing the value of including community leaders in its creative and cultural development process, Art Central connected key representatives from distinct areas of arts, business, education, sports and health via the formation

of a community leaders group. This unique approach to partnerships provides an interesting model of community engagement process. RMIT University was engaged to evaluate Art Central outcomes and the impact the project’s partnerships have on community culture.

### Art Shop opens its doors

Since its official launch in January 2013, Art Central has engaged a diverse team of professional resident artists to forge links with community members and groups in collaborative creative arts projects. The overarching theme of raising positive community aspirations is inter-woven into the project intent, direction and activities.

From its inception, Art Central artists found a home base in a working studio space centrally located on High Street in Maryborough to house its activities in the life of the project. The ‘Art Shop’ doubles as a studio and gallery, which maintains an “open door, all welcome, walk in-walk out” policy and a creative space for anyone interested. The shop has since hosted regular and impromptu workshops, meetings, art exhibitions and community consultation sessions. It has become a ‘go-to’ space for all matters related to the project. While the Art Shop is located in Maryborough, project activities have also extended to other prominent townships in the shire, including Bealiba, Carisbrook, Dunolly and Talbot. To date, the shop has become an exciting, creative community arts space and is seen as a valuable addition to the cultural landscape of the Shire.



New sights in Maryborough. This regional Australian shire is trialling a new approach to economic and social revitalization by encouraging organizations across all sectors to embrace the arts. Image: Central Goldfields Shire.

### **Outcomes to date**

As at 2014, Art Central is a little past its halfway mark, with the scheduled completion due in December 2015. Throughout 2013 and 2014, Art Central resident artists have been involved in numerous creative collaborative projects with hundreds of individuals, groups and organizations in the community. Strong working relationships have been forged with the health sector, particularly a mental health unit as well as a disability organization. Successful and reoccurring connections were also made with local parents and children groups. Art Central has also engaged positively with local primary and secondary schools.

### **Vases, verses and growing acceptance**

The Vases 'n' Verses project was initiated in conjunction with the 2013 annual Central Goldfields Shire Spring Fling Festival. Over 120 residents painted nearly 50 (1m x 1m) vases, which were displayed in highly visible, unexpected places around the Shire such as farm fences, side streets, a main street roundabout, library windows, and school offices to name a few. The colourful vases resulted in many 'Aha! This is what art is ... and can be!' and 'So ... that's what Art Central is doing!' moments. Individuals and organizations with very little awareness of the project noticed and admired the vases and wanted to know how they could also paint a vase.

These positive reactions reflect growing acceptance of the project by the community. The striking visibility and 'street-based approach' of the installation is a key contributing factor for a burst of new and positive creative dialogue with the community. It is interesting to note that none of the numerous vases planted in public spaces were vandalized or damaged. The installation has become an icon for the Art Central and, one year on, is still being praised by many in the community as a catalyst for propelling the project into the public eye and consciousness.

### **Lets talk about the future**

In the second half of 2014, a shift in what may be described as a more definitive construction and purposeful direction for the project was observed.

This shift is reflected in the beginnings of a discourse pertaining to 'the future of Art Central', which has since led to further discussions about how the positive outcomes of the project can be sustained in the community after funding has ceased. Inspired by the success of the Art Shop, there is also ongoing dialogue about setting up and maintaining a long-term creative working space studio. A member of the community leaders group, an influential individual in the shire, was the initiator of these discussions between various members of the community and Council.

The recently established Future of the Community Arts committee is a result of these conversations. The committee's purpose is to explore structural, funding and administrative options for establishing a sustainable model for an independent community-run and self-sustaining fund for the arts in the shire. Council has recently invested in part-time staff to research and write a strategy for the future of arts in the shire. While in its early stages, this development reflects the pivotal role community leaders have had in driving and establishing a legacy of continuity and appreciation of the arts within the community.

The Art Central project has provided an interesting insight into the impacts a cultural development project can make in regional community struggling with the many challenges facing so many contemporary regional communities worldwide.

*Central Goldfields Shire made the commitment to the Ten Principles of the United Nations Global Compact in 2014.*



Art Central has been reaching out across the community – from children's groups through to health organizations – to build a vibrant community in the face of tough regional challenges. Image: Central Goldfields Shire.