

Art and Safe Communities: the role of Big *h*ART in the regeneration of an inner city housing estate

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Background

John Northcott Housing Estate is unique in Australia in that it is located at the heart of inner Sydney, surrounded by bustling areas of commerce, expensive residential settings and recreational/lifestyle experiences. It represents the Department of Housing's largest single public housing area, comprising predominantly one and two-bedroom units.¹

The first tenants moved into Northcott in 1961 and at the time it was lauded as an outstanding example of what could be done in slum clearance. However, several events affected life at Northcott. In 1988, the Richmond Report was released. It resulted in the de-institutionalisation of people living with a mental illness and disabilities without adequate community resources or support, affecting people and services across New

South Wales. Many of these people ended up in public housing in Northcott.² Then, in 1994, a restructure and new direction for the Department of Housing (DOH) fundamentally changed service delivery. Tenants became 'clients' and a culture of 'total asset management' was introduced.³ The advent of the 2000 Olympics in Sydney caused huge reductions in the availability of affordable accommodation such as boarding houses as they made way for backpackers and bed and breakfasts, further compounding issues for the DOH and at Northcott.³

In 1996, the Department of Community Services issued a report on the Northcott Estate Project,⁴ the main thrust of which was that lives and services would not improve unless there was a high level of co-ordination and collaboration between different Government agencies, service providers

Abstract

Issue addressed: This paper describes how a notorious central Sydney housing estate nicknamed 'Suicide Towers' became the first public housing estate to achieve the World Health Organization criteria for designation as a Safe Community.

Methods: A case study was the method of choice to report on the way Government and non-government agencies worked with tenants in a community development approach.

Results: The Neighbourhood Advisory Board formed at Northcott worked collaboratively with tenants, Big *h*ART, Government and non-government organisations to make Northcott a safer place to live. This resulted in improved social cohesion, improved environments and a decrease in violent crime. Most importantly, tenants reported feeling more valued, much safer and more comfortable since the project started.

Conclusions: Although the arts are not often considered part of the community development process, the use of the art of story telling was the catalyst for the regeneration of this notorious housing estate. In addition, the criteria required for Safe Community accreditation provided an infrastructure within the Northcott Housing Estate for Government and non-government agencies to work with the Northcott community to establish the inter-connectiveness necessary to turn this community into somewhere that the residents felt safe and were proud to be part of.

Key words: Safe Communities; arts; social capital; safety.

Health Promotion Journal of Australia 2008;19:4-9

So what?

Using a community development model of involving residents in story telling can build social cohesion, resulting in the residents feeling empowered and valued. Additionally, involving other stakeholders (Government and non-government) to support the issues raised by residents can result in all key stakeholders working collaboratively to develop strategies to integrate social, health, safety and environmental policies to achieve Safe Communities status, thus fostering social cohesion and a stronger and safer community.

and a community-led management group. This report, and departmental documents, media reports, verbatim accounts and a damning report on Channel 10 News, painted a picture of a community in crisis in the late 1990s and early 2000s.¹ The community experienced a range of issues: family breakdowns, isolation, violence, vandalism, disability and illness, large numbers of people not accessing services, repair and maintenance problems, and people feeling unsafe and vulnerable.¹

The 1,000 people in the Northcott community are diverse.¹ More than two-thirds of tenants are single and 95% receive aged or disability support pensions. Sixty-five per cent of residents are female and the median age is 58 years. Residents are from 50 different countries, including a significant Russian and Chinese population. Children and teenagers live at Northcott, some being third-generation residents. Data on unemployment, median income and other economic indicators show Northcott as an area of striking socio-economic disadvantage.¹ In addition, while statistical data regarding the mental health profile of the community is unavailable, many tenants live with a mental illness. Dual experiences of mental illness and substance addiction are not uncommon.¹

One of the tools to enable community members to engage together, develop social and economic skills and assume the power to fashion their own future are participatory arts projects. There is evidence to show that art, as a medium, can enable individuals and groups to become more employable, more involved, more confident and more active in contributing to the development of their local communities.⁵ Cultural and artistic programs have played an increasingly prominent role in urban regeneration initiatives since the mid 1980s.⁶ A report commissioned for the Australian Council for the Arts revealed that art projects could create a greater understanding of different cultures; more skills in community leadership and management; and a stronger sense of community identity.⁷

In 2001, the social change arts organisation Big *hART* Inc (a multi-artform organisation established in 1992 to make contact with marginalised groups in isolated contexts) began consultations with the Northcott community about a participatory arts program.⁸ At the time, the community had been traumatised by a history of murders, suicides and violent crimes. Tenants did not leave their units and there was a culture of shutting the door on other tenants and the rest of the outside world. The public perceived Northcott and tenants fearfully; some service providers and agencies saw Northcott as a waste of time.⁴

Northcott provided an opportunity for Big *hART* to promote cross-government, cross-portfolio strategies that built on the strengths of the community. The applicability of Big *hART*'s

work with the Northcott community was that it aimed to challenge the DOH to recognise the importance of arts-based interventions as a tool for community development for both their individual clients and public housing communities. Big *hART*'s mission is to: provide opportunities for people experiencing the effects of marginalisation and make positive change; foster participation in the arts, creating new work for national and international arts festivals; and foster a more inclusive Australian culture and stronger regional economies.⁸

Once Big *hART* had started work, it was aware that at the end of its contract it would move on, so it needed to have structures in place to ensure the sustainability of its achievements. Website checks on 'safe' led Big *hART* to the Safe Communities website, and it realised that the initiatives in place at Northcott could be related to the criteria for International Safe Community accreditation.⁹

The Safe Communities concept evolved following a successful community-based injury project in Falköping, Sweden, in 1974.⁹ The premise of this concept draws from community development models and maintains that communities are best placed to develop and implement local solutions for local injury risks.^{9,10} A central element of the community-based approach is collaboration among different community sectors and organisations for a common purpose.^{10,11}

The criteria required to be designated as an International Safe Community are: an infrastructure based on partnership and collaborations, governed by a cross-sectional group responsible for safety promotion in the community; long-term sustainable programs covering genders and all ages, environments and situations; programs that target high-risk groups and environments and that promote safety for vulnerable groups; programs that document the frequency and cause of injuries; evaluation measures to assess programs, processes and effects of changes; and ongoing participation in national and international Safe Communities networks.⁷

In the Safe Communities initiative, the leading role is played by the community itself.^{6,11} However, first it had to be determined if the Northcott Housing Estate could be considered a 'community'. A Safe Community can be a municipality, county, city or district of a city working with safety promotion, injury, violence, suicide and national disaster prevention, covering all age groups, genders and areas and is part of an international network of accredited programs.⁷ The principles of a Safe Community will therefore change accordingly from place to place. The term 'Safe Community' implies that the community aspires to safety in a structured approach, not that the community is already perfectly safe.^{7,10} Once it was established that Northcott Housing Estate could become a Safe Community, all the partners involved became committed to working towards Safe Communities accreditation.

Method

A single-case study design was used because of its ability to appropriately describe the lived experiences of Northcott residents during a period of change. Such an approach can provide detailed contextual analysis of the changes related to the interaction of Northcott residents and Big hART. While the information collected for this case study came from a variety of sources, the main source was the participatory data collected for the development of the Big hART Northcott Narratives – Say Hello Resource Box.¹² Using participatory data acknowledges the importance of prioritising the feelings expressed by Northcott residents. Particular pieces of participatory data have been selected for inclusion as they illustrate consistent views expressed by residents or because they are an example of a unique perspective offered. Quotes from this source are in italics, unnamed and referenced to the Northcott Narratives – Say Hello Resource Box.¹² Additional data were collected from the Mayo Report;⁴ a review of unpublished materials; discussion with residents and staff from the Northcott Housing Estate; and a review of materials provided in support of the application for International Safe Community Designation.¹³ Quotes from the application are in italics, named and referenced to this source.¹³ Relevant media releases were also reviewed. However, for this case study it was very difficult to access numerical data on Northcott from the Government departments involved as no baseline data were collected prior to their involvement and very little data has been collected since. Isolating meaningful numerical data for a small local area from data collected on a regional basis is also challenging.

Results

In 2001, Big hART Inc began consultations with the Northcott community about a participatory arts program. In July 2002, the project Northcott Narratives¹² began in the community. Artists from Big hART shared their philosophy: “If you know someone’s story it is much harder to hurt them”. The residents that shared their stories felt validated and shared this feeling with others. Interest in story-making opportunities snowballed. People began to feel they knew their neighbours and no longer feared them. Differences that once fuelled fear, stigma and discrimination now began to nurture togetherness and a sense of community was enhanced.¹

At this time the Big hART team of artists and the creative producer worked alone. However, within three months the project had delivered ‘wins’ for the community and partnerships were formed with the New South Wales Department of Housing, which supported the project through its community development worker, and Surry Hills Police, which allocated its crime prevention officer. This was the beginning of the collaboration and co-operation

that underpinned the ongoing work and development at Northcott.

A volunteer tenant committee, the Surry Hills Public Tenants Association, was also established in 2002 and it operated a peer-based community centre that ran groups, meetings and activities for the tenants. “*The community centre has an open-door policy, encouraging people to come in and meet their neighbours ... At any given time, you’ll find upwards of 15 people just chatting*”.¹ As tenants began to get to know each other and the partners in the interventions, they also began to recognise the need for greater support and involvement in their and the wider community. Links were forged with a variety of partners in an attempt to further reduce the isolation of tenants.

The Neighbourhood Advisory Board, supported by the DOH, became a forum for tenants to report issues that concerned their safety and well-being at Northcott. This advisory board was expanded to include additional representatives from the DOH, Surry Hills Police, St Vincent’s Mental Health, City of Sydney Council, Department of Community Services, Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care, and local non-government organisations including the Surry Hills Neighbourhood Centre, Central Sydney Community Transport, Northcott tenants and Big hART.¹

Approximately 30 different individuals, businesses, non-government organisations, and Government departments were directly involved in creating greater opportunities for the tenants. “*It’s great to see the changes here. People are friendlier, happier and can express themselves creatively and not in destructive ways*”.¹² Tenants worked together to identify and address their own individual and community needs, resourcing themselves to respond to the needs of their neighbours and those who lived in other marginalised and/or isolated communities. “*The committee and all the other volunteers are keen, training hard and learning how to partner with skilled and supportive people*”.¹² The tenants realised that by working together on these projects they had generated pride and confidence among themselves and achieved something that they previously never considered possible. Government bodies developed a Memorandum of Understanding so as to best respond to the needs and interests of the tenants. Members of the wider local government area and neighbouring areas reported a different ‘feeling’ at Northcott and members from the wider community became more interested and involved.¹²

Five years on from the first Big hART consultations, tenants now work together to identify and address their own individual and community needs. “*Through engaging members of the community in collaborative arts-based activities, people have been invited to tell their stories and get involved with other*

members of their community to create art, increasing a sense of belonging and safety amongst participants," said Frank Panucci, director community partnerships with the Australia Council for the Arts.¹²

Over the past three years Northcott has experienced a decrease in violent crime and vandalism and associated costs. As noted by Reg Mahoney, assistant commissioner, NSW Police, in his letter of support for the Northcott application:

"Serious crime has now reduced. There have been no murders and no suicides for more than two years and instead of negative media, there has been a great deal more positive media stories about what is now an empowered and largely positive community".¹³

Further evidence included a reduction in unit vacancies and an increase in tenant participation and access to support services.

"At the outset of the intervention Northcott was traumatised. People felt unsafe, levels of fear and resulting isolation were high. The Department of Housing community development worker and the Big hART project manager recall walking the estate at the end of 2002 and not a day going by without someone pleading with them to 'get me out of here'. This simply does not happen anymore. Those that live at Northcott are developing a community and in doing so are developing a level of pride about where they live".¹³

It was also found that there was a reduction in the stigma associated with public housing and the Northcott Estate. Sandy Henderson, chairperson Surry Hills Public Tenants Association, stated that:

"Unfortunately, Northcott is a high-risk community, making it all the harder to develop the techniques needed to make it a safer place. Four years ago there was very little contact between any of the agencies. Now there is liaising and communication, so key safety issues are raised and dealt with much quicker. When a community stands together, they are stronger and therefore much safer. We believe it is a fundamental right for all people to feel safe and be safe in their home and communities and therefore, we are dedicated to the WHO Safe Community model and are committed to ongoing participation at all levels".¹³

In March 2006, Northcott was awarded a Coalition of Australian Heads of Government Crime and Violence Prevention Award. The Lord Mayor of Sydney and Member of Parliament for Bligh, Clover Moore, reported in her letter of support for Northcott that:

"Since the employment of [a] community development worker and the commencement of the Big hART program, I have witnessed dramatic and positive change on the Northcott Estate. Crime rates for the estate, especially for violent crime, are lower, isolation is reduced and there is a noticeable positive sense of community among tenants.

I believe that the Northcott experience shows the way to prevent large-scale social unrest and violence, and ensure that people who need help get the assistance they need. The Northcott experience should be used as a model for other housing estates so that this type of positive community change becomes more common."¹³

There were several significant cultural processes and events co-ordinated by Big hART from 2005 to 2007.⁸ These included the sellout performances of *Stickybricks* at Northcott over four nights as part of the 2006 Sydney Festival; the portrait exhibition *Tenant by Tenant* at the Museum of Sydney, also part of Sydney Festival; the documentary *900 Neighbours*, which premiered at the Sydney Film Festival in June 2006 and screened nationally on ABC TV in February 2007; the film version of *Stickybricks*, which screened on ABC TV in February 2007; and a series of short films, *14 Storeys*, which screened on ABC TV between February and April 2007. In November 2006 a resource box, *Northcott Narratives – Say Hello*, was published. This box contained all the creative works made with tenants at Northcott since 2002, a community directory, and a booklet describing the processes implemented by Big hART. This box was distributed to all Northcott tenants and project partners.¹²

Representatives from the Department of Housing, Big hART, police, and the tenants' safety committee hosted a WHO Safe Community site visit in September 2006. Key partners assured the site visit team of the long-term sustainability of the safety measures that had been established. For example, the community development worker position has been extended to July 2008 and a Neighbourhood Advisory Board has been established with a sub-committee (safety committee) directly responsible for driving ongoing safety programs at Northcott. This committee is responsible for reporting on and addressing issues of concern to residents related to their safety and well-being. There was also strong evidence of a significantly more empowered and positive community that demonstrated considerable improvements in quality of life. On 28 November 2006, the Northcott Housing Estate became the 111th internationally designated Safe Community. Representatives from all the Government and non-government agencies involved, as well as many of the tenants, attended the ceremony and widespread positive media attention was given to the event. Table 1 summarises how Northcott achieved the criteria for designation. A full copy of its application is available on the Safe Communities Foundation of New Zealand website.¹³

Big hART's work with the Northcott community was completed in early 2007. The legacy of this work is that the community now has more skills and the aspiration and the support of the Neighbourhood Advisory Board to keep on the path of community development.

Conclusion

There are many factors that contribute to the actual and perceived safety within a community and many ways of describing, charting and addressing these issues. This project at Northcott saw safety to be about social connectedness and relationships; individual and communal agency; physical and emotional well-being; a functional and helpful physical environment; and a positive image within the broader community, allowing for partnership, support and understanding. To this end, the community and partners at Northcott worked with a conception of safety that aimed to:

- Increase individual and community sense of ownership of issues around crime, safety and well-being.
- Build community capacity to respond to issues of crime and safety.
- Support and replicate the community development process, which leads to crime prevention, enhances safety and develops individual and community well-being.¹³

The Big *hART* project at Northcott has demonstrated the important role that the arts can play in the regeneration of areas whose residents are disadvantaged economically, socially, culturally and environmentally. As the process of group artistic production relies on identifying common goals, group co-operation and effective communication, social cohesion has been successfully developed at Northcott. The tenants participating in the various activities developed by Big *hART* have demonstrated the way that a project of this kind can be an effective tool of empowerment when the local community (in this case the tenants) own the project.^{11,12} Through participation in the project, the tenants have been supported in their personal development as well as contributing to the improvement of the image of the Northcott estate. Additionally, while it is acknowledged that very few accurate outcome data measures are available, as demonstrated by this case study, the Northcott environment became safer: no murders occurred, police call-outs were reduced, and media coverage changed from negative portrayals to positive.¹³

Table 1: Summary of how the Northcott estate achieved the criteria for Safe Community designation.

WHO criteria	Involvement of Northcott tenants, groups and organisations
1. Infrastructure based on partnerships and collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer tenant committee established • Neighbourhood Advisory Board (NAB) supported by Department of Housing, Surry Hills Police, St Vincent's Mental Health, City of Sydney City Council, and local non-government organisations, established • Sub-committee of the NAB directly responsible for driving ongoing safety programs meets bi-monthly • Continuation of key partnerships and collaboration in place • Participation in participatory arts program • Appointment of community development worker • Appointment of police crime prevention officers
2 and 3. Long-term sustainable program covering high-risk groups and environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At Northcott, safety is about social connectedness and relationships; individual and communal agency; physical and emotional well-being; a functional and helpful physical environment; and a positive image within the broader community, allowing for partnership, support and understanding • With successful collaborative partnerships formed, a number of programs were initiated to increase community connectedness, access services and activities, and to improve community safety and well-being • These have included falls prevention for the elderly; remodelling the flats for the residents to enable modifications for safety, especially in kitchens and bathrooms; the installation of fire alarms; and significantly, the establishment of a community development worker, provided by the Department of Housing, who is based at the estate. • Implementation of projects targeting high-risk groups, included support for people with disabilities and road safety initiatives to improve access in and around the Northcott Housing Estate
4. Document the extent of the injury burden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive and challenging indepth interviews conducted • Case studies, Northcott Narratives • Injury data analysis – regional • Crime statistics analysis – regional • Accidents and incidents report book
5. Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project evaluator contracted • Northcott Narratives project – reflective practice completed • Award of NSW Police National Crime Prevention Award 2006 • What have they done there? Two years at Northcott evaluation completed
6. Building networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attended Safe Communities conferences in Australia • Attended and presented at Community Housing Conference • Dissemination and information sharing of reports • Preparation and dissemination of Northcott Narratives • Numerous presentations on the Northcott project to Government and non-government organisations

The arts are not often considered to be part of community development. As Kay argues, the bringing together of arts into community development and community development embracing the arts in the development of a holistic approach to people-centred development is a challenge.⁵ However, the conduct of the Big hART project in Northcott has demonstrated the way the arts can be a powerful catalyst for change. It demonstrates how the more the tenants worked and socialised together in environments that encouraged co-operation, the more their trust in others grew.

The success of the regeneration of the Northcott Housing Estate involved collaboration between Government and non-government agencies as well as the Northcott community and demonstrated the success of a whole-of-government approach. As Mitchell and McClure argue, Government and non-government agencies must work collaboratively if the burden of injuries is to be significantly reduced. As they state, a whole-of-government approach can reduce duplication, focus resources, promote the best use of skills and expertise, and encourage sustainability of effort through the strengthening of cross-government networks and partnerships.¹⁴

The criteria required for Safe Community accreditation provided a framework for Government and non-government agencies to work with the Northcott community to establish the inter-connectiveness necessary to turn it into somewhere that the residents felt safe and were proud to be part of. The Big hART project has demonstrated that a large housing estate with a history of dysfunctional tenants and high rates of crime and mental illness can form effective partnerships with Government and non-government organisations to improve tenants' health and well-being to such an extent that they have become the first public estate in the world to be recognised by the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre on Community Safety as a member of the International Safe Community Movement.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the input from Emily Mayo and Michelle Kotevski, who contributed significantly to earlier reports related to the Northcott project.

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