

Made by many: how creative communities can be the heart of regional resilience

A keynote address given at the Kumuwuki/Big Wave Regional Arts Australia conference in Goolwa, South Australia on 21 October 2012

This is not 100% verbatim what I said in my keynote, but what I wrote before with the main edits and insertions I can recall, and one of the off the cuff jokes I made that I was quite pleased with. So though there will be some bits missing if anyone is rash enough to compare to the recording, and some bits I cut due to talking too long, it should give you more than the gist. (Or the gest for the Brechtians.)

(I began with the first half of a poem from 21 Ways of Looking At the Sponsors Club. It's not as impressive an attention-grabbing move as Bill Shannon's crutches and skateboard entrance, but it's all I've got. Many thanks to the AUSLAN signers for their forbearance and brilliance.)

Makers of pastry and shapers of pies,
builders of houses and mortgage providers,
bankers, crafters, tanker-drivers, shops,
counters of beans and makers of scenes,
conjurers of light and houses from hats,
creators of mats, offices, homes,
scaffolders, miners, benders, combiners,
those who run trains and boats and planes
– and cars, vans, bikes, trucks and lorries,
frothers up of headlines and local stories,
potash, iron, marshmallows, paninis, cakes,
country houses, open mines and mucky works,
people who pluck pictures from the air to make
photos, blueprints, fresh-baked pizzas, songs,
the people who give you ice creams,
toffees, tarmac, sleep-filled nights, insurance,
sharpeners of pencils, bakers of bread,
the ports, the malls, and the roads up to them,

These are just some of the many who have made the culture of my region. I will read the 2nd half of the poem at the end of my talk, if I don't wander off too much.

I want to start by thanking Steve Mayhew, Jo McDonald, Country Arts SA for inviting me to take part in this Regional Arts Australia conference. I've had a great time and very grateful to be here.

I am going to talk about what creative resilience from a regionalist perspective, why I think it's important and how can we as creative communities can be at the

heart of regional resilience – maybe not the whole heart but at least one of the muscles pumping away?

My normal nervousness about prescription is both heightened and calmed by being approximately a million and a half miles from home. Heightened because I am well aware that just because I have been talking to people in English for the last few days it doesn't mean we've always been speaking the same language. Some of what I have to say might sound foreign and provincial in the worst sense of that word, but I hope not.

I am somewhat calmed, though, because I do believe strongly with the great Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh that 'parochialism is universal', and have a sense that many here believe in the exploration of what he called 'local rows' – or is it 'rows' – as a way of exploring the world. I use the word as he does, positively, in the sense of relating to the parish, rather than the negative sense of narrow and constricted. I think of Tom Trevororrow talking yesterday of his 'lands and waters'. I like this phrase so much so I once used those words as the epigraph to a book of poems and photographs. I omitted the second half of what he said though, which has relevance here. Parochialism is universal, Kavanagh said, because it deals in fundamentals. So I hope that at least there may be some fundamentals to be drawn from my tales of home.

I think also of Deleuze and Guatarri's notion of 'minor literatures' – what a minority constructs within a majority language' or culture – and how in that minor or regional literature everything is political and everything takes on a collective value. (This notion taken from their short book on Kafka.)

This (image of map of northern England) is my home region, what I would call home – Northern England. I grew up in Preston, Lancashire, in the North West, in a place that had once been centred on its cotton mills and its railway sheds but was now without visible means of support. My ancestors specialized in dying industries – cotton and steam trains. And I now live in the parish of Preston-on-Tees, in Teesside, a place once renowned for steel and chemicals, with towns that have been identified as the least economically resilient in England. It has essentially been a life lived a long way from what many people in England would still consider, in the words of Matthew Arnold, as the 'natural centers of mental improvement and sources of lucidity' which practice if not policy holds to be in the South East of England. Obviously not a long way in physical terms, to an Australian or a South African, say, but still a long way culturally. Since 1993 I have considered myself part of the team working on making the region a better place to live, work and grow up or old – first as player in the arts, then manager and now perhaps as a player and part of the coaching team.

. I will share examples from regional UK, but only by way of illustration and evidence I'm not making up the reality of resilience to prove the theory. The Australian application of any fundamentals I might draw is obviously up or down to you.

WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT WHEN I TALK ABOUT RESILIENCE

I do however agree with the psychologist Kurt Lewin who said 'there is nothing as practical as a good theory' so I want to start by sharing some definitions. These stem from research over the last several years that included a lot of reading, getting to grips with the use of the word resilience in different contexts such as ecology, socio-ecology, child development, businesses and the economy, and a lot of case studies of organisations as varied as the National Theatre and Glyndebourne at one end of the spectrum of size, 'status' and 'national'-ness and Helix Arts and Soft Touch, community arts organisations in the North East and East Midlands at the other, local end.

So here is the definition I arrived at when I wrote 'Making Adaptive Resilience Real' in 2010:

'the capacity to remain productive and true to core purpose and identity whilst absorbing disturbance and adapting with integrity in response to changing circumstances'

Words I'd underline now are productive, identity, integrity. Words I'd try and insert (if it wasn't long enough already) might be creative or creatively and to shape circumstances rather than simply responding to them.

For me adaptive resilience or creative resilience, call it what you will, is important as a way of thinking that goes beyond immediate 'outputs' to lasting benefit and assets. Many of us in the arts focus our attentions and energies on the immediate, and thinking long-term can actually be counter-productive. Spare us, for example, the poet concerned with posterity. But for our communities, the resilience of artists and of arts institutions can be as powerful and transformational as an individual show, exhibition or work – indeed they make places those individual transformations can take root, rather than be allowed to slip away. (As in 'panarchy' where different scales of adaptive cycles connect or interact.)

Take the example of a festival or one-off event. A festival that happens once or twice can provide some unforgettable inspiration for those that were there. That's not nothing. But it's history that makes the significance. In fact history makes the short-lived nature of the event both romantic and somehow integral – designed you might say. In the language of ecological resilience such a cultural happening is not

the environment that needs to manage its vulnerabilities, but the disturbance to which everyone else must respond. There are countless examples from arts history. One might consider the Olympics this kind of disturbance – with what in the UK we are obliged now to call ‘legacy’. European Capitals of Culture act similarly – creating new opportunities and challenges, loosening the way in which things are tied down. Liverpool 08 saw classic examples of this, but the infrastructure there was not tempted to maintain it as an ongoing thing – it had its effect, catalyzed new thinking, collaborations and experiments. (This picture is of Richard Wilson’s appropriately named ‘Turning The Place Over’.) The event was the disturbance to the status quo.

We also need, however, other arts events that become part of the world, think longer term and start to become transformational in other ways. A festival that happens for 25 years – as my local Stockton International Riverside Festival has – can have a cumulative effect on local people, giving audiences the chance to try things, giving children the chance to grow up and take on roles they’ve aspired to, giving artists the chance to develop, creating relationships across the world impossible on a one-off basis. Of course, it can’t do that if it stays exactly the same – it will need to adapt – to incorporate its own successful experiments and those of others, respond to its funding environment and to the changing population of a place, and so on

SIRF - as we call it in Northern England because we have no other use for that word - has become part of the environment locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. the festival has enabled ambition and development which a less resilient event would not have. It has also supported a growing ecology of companies making work for and with local communities and the expansion of street arts as a genre.

This is also true of audiences who have grown in confidence. My favourite story to illustrate this is of the day a friend and I overheard two stereotypical Teesside blokes – shaven heads, tattoos on their necks, lost industry in their eyes – talking about a contemporary dance show on the High Street. One was looking skeptical, but just as we thought he was going to move away saying it was a load of rubbish, he turned to his mate and said: ‘It’s not as good as the dance thing we saw last year,’ moving on to give a detailed reasoning why he felt that. Job done – a habit of participation and critical discussion of the actual art. This cannot but help to affect the culture in the broadest sense of Stockton.

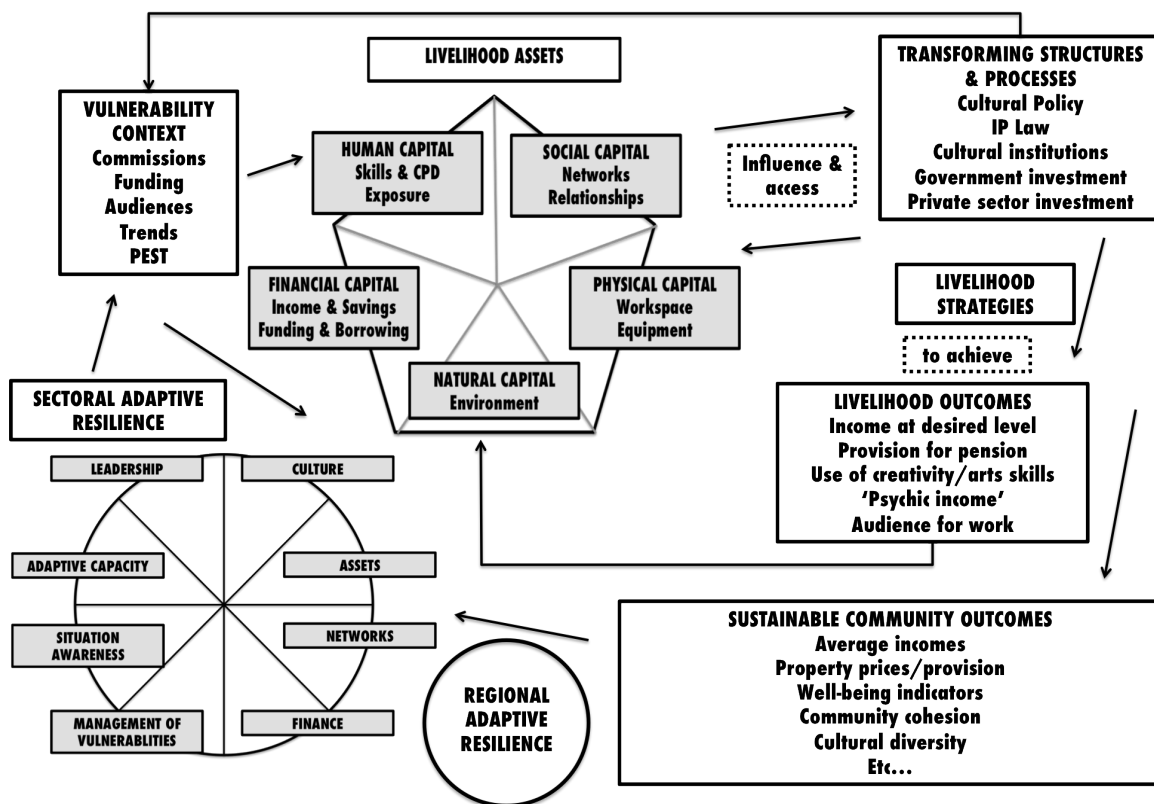
Those are examples of how the cultural sector and a regional place connect. Regional resilience is important for places away from the metropolis because of increasing concentrations of economic power and influence, even as the market becomes global.

For me regional resilience is about the ability to withstand shocks to the economy, about environmental factors and also about the physical and social fabric – can it hold, heal and be healthy? As I mentioned, most surveys in the UK – in the context of the double dip recession we have seen fit to create – put the region I live amongst the least resilient places. Weirdly enough, though, they have felt exactly resilient and adaptive to me: where people stick together, where values continue to matter and social inequality has frayed but not managed to totally wreck the edges of community. We continue to adapt and find creative ways forward, with arts playing a major role in this – moving away from our carbon-greedy history to breaking new ground in renewables, for instance.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

So why is resilience important in the context of regional arts development?

Work I am currently doing with Mission Models Money and New Economic Foundation leads me to suggest that there is the possibility of creating a virtuous circle if we can build a resilient cultural sector in a region at a distance from the metropolitan centres of power and finance.



This (above) is the latest version of a systems map we are currently working on that attempts to show how by better enabling artists to use their various sorts of capital

to develop sustainable livelihoods, the arts sector can play a part in developing the resilience of their regions and communities, but also increase their well-being in a more sustainable way than the growth-focused economic system which has, to be frank, left my home region suffering. This complex system would take too long to unpack here, but there is, I think, a simplified version where

Arts organisations that are deeply rooted in region identity & heritage and its contemporary 'purpose' have the ability to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem. They can contribute to regional resilience by helping build the core skills of personal resilience – problem solving, approaching even challenging experiences constructively, and developing positive visions for places and communities. In doing this they also make themselves more resilient – more connected, more valued. This manifests itself in, and is helped by supportive policies – from regional government for instance, and from developing reliable markets for activity and products. This builds on the heart of all kinds of adaptive resilience in my thinking: a shared culture of purpose and values.

To take an example from research I did last year for Arts Council England into the specific role of diversity in building adaptive resilience. (You can find more of these case studies on the site for the Creative Case for diversity at <http://disabilityarts.creativecase.org.uk> - interestingly enough not on Arts Council's own site, but that of a partner organisation working in disability arts.)

Punch Music in Birmingham began as a music shop in Birmingham in the West Midlands. As founder and CEO Ammo Talwar, says 'it started out trying to sell Sinatra, Oasis and Public Enemy side by side' but quickly realized it needed to draw more on its unique expertise, and became specialists in Black music. As the business model for record shops of any sort has been eroded, the organisation has used key assets of the knowledge base of its staff and its brand to expand into other areas of black arts, investing heavily in networks and in intellectual property. It turned potential competitors into collaborators. This has what you might 'competitive advantage' for them, but is more interesting for today's purpose for the effects on regional resilience – networks support a multiplicity of organisations, artists have distribution and touring networks which they might otherwise struggle to access. The locality has a vibrancy it might otherwise lack, and role models from the cultural sector.

Induction of staff emphasises the integral or organic nature of the diversity of Punch's audiences, with staff walking the streets of north Birmingham, talking to shop owners and businesses. This is the basis of the organisation's strength – a set of relationships rooted locally but which also allows it to represent that local community regionally and nationally.

This local regional national spectrum is worth focusing on for a few moments. In the UK, government policy is currently to take out the centre of that spectrum. Region is now 'the R word' – one you basically cannot use in government circles in the UK. (The CEO of Arts Council tells me their preferred workaround is 'pan-localism'.) We have what is called the 'localism agenda' – giving more power to very local communities and institutions such as schools – within an increasingly directive national framework. This applies in the arts as elsewhere, with the Arts Council increasingly erasing regional boundaries into super-regions.

Where arts organisations can be useful though is in connecting the local and the national, through the collectivity implicit in notions of regionalism. To put it crudely: localism can lead to provincialism, to the notion of the importance of small differences being over-riding and young people feeling constricted.

At the level of national identity differences are often erased into some kind of homogeneity, with all the difficulties for diversity we are familiar with.

The region, however, it seems to me is large enough to accommodate and respect differences in locality, but small enough to find a practical common shared identity and to work with it. (What in adaptive resilience terms I would call 'shared culture of purpose and values'.) This might actually be larger or indeed smaller than the administrative boundaries, but reflects something deeper. The region allows us a useful framework for identifying and addressing inequalities of access to the arts and to investment. It allows us a way of harnessing diversity creatively and productively – and my research suggests diversity is a key element in resilient organisations – diversity of workforce, perspectives as well as income streams and assets.

Behind this is the importance of mindset. In our work on diversity Tony Nwachukwu and I described this as the ROAR mindset – Reflective, Open, Adaptive and Responsible. We talk about how creating this is arguably the key leadership task within resilient organisations. But two things strike me about those characteristics in this context:

Firstly, this is the kind of place I want to live in as a citizen and a cultural worker. (And I would stress we are both – artists are not other than the community, they are part of it.) One which is connected to but not restricted by its roots and history, one that changes and is open to new influences, new people and ideas, and one which has a sense of obligation to communities, local places and to its nation. To return to Patrick Kavanagh this makes me think of the distinction he makes between parochialism and provincialism. 'Parochialism and provincialism are direct opposites. The provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes

see until he has heard what the metropolis - towards which his eyes are turned - has to say on the subject. This runs through all his activities.'

Secondly, a resilient region has a mind (and eyes, ears and mouth) of its own. Its artists and arts organisation are a key part of that.

I want now to think about how this might be possible, drawing on two recent examples from the North of England.

Northern Stage is the largest theatre in the North East, and was one of the original case studies for my adaptive resilience research, as it had evolved from being an alternative to the establishment Theatre Royal to being the main stage for new theatre. Like many organisations its resilience had also been forged over 40 years through some financial crises, successes that became issues, and through some major staffing changes.

You can see some of its roots in this extract from a programme note for the first Northern Stage production in 1970 by the great Northern novelist and playwright Sid Chaplin. I'll let you read it as I talk. If you don't know Sid Chaplin's work I can't recommend it highly enough. I love that phrase 'here when the temporal is shattered, we can exist out of time, laugh, weep and be shriven'. Sid Chaplin also gave me one of the quotes I live by, which I was reminded of yesterday by Tom Trevor's talk: "Give me sand before gold, sea instead of champagne, and all the common things like air, and wind, and clouds, and people.'

Northern Stage took more than a dozen companies from across the North of England to Edinburgh festival under their 'Northern Stage at St Stephens' banner, the first time they or any Northern building-based theatre had done this. This saw the organisation working in a way that was explicitly ecological – seeing its own capacity as an asset which could be utilised collectively. Backstage staff such as technicians, assets lacking to most regional companies could be used for collective benefit, for instance to transform the venue or to negotiate contracts. Its leadership created pathways for other smaller companies across the North.

The collaboration enabled regional companies to get the benefits often available to those working in the metropolis – a critical mass of shows, in every sense of the word critical, for instance, with the exciting community feel and discussion that arises from dense scenes, and review attention from a media which is still reluctant to leave the capital. One sign of a flourishing theatrical ecology might be said to be a fringe of small work – this is just emerging in Northern England, and this project has encouraged it.

The project exemplified some of the key characteristics of adaptive resilience that crop up in my research. Collaboration and networks were key, developed with clear, values-driven leadership – and get better once you acknowledge they are not perfect, with Northern Stage having to go to unfamiliar places to deliver this project. This is not easy, and requires clarity, persistence and self-reflection. New doors have opened as a result of Northern Stage at St Stephens – for small companies such as 3rd Angel, who have received bookings across Europe, and for bigger institutions such as Northern Stage itself. Connecting parts of the ecology across the scales has huge benefits in terms of shared learning from different experiences. Innovating in how things are done – ‘not the kind of perfect we normally aim for’ as Erica put it – leads to learning and new ways of working for the future.

One thing which was clear from Northern Stage’s experience was that drawing together region interests, with a strong sense of regional identity, did not lead to provincial small town thinking, but to a more expansive vision of home with nourishing roots. It was intrinsically collaborative in its methodology and its values – and is thus an example of how the arts can model resilient and positive ways of being for regions. It turned its back on the capital in order to find a new way, and drew on the North’s best properties – and in so doing supported its best artists, promoted the region and explored issues of identity.

There is a long tradition of doing this in North East England, where many artists and agencies have long been more active in Europe than in London. The culture-led regeneration of Newcastle and Gateshead was a collective regional act, with local authorities, business, artists and arts organisations all working together to firstly analyse and debate what was needed by way of capital infrastructure – with many family fallings outs and arguments, and only a very few ongoing feuds – and then find ways of funding and supporting it. This involved a clear dynamic with the holders of major lottery and other funders in London, but also with European Union funding, and with regional bodies.

Time does not allow me to tell this story of the North East, of the Angel of the North, The Sage Gateshead and BALTIC and more so I want to end by focusing briefly about an example of collective regional effort that was part of that work, and then drawing out some lessons.

The example is a micro-part of the picture that helped build the North East arts scene over the last 21 years – the Sponsors Club for Arts and Business. The North East has fewer head offices than elsewhere in the country – and even less now than 21 years ago. Ally that to a tradition heavy industry culture and it might not be fertile ground for business support for the arts, and that was the case many years ago. But over the last decades a collective effort has shifted the North East

from the bottom of the league of givers to 2nd only to London, per capita. I recently wrote a booklet for the Sponsors Club to mark their birthday, noting them as an example of resilience which in turn builds regional resilience – arts networks benefitting business networks and vice versa, bringing individuals together to eat drink and plan. The poem I began earlier came from this booklet. This mixture of formal and informal social capital feels the heart of what regions can do more productively than either local or national levels – again, local is too often too small, national too often too difficult and compromised by power dynamics.

The Sponsors Club is interesting because its resilience is intrinsically linked to its regionalism – as can be seen from this extract from the booklet I wrote for them. It began as a Northern group to rebalance the London-centric efforts of the national body Arts & Business, a group of people grown tight-knit by their regionalism, but open enough to the world to be rich in perspective. It built up a core of supported of the arts, and reached out to new business over the years, adapting as the business environment changed as a result of privatization and the increase in small and medium sized businesses in the region – including creative businesses. (Especially as by Richard Florida in Creative Class.)

So to draw out some conclusions I think can be mined from this Northern English perspective.

- Resilience Matters – to people, places and to arts organisations and that there is an inter-relation.
- We should never, in our keenness to be active citizens as artists forget our potential role as both disturbance and environment for creative growth. Vibrant regions need both disturbances and things which last to work with.
- Crucial to resilience at a regional level is understanding that we are Stronger Together, and collaborative effort – and debate and disagreement – is at the heart of both identity and our power.
- It is also vital we respond creatively to the Diversity within any regional Identity, and use that to constantly make it new.
- Our approaches, I would argue should be Asset-based, people-centred, and constantly seek to remain Dynamic and sustainable.

Only by doing this will regions be able to enter into equal relationships with the metropolitans, based on deep knowledge and confidence in ourselves, our heritage and our possibilities.

I was going to finish with the poem which gave me the title for this keynote, but I have realized bridges are not as popular in Goolwa as they are in North East England, where we have many we are very proud of. [There was an infamous case of a bridge being built on ancient aboriginal site close by, and it didn't seem

right, given the emphasis placed on the traditional owners of the land, to read a poem mainly consisting of the names of bridges.) I will therefore conclude with my thanks and with the 2nd half of the poem with which I began:

the fillers of airways, airwaves and glasses,
pullers of pints and molten steel, lager and bitter
and mild mannered curries, mixers of spices,
pickers of pickles and peppers, proud paper-peddlers,
fryers of fish and chips, trainers of the fat,
blenders of soup and fine tailors of suits,
mixers of cement to fill high heels and boots,
lickers of stamps and blowers of glass,
builders of containers, cisterns and fountains,
breakers of brown-fields, diggers of the dirt,
kickers of footballs, halo-headed chefs,
binders and sellers and printers of books, plain cooks,
cutters of concrete and layers of turf, geniuses
who argue the elements into medicine and art,
lines of melody, memory and meaning,
words, pixels, frames, oils, water, light,
muscles, shape, music, movement, laughter, bite.

THINKING
PRACTICE/

Mark Robinson, Thinking Practice
October 21 2012