

**Raise Your Voice  
Fourth National Public Galleries Summit**

**Plenary Forum: Collections and Access**

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**Why communities want galleries**

*Abstract*

Galleries everywhere are reviewing what might be their purpose in contemporary times. In 2008, the Maitland Regional Art Gallery held a series of conversations with local people about their dream for a new gallery. Fifteen focus groups, made up of more than 150 people from various parts of the community, talked about why their community needed an art gallery. These conversations reveal a firm commitment for the place of art galleries in communities, and reaffirm the essential value of galleries to community health and well-being. In my presentation, I will focus on the process of community engagement and discuss key findings.

## ***Maitland Regional Art Gallery: regional conversations***

Maitland Regional Art Gallery (MRAG) identified an opportunity to get to know their community in new ways during the construction of their new gallery. The existing facility was closed for the period of construction while the old building and its new addition took shape on the main street of the historic regional community in New South Wales.

The redevelopment of MRAG was a huge project with the expansion of the gallery into a significantly larger footprint with purpose designed, contemporary gallery spaces. In addition to extending its exhibition areas, the new MRAG proposed to build a large interactive space – branded as *The Art Factory*, and new commercial components (shop and café). Existing spaces would be refreshed and renewed.

At the same time as this massive infrastructure program was underway, MRAG decided to undertake an audience development project, known as *regional conversations*. As the first part of this work, MRAG hosted a community-wide conversation - about the value and potential use of the gallery by diverse populations in the local and adjacent area.

More than 150 individuals took part in the conversations in small group sessions, and their ideas form the basis of this short paper, thus giving us all a chance to think about the voices of:

- Parents of young children
- Primary school students
- Middle school students
- Secondary school students
- Young adults
- Men (aged 25 – 55)
- Women (aged 25 – 55)
- Seniors (over 55s)
- Education professionals
- Indigenous people
- Advocates for people with special needs or persons with a disability
- Creatives (artists, designers, craft workers and others)
- Local government officials and staff
- Gallery staff

A set of questions was designed to provide a standardized conversation across the fifteen groups who participated in *regional conversations*. Key questions were:

- Why does Maitland need an art gallery?
- Why do you visit/not visit an art gallery?
- How would you entice a non-visitor in the door?
- What types of exhibitions would you like to see at MRAG?
- What types of events and programs interest you?
- Have you or your family attended any events or workshops at MRAG?
- Where do you get your information about MRAG?
- What kinds of promotion or advertising appeals to you?

As the gallery was closed, the sessions were held in community halls and schools. I chaired the meetings and was supported by MRAG staff at each session. A model of the building site was supplied, as well as a brochure outlining the project aims and key questions. Refreshments were provided.

All conversations were recorded, and all participants provided informed consent to take part in the dialogue. Once consent was obtained, a digital voice recorder was used to document the conversations. Complete transcripts and audio recordings of the conversations provide a detailed record of local views of the gallery, its value and place in the local community.

Today, I plan to raise the voices of these local people to share why they want galleries.

### *Findings*

*regional conversations* participants identified many important reasons for having an art gallery in the community and cited specific preferences for activities, events and promotion of the gallery.

Nine key ideas were repeated across different focus groups.

<b>Maitland Regional Art Gallery:</b>
• Inspiring
• For children
• For tourists
• For everyone
• Our cultural centre
• Generator for social renewal
• Showcase & preserve
• An activity centre
• Educational hub

## **1. A place of inspiration**

Without exception, every group mentioned that an art gallery provides a place for inspiration in the community. Art galleries were seen as key sites for sparking the imagination, provoking new ideas, challenging traditions and generating creativity.

Participants across the community indicated that the gallery is important because it houses, protects and promotes artistic and cultural ideas. A gallery provides a positive social outcome for individuals and groups by encouraging self-expression, providing a safe place for dangerous ideas, and a location for wholesome activities.

*I'm enormously excited and proud that we have a gallery here. Thank you Lord, it's so wonderful. I just want to come along and bring my CWA and tell everyone about it because it's such a beautiful space to be in. I love just being there. It's so lovely and I love it and I love what you said about everyone should come in there and feel safe. What a great word.*

*It's definitely a place of inspiration and education for all people, and definitely a place for showcasing talents of people within the local community - and wider.*

*I think an art gallery should generate imagination, that's the most important thing. It was Einstein that said that imagination is more important than knowledge, and I think that's what a gallery should do. You should walk out stimulated.*

*I visit art galleries. The last time I went to Maitland John Martin's exhibition was up, and he's a printer. I went home and started doing things straight away. That was inspiring; I loved it.*

## **2. For children**

Every group identified children as a primary audience for a gallery. There was a feeling that the gallery would provide a dynamic centre for children's engagement and involvement in Maitland.

The design of the interactive gallery space, *The Art Factory*, generated excitement and animated conversation. Participants were eager to see exhibitions of art by, for and about children in the gallery. They were also eager to see low-cost or free workshops for children to be involved in making art.

Parents indicated that they were sometimes uncomfortable with taking their children into galleries because they might disrupt the patrons. Though they thought MRAG had already undertaken positive steps to welcome children into the gallery, parents thought the strong emphasis on children in the new gallery environment and programs would overcome any lingering misperceptions.

Educators felt that the gallery and educational settings (from preschool to TAFE, and beyond) could become frequent users of the gallery spaces to supplement the school curriculum, and expressed interest in forming collaborative relationships with the gallery staff.

School children expressed interest in taking part in art gallery experiences of all kinds. They stated a preference for interactive exhibits that connected with their areas of interest – sculpture, installations, workshops, play-based environments. They also expressed interest in having exhibitions of their own art at the gallery.

*Children are most important in a gallery, to introduce them to a gallery while they're young, and ensure that there are interactive things for them to do there.*

*I think that we need an art gallery because sport has too much influence in Australia. When you look into the school newsletters it's all about who's in trials and who's playing for the state, and who's gone off for regionals. Nobody says what a good artist their child is. There's just not enough of it.*

*I looked at this thing here, the Art Factory, and that really excites me because we've got 20 kids over in that preschool three days a week and I feel we could utilise that if there was stuff there that could promote art and creativity in them. We do excursions, we could do something like that, and we could certainly utilise that.*

*I think Maitland does definitely need an art gallery that shows the future, the past and the present. And it's good for the children, for education for the children. The children bring in the parents. The parents bring the uncles and aunties and the grandparents.*

### **3. For tourists**

There was an expectation that the gallery redevelopment would be a magnet for tourism to Maitland. The gallery was seen as a destination for tourists, and as a venue that could spark a boost in the tourist economy.

In this regard, exhibitions of local, regional and national interest were seen to be important, especially if the gallery were to be competitive with other nearby galleries. Advertising and promotion was seen as vital to drawing more visitors into the gallery.

*I think that we need an art gallery in Maitland just to increase visitors to the community and kind of give them a different perspective of what they think Maitland is, 'cause it's a very historical town and maybe if there are contemporary exhibitions they'll see that it's not just historical.*

#### **4. For everyone**

While children and tourists were mentioned as key audiences for gallery exhibitions and events, there was a strong sentiment that the gallery should be for everyone. In this regard, participants mentioned that the gallery should provide a welcome experience for all kinds of people, especially those who do not traditionally come to an art venue. Attracting new or first-time visitors to the gallery was seen as a high priority, and many strategies were discussed – especially having shows with content that would attract new audiences.

The café and shop were mentioned as important venues, and as places where people could come to visit even without participating in gallery events and exhibitions.

In relation to attracting new visitors, several suggestions were made to reconceptualize the gallery as a comfortable and inviting space for everyone:

*When I first started going to galleries I wasn't sure if I was allowed to walk in. But I soon found that no one was kicking me out, so there was no stopping me then.*

*I think galleries can be really intimidating spaces, particularly if people haven't been, 'cause there's that sense that you may need a certain level of education and literacy of what it is that you're viewing. And I can't help but feel that marketing and trying to change that image is really important...*

*I would tell them to just go in and enjoy it. You don't need any credentials to go in or you don't have to look a particular way.*

*The linking of other networks and clubs into the use of the gallery space would be the way that you'll fill that diversity of people that visit. If you watch at any of those events they all pretty much go and have a look at the exhibitions before they do that event that they're specifically there for.*

*I think it's great to be able to bring the art out of the gallery and make it very accessible to the people.*

## **5. A cultural centre**

Many people expressed the idea that art galleries provide a dynamic centre for community engagement, and even called the venue the "heart and soul of the community". In this regard, many stressed the integrating the arts in the gallery and providing a diverse multi-arts focus (art, craft, music, drama, dance, literary).

*I kind of see it as the soul of the city, the Art Gallery. Probably the heart and soul would be the Library and Art Gallery because not only do they have the educational value but also it is cultural and it allows people to go and imagine. You know, use their imagination and admire beautiful works of art. I think it's a stage in growing up for the city. I think it's a necessity.*

*People have varying interests. The community here provides sporting arenas. They provide all sorts of arenas and why not provide an outlet for people who are into the artistic side of things. We need the art gallery, we need the drama institutions, we need the musical institutions.*

*Maitland needs a cultural heart that's bigger than football and the pub.*

## **6. Social renewal**

In many ways, participants indicated that a gallery was an important venue for generating change and creating social capital in a community. Others applauded the notion of the gallery becoming a venue for wholesome social activity for people of all ages.

*I think the heart of the community is really around celebration of local identity and stories and cultural production. And even though the art gallery is a physically built asset, it's what happens in it that generates that social capital and a sense of identity and pride. So I think an art gallery is a really critical, or a space of cultural*

*production and exhibition is really critical, to that social aspect of the community.*

*Just as we would expect Maitland City Council to provide us with things that were going to satisfy our physical needs - the roads, whatever - this is about satisfying the spiritual aspects of people, and giving them an outlet for creativity and an appreciation for beauty. That's having a balanced life and having a quality of life.*

*I think the galleries nowadays are classless so it's a really nice place for people to go into and there is no right or wrong – and that's even for children to older people. I think they can go in there and feel safe. Everything is given to them for them to be free to make their own decisions about how they feel in a place like that and mix with other people on the same sort of basis.*

*I think that you need a gallery for lots of different reasons. One thing that I've noticed since the gallery has been opened is the range of exhibitions that we've had. It's created ideas that make you think or talk to other people in and outside of the exhibition itself. So that you might go to dinner sometime during the week and say 'did you see that whatever thing' and 'it was great' or ... 'oh, you've got to go and see it', all those sorts of things.*

## **7. Showcase and Preserve**

There was a diversity of ideas about what to showcase and preserve at MRAG. Four types of ideas/content were expressed:

**The “real thing”** – many people spoke of the awesome feeling they got when they were able to see real objects and art in a gallery.

**Local talent** – there was a strong emphasis on being able to showcase local talent at the gallery, with all kinds of groups exhibiting their work in curated exhibitions. The groups mentioned included children, emerging artists, crafts people, photographers and established artists.

**Local history** – a few people emphasised the importance of being able to view local history at the gallery, and expressed the value of having a place to archive and exhibit these important records.

**Regional, national and international shows** – there was enthusiasm for bringing the world to Maitland by having important regional, national and international exhibitions.

*I think we should be concentrating on producing an art gallery which brings forth all sorts of creativity, whether it be workshops for the young or for the old and dodderly, certainly a meeting place, but also somewhere where Maitland history can be preserved.*

*I visit galleries for enjoyment and to view the works in person, to see their surfaces, to move around them, to see the differences to what I've seen maybe that's already printed in a book. And I visit all types of galleries, like local regional galleries ... spaces and major galleries. Sometimes I only visit like one show or one work 'cause I find sometimes it's too overwhelming to see too much all at once.*

*I think there's a potential also for if the gallery is showing children's art, for the image of children to be changed or affected in society.*

## **8. Activity centre**

Interactive, multi-arts art experiences were highly favoured by all respondents. People indicated that they would like to be involved in a range of activities at MRAG:

- Places to make art
- Places to see artists at work
- Places to interact with technology
- Workshops with artists
- Artist in residence programs

*The Art Factory* was seen as a highly positive direction and people were keen to make sure it worked to connect children, schools and the general public.

*I think the Art Gallery – since it's been here and since Joe's been director – has achieved a great deal and has probably induced a lot of people in Maitland to venture in the door who wouldn't have done previously because of the music concerts there and various other activities and a lot of activities for children.*

*I think there should be more workshops in the school holidays for the kids.*

*...there should be an emphasis in the craft programs on maybe paper making, print making...*

*I love the speaker series. I think that gets ... intelligent debate.*

*...workshops, master classes, life drawing facility...*

## **9. Educational hub**

All groups mentioned the important educational value of a gallery to the entire community. In both the formal curriculum, and in the sense of contributing to lifelong learning, the gallery was seen as a vital and important community resource. Many spoke about the important links the school and gallery could forge and strengthen to build truly collaborative relationships that would last for a lifetime of learning.

Importantly, participants saw true value in establishing strong educational programs for schools and colleges to augment art learning in the school curriculum.

*... all of the teachers here have a very positive view of the gallery and have been extremely appreciative of the support that we've received whenever we've asked for it. I think we have a really good working relationship at the moment.*

*I'd like to see somewhere along the line a partnership, a transport partnership, where there could be, like the schools could somehow get access to low cost transport, even if it's with Blue Ribbon and they just put one of their ordinary buses that's not being used on, or something along those lines. And the council could perhaps be involved in sponsoring that. We would come down much more regularly and I would bring a class once a term. I'm sure lots of other teachers would as well if we had access to that lower cost transport.*

Importantly, community members recognised that the gallery could play a vital role in keeping the learning spark alive in the post-school years. There was recognition of a diverse range of learning needs – from traditional to creative – to be sustained through the gallery and its programs.

*I see the role of a gallery as educating, exploring lots of different possibilities, expanding horizons, and also as an umbrella to bring local groups together – a focal point. It's a focus point for the*

*community – a focus point of the artistic part of the community or the cultural part of the community.*

### **What next?**

This type of visitor-centred research can yield great results, especially when galleries are undergoing expansion projects. Ideas generated during the first part of the *regional conversation* project were used to shape programs, advertising and promotion of the newly re-opened MRAG. Opening weekend yielded a very high attendance, and so the new venue has sparked a lot of interest.

The real challenge lies in the months and years ahead as some of the long-term dreams and aspirations for the gallery to fulfil its mission as a place of inspiration, as a showcase and preserver of culture, as the cultural heart of the community, and as a generator for social renewal. As the community and the gallery form new relationships, expect to see interesting new practices and ideas emerge from MRAG.