LOCAL GOVERNMENT AMALGAMATIONS IN QUEENSLAND

Tips for Surviving and Thriving

The following articles are reprinted from Museum and Gallery Services Queensland’s magazine, Artery, December 2007 issue (Volume 3 Number 1).
Contents

Museums, Galleries and Council Amalgamations in Victoria
or how I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb

Hanut Dodd 3

Art Making Culture

Chris Hudson 5

Grafton Regional Gallery

Jude McBean 6

Closing Tips

Michelle Smith | Julie Boyd 8
Local Government Amalgamations in Queensland

Tips for Surviving and Thriving

In early 2007 the Queensland Government undertook a state-wide review of boundaries which commenced a process of amalgamation of local government areas. Vigorous discussion within the cultural sector about the future of local council-funded galleries and museums prompted Museum and Gallery Services Queensland to conduct a forum on amalgamation at its 2007 state conference held on the Gold Coast in September. The purpose of the forum was not to debate the merits or otherwise of council amalgamations, but to provide advice and guidance to museums and galleries on how to survive and thrive throughout the process. Both New South Wales and Victoria have undergone a similar transition in recent years, and speakers from these states presented case studies on their experiences. The following articles are drawn from the papers delivered at the forum.

Museums, Galleries and Council Amalgamations in Victoria

or how I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb*

HANUT DODD

In 1994, the then Liberal government in Victoria forced virtually all local government authorities to amalgamate. The number of Councillors was drastically reduced; the number of council workers was drastically reduced (although this may have had more to do with Compulsory Competitive Tendering than amalgamation). Individual workloads went sky-high. The relationships with the old communities of interest that councils served fundamentally changed.

Council-owned art, heritage and civic collections vanished as Commissioners, state government appointees who were tasked with creating new super-councils, got rid of ‘old stuff’ or stuff they deemed wasn’t core business; and disgruntled staff, many of whom had just been effectively sacked, ‘saved’ things by souveniring them.

I, and thousands of my colleagues, went out and protested in front of Parliament House. Three times as I recall. I lost my job as a graduate curator assisting local historical societies to catalogue, conserve and exhibit their collections. It was an awful time.

Now it's twelve years later and looking back, I think that amalgamation is the best thing that ever happened to council-funded museums and galleries... What's changed? Ultimately, the answer is incredibly banal...

Amalgamated councils are bigger. There is more staff. In regional Victoria, local government is one of the largest employers; they have more money (this doesn't mean there's enough money, just more money); they have more buildings, meaning more venues. What the councils do is bigger, the communities they serve are bigger, there are more visitors, there are more people using the facilities. Also, the way in which councils organise themselves becomes more professional (which is not to suggest a hard and fast rule that small local government areas aren't professional and that large ones are). Finally, the process of amalgamation itself generates an immense amount of hubris. From the point of view of museums and galleries, that's a 1-in-100-year opportunity.

Let's start by examining the politics of local art (applies equally to heritage). The local council has an art collection, often overseen by the Mayor, often featuring the annual purchase of the prize-winning painting from local art show. After a few years, the result is a room full of works that the local op shop would sniff at. Yet, the finance department insists it manages a valuable collection — and if you tally it over a few years, it does represent a significant investment of money. It's even more dire...
if council has ventured into public art. Large outdoor sculptures cost money and if they aren't built properly, they cost even more money to maintain. Not to say that locals can't be artists, but by comparison, I'm yet to hear of a council bridge-building contract that stipulates the chief engineer has to be a local!

This phenomenon of the 'local' can be characterised in any number of ways. Take for example the Port Philip local government area, made up of the old councils of St Kilda, South Melbourne and Port Melbourne. Port Philip has a large population, low rents, a long history of professional artists, a large number of commercial galleries, as well as the Gasworks Arts Park and Linden Gallery, both excellent local-government funded institutions. Neither Gasworks nor Linden restrict themselves to solely local production — and at Port Philip, the definition of 'local' is a very enabling one. More typically, local art collections are as exciting as a collection of flat irons or an exhibition of amateur landscapes and watercolours.

Do large councils resist this phenomenon? Do large councils look beyond the local? In Victoria, by and large, the answer is yes — change is an opportunity to break previous patterns. The obvious difference is that there are bigger budgets and more people, you can accomplish bigger things. Of course, that's not to suggest that all large councils are altruistic and want to look beyond their boundaries.

As an example of the former, the City of Greater Geelong has the National Wool Museum. Geelong itself is a large regional city south-west of Melbourne; the National Wool Museum is the largest museum in regional Victoria and a major cultural tourist attraction. The museum is a four-storey bluestone building with three large permanent galleries devoted to the Wool story and two temporary exhibition galleries for touring exhibitions. During my time as Director, there were 28 staff and 70 volunteers. Programs included an access gallery, education program, event program, and a workshop program (concentrating on assisting the community with preservation of local heritage items). The simple fact is that the old Geelong Council could not have afforded a museum of that scale — it couldn't have afforded to build it, to staff it, or to have anything in it. Furthermore, the Wool story (wool growing, textile manufacture, the effect it had on the region and on the national psyche) really wasn't the business of the Geelong Council, nor was the development of a major tourist attraction that would bring in 30,000 paying visitors and would then send them off to other attractions in the region.

But it is bread and butter for the City of Greater Geelong. Only amalgamation could have delivered that result.

Two other developments I have been involved with, both in the role of Coordinator, are the Museum of Lilydale (soon to be renamed) and the Urban Heritage Centre in South Melbourne. The old Museum of Lilydale consisted of three small galleries with very static exhibition and publication programs. Visitation rarely exceeded 100 a month. A new museum for the region is proposed at a cost of approximately $4 million and will focus on three themes: Wine Production, Environment, and the region's famous daughter, Dame Nellie Melba. Half a million dollars was raised locally, the Commonwealth put in one million and the State put in half a million. The Shire of the Yarra Ranges will put in two million dollars. By comparison, excluding wages, the old shire of Lilydale rarely spent more than $5,000 a year on the museum. Without amalgamation, the museum upgrade couldn't exist.

Another example is the Urban Heritage Centre in South Melbourne. The idea is to build a combined library, museum and heritage resource centre in the old South Melbourne post office — a $3 million development. It's still on the drawing board and it is being debated as to whether it will get built or not. The reason for the debate, and the primary reason it hasn't been started, is whether the site's big enough. It will cost a lot more money and that's a problem, but not an insurmountable problem, because the City of Port Philip — as opposed to the City of South Melbourne — is big enough to do it, it's big enough to staff it and it's big enough to provide a recurrent budget. In essence, the City of Port Philip is big enough to create a facility whose footprint will extend well beyond municipal boundaries, and they're proud of it.

So, what's the argument? There are plenty of excellent regional galleries or museums that are closely linked to local government. The difference is that I'm yet to hear of one that doesn't have links going back well into last century or the century before that, or have serious State or Commonwealth or corporate support. Yarra Ranges and Port Phillip are new and are entirely council generated.

Victorian councils are taking a more rigorous approach to commissioning and collecting art and heritage. They are embarking on a building program to showcase regional arts and heritage. Why? And how does it relate to amalgamation? Again, there is a simple answer. In Victoria, council museums and galleries often become part of a broader department of cultural
development / arts development / social development. While this may seem somewhat of an anathema, in practice it means you have allies — allies in your peers, allies in management, allies in the Councillors.

Prior to amalgamation, the three R's (roads, rates, rubbish) were paramount. Usually there was room for ‘fluffy stuff’ like Health or Childcare or Marketing — but the arts, including museums and galleries, was definitely garnish. Post-amalgamation, arts and cultural development have started to move to the centre. Why? Because it is one of very few service areas that cuts across nearly all layers of council. Look at the council plan; councils are audited on their performance against these central planning strategies. At the moment I am writing an arts and cultural strategy for a Local Government Agency that will deliver against six of council’s nine key areas: Liveability, Environmental Awareness, Learning Culture, Active and Healthy Communities, Community Advocacy and Community Leadership. If I wanted to be greedy I could stretch it to all nine. It is difficult to argue against a program that does that, and more difficult to argue against a program that does that successfully.

Being part of a larger department can feel challenging — competing against Festivals or Health or Marketing. But gradually I started to realise that I could use all these areas and that they could use me. Those things that are bread and butter to a museum or a gallery are exactly the same as what councils are trying to produce. It gets even better if someone with a museum and gallery background moves into council management.

To finish, let’s return to hubris — in Victoria, it was phenomenal. All the new councils wanted to create unity, to hang out their shingle and mark themselves as unique, and roads/rates/rubbish wasn’t going to cut it. The lesson I learned is that the more organised you are, the more clear your agenda, the more your agenda articulates council’s bigger agendas, the more likely you are to get what you want. For all of the reasons articulated here, museums and galleries have a running start — so how far are you going to run?

_Hanut Dodd is a Cultural, Heritage and Tourism Consultant, based in Victoria._

*Apologies to Dr Strangelove.

---

**Art Making Culture**

**CHRIS HUDSON**

In 1935, American minimalist sculptor Carl Andre said, “Art is what we do, culture is what is done to us.” Now is the time to turn this around so that art can do — and be more active in _making_ culture.

Council amalgamations, of themselves, can either be a positive or a negative experience for museums and galleries. The impact of amalgamation on cultural development can largely depend upon local and grass-roots advocacy. To attract and retain the interest and support of local government, it is vital that the cultural sector plays an active role in longer-term strategic planning for communities. Museums and galleries need to repurpose art, to help make life.

Council amalgamation in New South Wales has not been as rapid as in some other states. The number of NSW Councils is now 152, down from 177 in 1999. Local Government is opposed to forced amalgamations, and the majority of amalgamations have been council-initiated.

Post-amalgamation feedback indicates that new opportunities can be realised. Part of the reason for this is that councils need to reflect community identity — they need a heart and a shape. This doesn’t come only from inside a council — they work to facilitate development within communities. Organisations like museums and galleries have much to offer council. Amalgamation provides the opportunity to help council with community vision and planning.

In New South Wales, Local Government have some great visions, such as:

- _Fairness_ — local government commits to pursuing the Australian vision of a fairer, more just and more equal society.
- _Participation_ — opportunities for people to participate in the community and be consulted on decisions that affect their lives.

Why should museums and galleries help government to work with community? Because, right now, we really need museums, galleries and all the arts to work with government, to bring council planners and senior management into our sphere of operations.
It is increasingly vital that we build public participation in local and other government. Museums and galleries are ideal venues for this civic dialogue. We have to roll up our sleeves and help council to play a role in shaping local futures. It’s too big a job for local councils to do it alone — what an enormous charge, to be responsible for a ‘community plan for the future’. If plans are to be meaningful, they need everyone to be involved.

Looming environmental and social changes give these discussions an increasing sense of urgency. Growing public participation in local and other government is essential, now more than ever. I first heard the term ‘Cultural Agent’ from Jordi Pascual from United Cities and Local Governments, the world’s peak body for cities. The mission for Cultural Agents is to focus the arts to change the bigger interpretation of culture, to advance culture as a means to achieve a “more satisfactory, intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence” (from UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, Article 3).

The three main endeavours to understand and make sense of the world are religion, science and art. We must help the agency of art and creativity to make the world. I charge all of us to become Cultural Agents — through the way we curate, through public programs, through our outreach and participation, and through working closely with planners and senior management in our local government.

There is a fear that amalgamation will result in a loss of identity. I reinforce that there is a much greater opportunity available. You need to become personally involved with planners and senior managers, to assist them. You are bringing enormous gifts — potential and existing connections to communities, and the ability of art to help us ‘think differently’. When you present these gifts, funding won’t be a problem because you will be participating in what the councils are really trying to do.

Chris Hudson is the Policy Officer – Cultural Development, Local Government Association of NSW and Shires Association of NSW.

Grafton Regional Gallery

Jude McBean

In 2004, the four councils of the Clarence Valley: Copmanhurst Council, Grafton City Council, Maclean Shire Council and Pristine Waters Council were forcibly amalgamated to form the Clarence Valley Council.

The Grafton Regional Gallery was established in 1988 through the actions of community members (in particular the Jacaranda Art Society which operated from 1961–1987), and enjoyed a strong sense of community ownership. This award-winning gallery, administered by the Grafton City Council, was an outstanding development for a council that represented just over 20,000 people and provided cultural and educational services for over 50,000 residents in the Clarence Valley.

Following amalgamation, the Grafton Regional Gallery was placed in a new directory called the Community and Cultural Services Directory. Three new cultural positions — a Director of Community and Cultural Services, a Cultural Development Officer and a Manager of Library and Museums — were created, and support was given by the Council for a regional Museums Officer position, through regional arts body Arts Northern Rivers. The Clarence Valley Library received the first increase in its book vote for over ten years and the Grafton Regional Gallery gained a part-time curatorial position — the first new position at the gallery since 1993 — and a block of land adjacent to the gallery for future expansion. The Council’s first Economic Development Plan has, as a major strategy, the development of creative industries.

In February this year the Council underwent a restructure, repeating many of the processes it undertook after amalgamation. The five directories were reduced to two under the two deputy general managers. The gallery is now in the Environment and Economic Directory and managed by the newly-created position, Manager of Social Development.
and Cultural Services. Appointment to this position occurred very recently at the beginning of December 2007. The Cultural Development Officer position has taken on managing two community centres, and the gallery has been allocated historical services. The part-time curatorial position is being increased by one day a week to manage this increased role.

Impact on Staff
The Grafton Regional Gallery’s current staffing levels include two full-time staff (Director and Administrator), two part-time staff (Education & Public Programs Officer and Assistant Curator), and four casual staff. The Gallery is also supported by 95 Volunteers, 185 Friends of the Gallery and 10 Directors of The Gallery Foundation.

In comparison to the staffing levels prior to the council amalgamations, this represents an addition of a three-day per week curatorial position and increased casual hours for collection support. My role as a director has changed significantly to become more managerial and administration based, and the workload has increased proportionally.

Impact on Core Programs
An increase in the budget was given for casual exhibition assistant hours, conservation management and documentation. This also contributed towards the establishment of a new curatorial position.

The Gallery has increased the length of its exhibition cycle, currently with nine exhibition cycles per year. In response to increased demand for access from the community, the Gallery now displays four to seven exhibitions at any one time. The exhibition program now features more incoming touring exhibitions and there has been a reduction in the number of Gallery-initiated touring exhibitions.

The number of Gallery events is as high as ever; for example, the Outreach Education Program, Gallery Goes to School, Official Openings, Artist Talks and Forums. New outreach exhibition programs were implemented, including the extension of services to the Lower Clarence region.

Over 43,000 people visited the Gallery in 2006–2007.

The Gallery’s 95 Volunteers assist with retail, reception, exhibition changeovers, gardening maintenance, office work, mailouts, and event support. The Friends of the Gallery perform diverse roles such as community workers, audience development officers, gallery ambassadors, fund-raisers and art collectors. They run soup days, winter markets, Artsfest openings and theme days. The Gallery Foundation, established in 2005, supports the development of the collections and infrastructure of the Gallery.

Impact on Collections
From managing six collections, the Gallery now manages ten. The new collections from the former and existing councils are a diverse mix of forms and mediums:

**Grafton Regional Gallery**
1. Jacaranda Acquisitive Drawing Award Collection from 1988
2. Regional Collection from 1988
3. Contemporary Australian Prints and Ceramics
5. Gladys & Doris O’Grady Collection
6. The Clarence Valley Photographs of John William Lindt 1863–1876

**Clarence Valley Council**
1. Clarence Valley Council Collection
2. Maclean Community Collection
3. Copmanhurst Collection
4. Grafton City Collection

**Getting through**
The impact of council amalgamation on the Grafton Regional Gallery has resulted in more work, increased expectations, changed audiences and new challenges. From servicing 20,000 well-trained ratepayers, it now has to meet the demands of 50,000.

However, the major difference is in the relationship between the Gallery and the Council. From previously being held at
arms-length, the Gallery is now embraced as an integral part of Council. Some advantages include access to cooperative marketing strategies; increased professional development opportunities; the economic development team and the gallery working together on initiatives; and access to Council’s IT expertise (instead of gallery staff having to be able to fix everything).

Of course, new environments also mean new bureaucracies such as having to work with Council’s finance systems, having to attend many more meetings, and being involved in Council planning and management systems.

Planning, however, is the key to surviving. In order to get through the process of change, ensure that all of your dreams — big picture, small picture — are in plans.

The working environment is one of constant change. The gallery’s focus is often inward rather than outward as protocols, procedures and policies are constantly rewritten and updated.

Yet the future for the Gallery is very exciting. The extension and redevelopment is underway — the big picture is happening. This commitment by the Clarence Valley Council to the cultural services and creative industries is in recognition of the significant advantages that the Clarence Valley community and its economy gain if there is a rich and active cultural life. With the first Cultural Plan for the Clarence Valley launched in September 2007 and the Creative Industries Strategy well under way, the future seems pretty bright for the arts in the Clarence Valley.

Jude McBean is the Director of the Grafton Regional Gallery.

---

**SOME CLOSING TIPS…**

**From Michelle Smith**  
Curator/Administrator, Redcliffe Museum

- Think about the transition as a positive means of achieving your outcomes.
- You are the holders of your region’s cultural heritage. Your council needs to know what you do, whether you do it well, what successes you have achieved, and why you are important to your community. Ensure that you communicate to council why you are special.
- Does your current relationship with council meet your needs? Do you need a better deal? If council currently supports you, even in small ways, make sure you don’t lose this support in the process. Get it in writing if necessary.
- Know what you want from your council and prioritise. Know your level of resources – don’t ask for something if you can’t deliver the outcome. Be realistic.
- What does council want in return? You have many great things to offer. It may be as simple as providing a venue for council functions — a neutral, public space with interesting things to look at. Get them in to your space and show them what you do.
- Have a plan. Put forward your proposals in writing. Know how you fit into the new council’s plans.
- As most museum and gallery workers operate in relative isolation, see this as a chance to work with new colleagues, to consolidate resources, to have a stronger voice and to make a positive move forward.

---

**From Councillor Julie Boyd**  
Mayor, Mackay City Council

- Councils like to spend money on solid things like roads, however people don’t go into a community because of its gold-plated roads. They go into a community because of its soul — what it has to offer to an individual or a family. This is where arts and culture come to the fore.
- In Mackay, the Council built an art gallery that was commensurate with its community and its location; a place they could be proud of.
- The amalgamations offer new opportunities for smaller councils to tap into the larger council, to develop one cohesive unit. Size does matter in terms of more resources.
- Larger councils can move out into smaller communities and provide better access and services. For example, Artspace Mackay can make links with the arts sector in the outer regions.
- Now is the time to start a dialogue with all the councils. There should be one aim in mind — to get a plan together to ensure that the small communities aren’t left out.
- Councils love plans and ideas, but they need to be concrete. There is no point spending everything on a building if there’s not enough for a program or collection.
- There is a tremendous opportunity to be grasped to achieve a better outcome. This could include a re-examination of arts policies (for example, a chance to deaccession works that don’t fit the policy).
- Get involved now; start making connections and move forward.