



# AVONDALE CREATIVE SPACES: A CASE STUDY IN COMMUNITY BUILDING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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# AVONDALE CREATIVE SPACES: A CASE STUDY IN COMMUNITY BUILDING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

PRACTICE PAPER BY PAUL WOODRUFFE

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## ABSTRACT

This case study outlines the process, delivery and outcomes of a series of public artwork initiatives undertaken through a partnership between Unitec Institute of Technology research group The everyday collective laboratory and Avondale Community Action (ACA). To assist in promoting the benefits of participation and attracting volunteers to assist in ACA's random household survey, a series of interconnected creative events were designed. These projects, held within the Avondale town centre, were also intended to engage the local people in community based creative processes, making this activity visibly public, and responding to an identified need to introduce public artwork into the Avondale town centre. This was intended to be a signal to, and a catalyst for, positive change – promoting the concept of having “creative space” within the community. These projects were jointly funded by the Whau Local Board, Auckland Council and Unitec, all of whom agreed to a set of specific outcomes. These were primarily to promote public engagement with the arts, data collection for the facilitation of networking, and the prototyping of small-scale, affordable, temporary public artworks as well as assisting the survey to gain traction.

## INTRODUCTION

### An everyday collective

The everyday collective laboratory is a Unitec-based research group that consists of a fluid network of staff members, graduates and student research assistants from across disciplines, all of whom are interested in design for social

change, public engagement, environmental design and experimental public artworks.

The aim of the collective is to use the resources of the institution to assist not-for-profit community (NFP) groups in projects that would normally be beyond their capability; for instance projects that include advocacy, communication, environmental design and/or collaborative public art projects. Our current focus is in the western areas of Auckland city. Past projects can be seen at: [www.collectivelab.wordpress.com](http://www.collectivelab.wordpress.com)

### Avondale Community Action

Avondale Community Action (ACA) was established in early 2012 by a group of local residents in Avondale. It is a fully independent network of local residents who come together to advocate for more inclusive and transparent decision making processes, specifically for Auckland Council controlled improvement initiatives for the area ACA mapped as being “Avondale”.

Avondale is a neighbourhood that prior to ACA forming, did not have any existing ratepayer or resident association groups. The Whau Local Board recognised the need for such a group in order to improve the quality of its community consultation processes, and so indicated the board would assist in funding one. The establishment of ACA was assisted and mentored by Gail Fotheringham, Auckland Council, and Dr Tess Liew, an academic and social worker, both of whom have extensive previous experience in the mentoring and start-up of community organisations. On their advice, ACA agreed that the completion of a random household survey would be a priority project, and that this was fundamental for understanding the community. It was also recognised, as Liew states, that “people may feel uncomfortable about being brought together simply in order to interact with each other, they are generally much more comfortable about being brought together for a specific purpose” (2013, p.181). It was this col-



Image 1: Members of Avondale Community Action taking part in one of the 'creative spaces' initiatives. Image credit Paul Woodruffe

lective goal – to bring people together in order to complete the survey – that was hoped could lay the foundation for community-building in Avondale, and the process for this was supported by the creation of a website and a Facebook page.

Charitable Trust status for ACA was obtained in 2013. This means that from that point, Unitec was no longer needed as a funding agent, and that ACA is now fully financially independent as a registered charitable trust. Through its status and subsequent eligibility to apply for funding through organizations like the Portage Licencing Trust, ACA is able to assist smaller community groups with their funding.

### Partnership

It was agreed in 2012 during the initial meetings of Avondale Community Action (ACA) that in order for the organisation to be completely volunteer based, it would need to undertake community building projects that could be sustained through periods of limited or no funding. It would therefore be necessary to form partnerships with larger organisations.

At that time, The everyday collective laboratory research group saw potential in collaborating with ACA, as it offered an opportunity for a multi-disciplinary project. The everyday col-

lective could contribute specialist expertise to ACA's projects and assist in funding applications through Unitec's Research and Enterprise Office. This specialist expertise proved to be especially valuable for the ethics approval process that was required for quality assured data collection in the household survey.

### Community Development

As expertise and hours were needed for the data collection and analysis, students from Unitec's Social Practice Programme were approached to assist with the random household survey, which began in July 2012. The everyday collective laboratory designed the survey document's typography and layout, and ethics approval for the survey was facilitated through Unitec's Research Ethics Committee. In undertaking the survey an informal partnership was established between ACA and Unitec, especially in regards to problem solving issues around engagement and participation. The benefits of this partnership went beyond the application of specialist expertise, as it connected ACA members with the researchers and students of Unitec. Furthermore, as Ife observes: "The participants in a community project may have joined initially because they believed in the value of the project itself, but it is often the social interaction associated with the project that keeps them involved" (2013, p.181).



## THE BEGINNING

The first project that the newly formed ACA agreed to undertake was the completion of a random household survey. It was agreed that this could deliver data capable of enabling the group to understand the residents' perceptions and opinions of their social and economic environment, and could produce a snap-shot of people's aspirations for themselves and for their local community. This project involved a considerable number of volunteers for the door-to-door work, as well as the technical and organisational survey skills required for data collation and analysis. It also required the local people to want to participate in it, and this in turn required a degree of trust on the part of the respondents towards ACA.

One of the first public forums that the group held to gauge the public response to the concept of forming ACA was at St Ninian's Church, on a weekday evening in 2012. Quite a number of local people turned up to hear what this new residents' group had to say. The overall impression from ACA members attending the meeting was that the people's voices had not been heard by local government in the past, and that they were very sceptical that it would be heard now or in the near future. But they were receptive to the formation of a residents' advocacy group.

The result of this meeting was that ACA decided to form a working party tasked with devising strategies that could raise the profile of the group, establish a graphic identity, and make the winds-of-change they were advocating for visible on the main streets of the town centre.

It was acknowledged that branding ACA through graphic design as well as becoming involved in local event management could also greatly assist in the recruitment of volunteer workers for the survey. This could also encourage more people to become aware of the advantages that participating in the survey could bring to the community. It was at this early stage, with the assistance of Gail Fotheringham from Auckland Council and Mark Allen the Whau Local Board Advisor, that the Local Board became interested in the value that ACA and the random house-

hold survey could bring to the community and to their decision making. It was agreed by all parties that the project philosophy was to "allow the process to determine the outcomes, rather than the perverse approach of allowing the outcomes to determine the process, and that this is at the heart of good community development" (Ife, 2013, p182).

The ACA working group, tasked with improving the public engagement for the survey, decided to schedule a series of creative events based from a "hub space" within the town centre. A funding proposal for this was designed and presented to the Whau Local Board, and funding was applied for from Unitec's Foci Research Fund.

It was acknowledged in the proposal that a series of creative projects through a partnership with Unitec and the Whau Local Board could be capable of generating a greater public profile for ACA as a neutral and independent community driven organisation. It could also be of help to increase membership and volunteer recruitment and communicate the value of the random household survey to the residents of Avondale. These projects came under an umbrella title of "Avondale Creative Spaces".

The first of a series of planned occupations of space for creative-practice-based events included one for ACA's first birthday. A local café situated in what used to be a petrol station, and still retaining the large forecourt roof, hosted an afternoon of live music from local musicians and a wall of coloured boards that people were invited to draw and write comments on with coloured chalk. The event also featured a display of local produce in the form of lemonade and fruit drinks made from the fruit of local trees, thus launching the "Made in Avondale" label. This was an idea that was designed so that it could be extended beyond the fruit-based preserves and used to promote a wider variety of locally made products. It was a well patronised event, with the local Police attending and showing their support. The popularity of the event, as well as the public's willingness to participate in the art making and the appearance of locally made produce, confirmed to the

ACA membership the validity of using creative practice to bring people together (the enthusiasm for the event extended to an old planter box being weeded and re-planted with herbs by some keen local gardeners). This event illustrated that participatory community activities could progress organised advocacy for a positive change in Avondale.



Image 2: Avondale street corner sculpture. Photo credit Paul Woodruffe

## A CREATIVE SPACE

“Public art logically and potentially becomes adopted as both study object and place of study in a social-scientific fashion, as it finds itself in a socio-spatial field of force that is as intricate as city life itself.” (Zebracki, 2012, p.2.)

The working party of Avondale Community Action Trust, who was tasked with running the Creative Spaces project, had several goals. These included engaging with as wide of a cross section of the local residents as possible, creating a highly visible presence in the town centre, making the projects as participatory as possible, and lastly recruiting as many new members for ACA as possible.

The funding applications applied for from the


Whau Local Board and Unitec were successful, and a vacant retail space in the main street was identified as a possible base for meetings, exhibitions, events and concerts. A lease was proposed for 1865 Great North Road – an empty retail space in the centre of the Avondale township – and it was also decided that events and interventions would be held or placed within other negotiated community spaces.

A Facebook site was created and the project was given a coordinator role that was filled by Michelle Ardern, a local designer and photographer, who described the project as “an initiative by Avondale Community Action that aims to encourage, support and install a number of creative projects in and around the Avondale town centre. We want to provoke, entertain and amuse locals, visitors and passersby in Avondale as well as encourage the participation and collaboration between local residents, businesses and artists.” (Avondale Community Action, n.d. para 4)

The 1865 Great North Road premise was secured for the hub space of the project, and as ACA had not yet obtained Charitable Trust status Unitec’s Research and Enterprise Office administered the funds granted by the Whau Local Board, arranged for public liability insurance and undertook the lease agreement for the space. This system of management ensured financial accountability, and avoided any issues of financial impropriety in purchasing goods and services, thus satisfying Council requirements for funding. A schedule of events and an operating budget was drawn up for the space and also for off site actions, the front of the building was given a hand painted sign, and the window space was set up for 24 hour video screening and information display.

### Public artworks

To promote and publicise the opening of the Creative Space, and to produce an immediate change to the main street, it was decided that two pieces of public artwork would be made by The everyday collective for two spaces adjacent to 1865 Great North Road. As the budget was very tight for what was planned, they had to be classed as temporary in order to avoid re-



source consent costs. Due to the consent processing time and the considerable expense that surrounds public artworks and their placement, a solution was needed for the two pieces of public artwork. As the Creative Space was only funded for three months, the visibility of the artworks needed to run concurrently with the Creative Space activities in order to achieve the effect we wanted in the town centre.

The solution was “sign art”. Signs do not require the same consent processes as classified artworks do, and the maximum proportions permitted for a sign are quite generous. So the two proposed sculptures became “signs” rather than artworks. Both works were made from laser cut steel, which is relatively inexpensive and durable. Through the use of figures these depicted the past of Avondale and its contemporary life. One was placed on privately owned land, the other on open public space; both had typography on the base that identified them as part of the ACA Creative Spaces project.

To accompany the placing of the artworks, a series of interactive workshops were run in the Creative Space by ACA member and coordinator Michelle Ardern. These were called “Weaving A Story” and Michelle used fabrics and natural fibres to produce a wide variety of artworks, engaging a very diverse group of participants. Some of these works were also placed in the main street. These design interventions announced the arrival of the Creative Space to all who used the main street in Avondale, and were very successful in promoting ACA as an agent for positive change.

### Creative interventions

The repurposed retail space at 1865 Great North Road held a wide variety of exhibitions and events, with many local artists holding exhibitions of their work there. Creative workshops, some of these being staged specifically for school children, were well attended as were music concerts, often drawing full houses. A group exhibition that was open to the public was held at the end of the tenure at the space; this event enabled anyone who had made anything creative to show their work in the context of a wider body of events and shows. This was

successful in terms of community building, and appeared to empower people who previously had not considered themselves good enough to exhibit in such a public arena. This presented an interesting cross section of works and reflected the diversity of the neighbourhood in a very public way.


The “Weaving A Story” workshops were held both in the local school hall and in the Creative Space at 1865 Great North Road. These workshops not only taught skills to those who wanted to learn, but also enabled participants to communicate their identity to the community through the making and exhibiting of the work. These workshops produced some very colourful lantern shades that were then hung from a large tree in the town centre, a striking and effective intervention within the streetscape that drew a very positive response from local residents. These inexpensive but highly visible creative interventions achieved the desired effect of making change visible on the main street, and the inclusive nature of the works encouraged more people to enquire about becoming a member of Avondale Community Action Trust.

## A BENEFIT TO THE COMMUNITY

The Creative Spaces project was a great success for both ACA and the local residents of Avondale, and can be measured as such by the attendance at the events and the feedback given to the volunteers. One aspect of this success was the large number of people who turned up at all of the events and exhibitions, often spilling out onto the pavement and creating a lively scene that gathered up people passing by. Importantly, the project was able to establish the profile of ACA as a group independent of the Whau Local Board and one that was not politically aligned, as this was an initial impression some local people held. The project was also successful in collecting email addresses that enabled a database, from which a network of local creative practitioners was formed, to further help facilitate locally driven makers projects.

### Challenging convention

Many of the local artists who exhibited, like



other artists and designers who came to the exhibitions and events, shared their opinions on exhibition practice within small, community based temporary spaces that exist outside of traditional art dealer conventions. These opinions confirmed the observation that “though communities can not be the real entities that lie in our collective imaginations, it still makes sense to reflect upon the real potential of alternative modes of making our practices public” (Panigirakis, 2008, p35). The creative spaces that were facilitated had opened up some of these alternative modes through the attendance and enthusiasm of viewers who had never visited mainstream galleries, and who did not consider themselves regular consumers of art. It was a curiosity of what existed within their community, rather than the perceived quality of the artworks, that encouraged them into the exhibition space.

Some of the better-known local artists who had established dealerships in the city declined to participate. This provoked questions about the intentions of the curatorial practices encouraged through the Creative Spaces project, and challenged notions of the role and obligations of artists in our society. Panigirakis observes (2008, p.43): “After all, a community mural painter, arts therapist, social outreach worker, youth counselor or educator is unlikely to be concerned about the public’s perception of assistance given to a disenfranchised group, regardless of how conceptually aware they might be. This dimension – along with balancing the nuanced power relations between participants – is part of these professions’ core values.” Murals aside, at what point or level does the artist become social worker? And how does the abandoning of curatorial practice for an open door policy on works effect experimental forays into art for social outreach? The function of art made by adults was in a small way challenged by the nature of the exhibitions shown in the 1865 Great North Road space, as was the nature and function of publically commissioned street art. Sheikh suggests to artists working in the public domain that “we need not only new skills and tools, but also new conceptions of the public as relational, as articulate and communicative” (2008, p.53). How can a community or

section of a community participate in the creation of public artworks? And how can creative practice be used for community building beyond place making? The Creative Space raised these questions.


### Creative practice as community building



Image 3: Avondale courtyard sculpture. Photo credit Paul Woodruffe

The project format posed questions about how both professional art and amateur art practice can intersect in a festival type format. This question was answered through a high public engagement in the events, and the positive feedback received. However the original project question asked was ‘how can art practice make change visible and promote community engagement possibilities’. This was within the context of also question how a tertiary art and design institution could, through teaching integrated research, make more direct connections to a community close its campus. In doing so it further highlighted in this context how relationships can be structured and managed sustainably, respectfully and for mutual benefit.

The metal street sculptures, although originally intended as temporary, were kept in place and are much loved – so much so that one was stolen. Given the inexpensive construction and easy replacement of the designs, the theft did not have the negative media coverage that



would have occurred if it had been, for example, a \$50,000 bronze statue. This design approach meant that given a budget that would normally be attached to public sculpture, many pieces were placed around the town centre; a rotating series of works by various local artists that created an interesting narrative and brought art to multiple streetscapes for the cost of a single large piece.

With this approach to sculpture there comes a challenge to the practice of artists, as Zebracki states when referring to public artwork: “The context of practice includes artists, individuals or collectives, who usually enjoy artistic liberties, acknowledgement and safekeeping of their artworks” (2012, p.9). In this project, the safekeeping of artworks had to be abandoned, and the works were, to the passing public, anonymous. The works were designed to become like the street trees: part of a changing, evolving set of signposts that offered what storytelling could bring to the everyday experience of wayfinding.

The project highlighted the fact you can make a real difference in the experiential aspect of a place with, relative to the effect, very little money, and that existing spaces – no matter how architecturally challenged – can host exciting and stimulating events. Temporary and evolving interventions contribute hugely to the vibrancy of a street. De Sola-Morales referred to working within urban space as akin to using acupuncture, and says that “the skin of the city is not a flat envelope. It is in itself, and as a skin, a qualitative network, a membrane of differences that are subject to interventions and strategies, whether they be rough or smooth” (2005, p.24). This theory supports the methodology used in the Creative Spaces project, one of many small actions, interventions or “needles” across a series of connected spaces, rather than a single location that contains all the action or a single large piece of artwork.

## THE RESULTS OF THE PROJECT

The direct result of the Creative Spaces project was an acknowledgment by ACA that a visible and accessible presence on the main street of Avondale was essential for completing the

random household survey. The use of an open “hub space” identified the organisation as being transparent, independent, culturally diverse and locally lead. It provided a communal and safe place for people to ask questions and enquire about becoming involved, and it provided a platform for information sharing and local news. The number of volunteers for the survey increased, and most importantly the Whau Local Board recognised this value and funded in the following year an adjacent space in order to complete the survey. This new space became the “Survey Hub Space”. A group of local artists who had participated in the Creative Spaces project set up their own group called “Whau the People” and through this obtained funding to run an arts festival in Avondale. ACA, which by then had its Charitable Trust status, administered the funding.

The Creative Space project was successful in establishing ACA as the community organisation it wanted to be. It created databases for local people who could connect through shared interests. It also prompted discussions on the nature and function of public art. Further, by making the project visible on the main streets it proved that art can contribute to community building and increase public engagement with democratic processes.


### The results of the survey

The prime motivator for the Creative Spaces project was engaging with the community in order to get traction and participation for the random household survey. It is therefore important to include the summarised findings from ACA itself.

What the Trust found from the survey was that:

“The Avondale residents who participated in this survey indicated that they liked living in Avondale and most of them felt a sense of belonging in their community. They liked the accessibility and the location of Avondale and also the sense of community and the friendliness of the people. But respondents felt that the area, especially the town centre, was run-down, neglected and lacked basic services such as banks and a post office. Of the small





percentage of participants who plan to move away from Avondale, the most common reason given for these plans was housing issues. For the most part, participants reported feeling safe in their community. The main reason given for this sense of security was the feeling of community. The most commonly cited threat to the participants' sense of security was drunk and disorderly people, loitering, homelessness and beggars. Disruptive behavior and loitering was also cited as a reason that participants did not find parks and green spaces in the area safe and pleasant places to visit. However, the majority of participants indicated that they did find the parks and green spaces safe and pleasant. They attributed this to lots of people using the parks and the wide-open spaces with nice scenery. Many participants felt that Avondale needed a swimming pool, a community centre and more meeting places. When asked what they would like to see developed in the empty spaces around Avondale, participants indicated that public spaces such as parks and playgrounds would be beneficial to the community as well as food and retail shops." (Avondale Community Action, n.d., para 1, 2, 3)

### Reflection

As noted above, because Avondale Community Action now has Trust status, Unitec is no longer required for funding administration. Although not in the Trust Deed statement, a new representative from Unitec will hopefully be on the Board to continue the relationship – ideally someone who is both a staff member and a local resident. Avondale Community Action Trust has after three years of successful projects earned the trust and respect of the Whau Local Board, who are happy to work with them as a mandated citizen's organisation.

This willingness of the Local Board to recognise creative events as community building also led to a new arts-based group to form in Avondale; "Whau the People". This group is run by residents who participated in or managed creative events run by ACA as part of the initial project. Whau the People run and facilitate the Whau Arts Festival (established in 2014), an event based in central Avondale that uses creative

practice to engage the community, taking over the concept of the Creative Spaces project.

Another ACA run creative space in Avondale is unlikely, as this new group will be responsible for local arts initiatives, festivals and exhibitions. The Trust is now focused on becoming an organisation for the facilitation of funding, for leading community advocacy on local issues, and to act as a talent pool for all the organisational skills smaller community groups do not have access to. ACA has subsequently become a core organisation within the community, and one that can support any initiative that reflects their trust charter.

The Creative Spaces project proved that Local Government does not have to fund the building of expensive new spaces to promote, nurture and involve the local population in the creative arts. Existing spaces can be inexpensively adapted and modified, with funding spent on the people making the work instead of bricks and mortar. It is the visibility and abundance of creative practice that enables the life of a town to be celebrated, to grow sustainably, and to provide opportunity for its residents.

Following the success of the "sign art" design, Auckland Council commissioned The everyday collective to run a student project to create a "gateway" on the Whau River bridge – a design that would celebrate the past, the present, and the natural environment of the Whau. The Survey Hub Space at 1882 Great North Road provided a platform for feedback on the initial gateway project concept designs, and feedback sessions with the project designers were advertised and held there. The Survey Hub Space provided a working model for a community service. It did so by being a social place where new initiatives and ideas for improving the physical and cultural landscape of Avondale could be presented and workshopped in an authentic way. This was in line with the Whau Local Board's recognition for the need to improve the quality of their community consultation processes.



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**Paul Woodruffe** graduated from Auckland University of Technology in 1978 with a Diploma in Graphic Design, and later Graduated with Distinction in a Masters Degree in Landscape Architecture (2010). Paul has worked as an art director for films and design and as a freelance landscape designer and visual artist. He has exhibited widely through commissioned paintings, public artworks and design.

After holding part-time lecturer positions at Auckland University of Technology and Manukau Institute of Technology, he became a tenured 0.5 proportional staff member in the Department of Design and Visual Arts at Unitec Institute of Technology in 2003, becoming an Academic Leader Undergraduate in 2014.

His interests include research into the values of place, identity and belonging, and the use of art and design for social and environmental improvement. This is carried out primarily through the collaborative research group The everyday collective laboratory, which consists of multidisciplinary researchers and practitioners from across the Faculty of Creative Arts and Business at Unitec.

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