



Burrinja Dandenong Ranges Community Cultural Centre Inc

Today, Burrinja's function and purpose are built on a multi-element vision summarised by its 4 key areas of activity: Arts, Performance, Education & Community. The centre encompasses arts activities, indigenous gallery, café, contemporary gallery, performing arts, arts-business incubator, tourism, hospitality and community cultural development including youth arts development.

In practical terms, the centre develops, promotes, facilitates and delivers a wide diversity of arts and cultural activities and events from visual to performing and youth arts, indigenous culture, arts business incubator studios, cultural tourism promotion and community development. A sense of local identity and community is encouraged through a focus on developing the already strong arts/cultural image of the Dandenong Ranges and surrounding regions.

Back to the beginning

IN the mid 1990's four regional shires were amalgamated into one: Sherbrooke, Lillydale, Upper Yarra and Healesville. The former Sherbrooke Shire Offices in Upwey became 'redundant'. In 1996 the Commissioners put the building and surrounding depot land on the market in an attempt to reduce debt.

The local community fought back to save their building. Numerous organisations and individuals were involved in the fight to save the building, such as United Neighborhood of the Hills (UNOH), Save Our Sherbrooke Association, Save the Dandenongs League and others. Among the many who marched in the streets to demand that the shire offices become a cultural centre for the community were indigenous artist and local resident Lin Onus.

In 1997 the first motion put through the newly elected Shire of Yarra Ranges Council by Cr Louis Delacretaz was that the Sherbrooke offices be taken off the market. A business plan for a proposed Dandenong Ranges Community Cultural Centre was presented to Council and a Special Committee of Council was established to form the 'DRCCC'. It became an independent incorporated body in mid 1998 with Louis Delacretaz as President.

The Vision

The centre's Vision was to *"be a vibrant community cultural centre offering a total Dandenong Ranges arts, cultural and environmental experience providing for a diverse range of local need"*.

One half of the premises was given over to the DRCCC, while the other was to be let by Council commercially in an effort to make the cultural centre 'cost neutral'. Eventually local artist and art collector Neil McLeod took on the lease to set up an indigenous art gallery.

Neil and Lin Onus had been best of friends. Just days after the largest protest meeting to establish the Cultural Centre, Lin died suddenly of a heart attack. Neil named the gallery 'Burrinja' in memory of Lin. 'Burrinja' was Lin's Yorta Yorta nickname meaning 'star'.

Early Days

When established in 1998 the centre had many fantastic supporters, but also its detractors. The centre needed to 'prove itself' and its viability.

D.Ranged Artworks was established as a local cooperative of visual artists. They ran a gallery shop and organized the first exhibitions. The Local Energy Transfer (LETS) group helped organize volunteers for the reception and other tasks.

Partnerships were formed not only with the Shire of Yarra Ranges but also Swinburne University and Yarra Ranges Enterprise Centres. This saw the establishment of seven Arts – Business Incubator studios and an IT learning room.

These were essential developments in building some necessary infrastructure, bringing through lots of people and establishing some revenue streams. This enabled the volunteer Committee of Management to bring onboard a full time Executive Officer.

Slowly but surely, with much scamming of resources and volunteer help, improvements were made to areas like the foyer gallery and the old council chambers – now the performance space. Meanwhile, Neil McLeod weaved some magic with curved plaster and desert ochre, transforming the old rates section into the stunning Burrinja gallery and Uncle Neil's Place Café.

In the year 2000 the DRCCC became a Regional Arts Victoria Arts Council.

We're all in this together now!

A real turning point in the future direction, growth and tenure of the cultural centre came in 2000 with the negotiation of a three way partnership between the Shire of Yarra Ranges, Neil McLeod Fine Arts and the DRCCC. Neil McLeod donated a million dollar indigenous art collection to Council, with its home to be at Burrinja gallery. The DRCCC took on management of the Collection on behalf of the shire, as well as the gallery and café. From 2001 the operations of the DRCCC and Burrinja were combined under the not-for-profit cultural association.

This new Partnership saw the cultural centre take on Indigenous art and culture as a major part of its charter, quickly establishing links with local indigenous organisations, becoming a founding member Aboriginal Tourism Victoria and establishing indigenous cultural education programs. A Vision Statement was developed for Burrinja gallery, one which aims to provide programs that stimulate cross-cultural awareness and promote respect for Indigenous and contemporary art and culture.

The centre was able to make a small increase in its staffing level, which allowed it to develop better programs, and work towards major projects like the Footprint of the Spirits exhibition, which toured 26 key works of the Burrinja collection to 7 galleries in New Zealand during 2002.

Refining the vision

In 2001 the Committee developed and adopted a new more succinct Vision that brought together the aims and vision of the Centre: *Building Community through Art*. This Vision has really drawn together all that the cultural centre does and encompasses, and continues to fulfill our future vision.

By 2004, however it was apparent that the public were confused by the many different 'identities': DRCCC, D R Triple C, Dandenong Ranges Community Cultural Centre, Burrinja Gallery and Uncle Neil's Place Café.

The centre undertook a comprehensive review of its activities and spaces, its past and future. The focus needed to be on what the centre does, not its name. In choosing just one unifying name *Burrinja* was the obvious choice. Its heritage with Lin grounds it in the history of the centre and the fight to save the building. It also places the centre in the arts, in indigenous arts and in activism in local community.

The centre also needed to answer the question, 'what is Burrinja'. The answer was: 'Arts, Performance, Education, and Community'. The aim was to 'Experience' Burrinja – things to do, things to learn, things to discover. Burrinja launched its new image and name in March 2005 with a 20 day celebration of 'New Beginnings' and a fabulous retrospective exhibition of Lin Onus' works; *Gili Bigi*.

Engaging New Audiences - Building Partnerships

A key area Burrinja has developing since then is working to identify those areas of the community who do not traditionally engage with arts activities and then seeking strategies and programs to engage them. Reaching into the community cannot be achieved alone. Partnerships are a key element in Burrinja's approach to building community through the arts.

The future beckons

Burrinja and the Shire of Yarra Ranges are now a long way down the road toward fulfilling the need of the community to have a dedicated performing arts venue in the region. Work on the 400 seat theatre is to commence in November 2009.

As the centre works towards that aim though, the Committee, staff and volunteers have been mindful that Burrinja is much more than bricks and mortar. That is why we have asked ten important questions, such as what we mean to the community, and what the 'spirit' of Burrinja is. It is important that we take the answers to these questions with us into the future.