Safeguarding Australia's community heritage sector: A consideration of the institutional well-being of volunteer-managed galleries, libraries, archives, museums and historical societies

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Abstract

In Australia, the community heritage sector – galleries, libraries, archives, museums and historical societies managed by volunteers – plays a significant role in recording and preserving the diversity of Australia's cultural heritage. However, these community heritage organisations face uncertain futures. This article offers four examples of heritage organisations located in New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia which have struggled with organisational sustainability arising from various financial, human, physical, skills, and expertise challenges. We assess some of the common problems threatening the longevity of community heritage organisations and what action is needed to safeguard this sector into the future.

Keywords

Introduction

In Australia, the community heritage sector has been described as 'the most remarkable and sustained grassroots movement' the nation has 'ever seen'[1] and is acknowledged to be 'responsible for the care, display and interpretation of a vast portion of the nation's tangible and intangible heritage'.[2] Victoria alone is estimated to have 'more than 740 community collecting organisations – two thirds of which are in regional towns and cities'[3] and of the '500 small to medium sized museums and galleries' estimated to be operating in New South Wales, 350 are run by volunteers.[4] While the volunteer-run heritage 'movement' is significant in producing and circulating public history, it continues to go largely unrecognised for 'its contribution to communities' or the importance of its 'historical and cultural assets'.[5] Despite having a vital role in recording and preserving the diversity of Australia's cultural heritage, community heritage organisations – galleries, libraries, archives, museums and historical societies that are managed by volunteers – face precarious futures in the short- to medium-term. The well-being of institutions in this sector is increasingly under threat, placing artefacts and vernacular knowledge of Australia's cultural past at risk of being lost forever.[6]

The key challenges for the community heritage sector are centred predominantly around its ability to access sufficient resources – 'financial, human, physical, skills, and expertise'.[7] In Australia, these issues are compounded when public funding to the cultural sector overall is contracting and federal funding for heritage projects has been reduced.[8] This article examines the challenges facing Australia's community heritage sector, focusing on four examples of community-led organisations from across the country: Australian Computer Museum Society; New South Wales Jazz Archive; Cairns Museum; and Cobdogla Irrigation and Steam Museum. Although each of these organisations vary in terms of their structures,

collections and communities of interest, together they illustrate some of the key issues

threatening the long-term sustainability of community-based, 'do-it-yourself' (DIY) heritage

initiatives.[9] The article highlights different responses to and outcomes resulting from

challenges to institutional well-being, and discusses possible approaches to securing more

sustainable futures.

Community Heritage Organisations

The community heritage sector comprises a range of organisational structures and activities

with varying aims and missions. Organisations may be in the form of galleries, libraries,

archives, museums and historical societies, or a combination of these, and function to collect,

preserve and/or display a wide range of histories and to service different communities of

interest. However, the sector is also marked by certain commonalities, including volunteer

workforces, most of whom are not professionally-trained heritage practitioners, and irregular

sources of funding (for example, small and large donations, membership fees and government

grants).

The development of the community heritage sector is part of a sustained movement towards

the democratisation of heritage.[10] Community heritage organisations can play an important

role in the preservation and transmission of historical narratives, reflecting and shaping

everyday 'historical consciousness'[11] and producing forms of 'public history'.[12] Hoyle

characterises the public history work of these institutions as 'live and meaningful in the

present, tools for making change as well as for reconstructing the past'.[13] In particular,

community-based initiatives can function to highlight hidden histories and marginalised

narratives that might otherwise be excluded from mainstream heritage organisations.[14] More

broadly, these organisations also fulfil a crucial role in strengthening rural, regional and

urban communities. Historical societies, which often manage local archives and museums, are seen to play a significant part in 'rescuing and preserving' community records and artefacts, detailing 'the small politics of people's lives' and empowering communities through the creation and curation of 'their own histories'.[15]

Community heritage organisations help build stronger communities by encouraging community participation, providing opportunities for volunteering and life-long learning, offering cultural facilities that promote intergenerational engagement, contributing to local economies as tourist sites, and fostering a sense of community identity, memory and pride in place.[16] For example, in our study of the Australian Jazz Museum, we found that the museum's retired volunteers were engaged in a form of 'serious leisure' that had positive impacts on their well-being.[17] Further, the enthusiasm and care volunteers felt towards the social and affective dimensions of the Australian Jazz Museum also benefited the institution's practices of preservation and community engagement. Similarly, Hanley, Baker and Pavlidis' study of the Mudgeeraba Light Horse Museum emphasised that the value of this institution extended beyond its capacity to manage its collection, with value also arising from the learning of visitors and volunteers, and in volunteers' role in transmitting historical knowledge to others.[18]

Despite the important role that community heritage organisations play in society, this sector has tended to be discounted and marginalised in heritage studies and related fields such as museum studies.[19] The most concentrated body of work has focused on community archives.[20] While some of that literature touches on sustainability,[21] there is also an underlying assumption that volunteer-driven heritage institutions have a predictable life cycle, the last stage of which is decline and dissolution.[22] Rarely are volunteer-managed

galleries, libraries, archives, museums and historical societies examined collectively in the context of a community heritage sector, despite recognition that 'for the most part the collections and types of materials held, the aims and objectives, and the structures of these organisations are broadly similar and transcend the silos' in which studies of 'professional mainstream sector' organisations occurs.[23] The focus of this article is not on the significance of community heritage organisations to public history, nor on the benefits of these organisations to volunteers, both of which are documented elsewhere. Rather, we highlight some of the common challenges to sustainability faced by the community heritage sector.

This article emerged from a three-year Australian Research Council (ARC) funded project that investigated DIY heritage institutions. Although this project was focused specifically on archives, museums and halls of fame devoted to documenting popular music heritage, the data revealed experiences and issues specific to community-based (rather than mainstream) heritage organisations, particularly in terms of challenges to institutional sustainability.[24] The present article aims to broaden the scope of this work by considering how these issues resonate with challenges faced by Australia's community heritage sector more broadly. Taking a comparative case study approach,[25] we present examples of four community heritage organisations from New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia which have struggled with sustainability. Each differ in form and focus, but are instructive for understanding problems that affect the community heritage sector as a whole. Case studies were selected to represent a range of common issues among community heritage organisations, as identified in the literature and through our own work on the project described above. With the exception of the New South Wales Jazz Archive, the organisations presented had their stories of struggle and closure covered by local media outlets. Our data sources included online news reports, the organisations' official websites, blog posts,

YouTube videos, Facebook pages, and, in the case of the New South Wales Jazz Archive, interviews we undertook with volunteers at another jazz heritage institution.

It is important to note that many other community galleries, libraries, museums, archives and historical societies in Australia have closed without their stories being told. The examples provided in this article represent just a small fraction of volunteer-managed heritage organisations for whom 'financial, human, physical, skills, and expertise'[26] challenges pose very real threats to longevity. In the following sections, we analyse some of the key issues faced by our case study organisations before discussing potential strategies that may be used to bolster institutional sustainability in Australia's community heritage sector.

Four Cases: Real, Temporary and Perceived Threats of Closure

Australian Computer Museum Society

With upwards of 50,000 artefacts, the Australian Computer Museum Society (ACMS) has long struggled with finding a suitable long-term home within its small operational budget. The ACMS was established in 1994 in Sydney, New South Wales, by a group of volunteers, many of whom are current and former engineers and computer programmers. The institution aims to highlight Australia's role as a 'world leader'[27] in the early days of developing computing technology, stating that 'Australia … has always punched above its weight when it comes to inventiveness'.[28] The ACMS held a vast collection documenting Australia's computing history, including equipment, manuals, magazines and journals. With a comprehensive collection policy, the ACMS kept almost everything donated to them, including duplicate items.

In May 2003, it was reported that the ACMS was in desperate need of a new space after the storage facility in which they were located in Homebush, Sydney, asked them to leave.[29] Due to the size of the collection, which took up 700 square metres, the ACMS claimed they needed to secure a new space immediately as the collection would take six months to be relocated. The potential of the collection to be donated elsewhere was also limited, with government-funded museums in Melbourne and Sydney indicating that they did not have the capacity to house such a large collection.[30] By the following year, the ACMS was still struggling to find a new home, owing thousands of dollars in back rent.[31]

Eventually, the ACMS secured a new site for the collection in Villawood, but by August 2018 they again needed to urgently vacate, given one month's notice that their warehouse was slated to be bulldozed to make way for new development.[32] Volunteers and other enthusiasts circulated calls online (on Reddit, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and so on) asking for anyone in the vicinity with some storage space to come and save the artefacts. In the words of curator John Geremin: 'We need bodies, we need people with a corner of a garage, a bit of basement, a caravan not being used by the grandparents'.[33] The collection is now partially stored in shipping containers and partially dispersed among its community of interest. Commenting on the potential future of the collection, Geremin stated:

> the shipping containers should be okay for a few years, and hopefully somewhere along the line we'll find a benefactor, corporate people who may have some interest, and hopefully with a bit of public support maybe the government will come to the party and provide space and resources so that it can all be saved.[34]

The ACMS therefore treats this closure as temporary, and hopes to raise the funds necessary to find a new physical space for the museum in the near future.[35] On their website, the ACMS

notes there is renewed interested in the museum following its 2018 closure, with an influx of new members joining.

In this case, the ACMS faces two key issues: firstly, a lack of funding from both public and private sources to support the collection, and secondly, difficulties associated with the sheer volume of artefacts they held. The latter is an issue arising, in part, from the fact that the ACMS is run by volunteers who are not trained archivists. As Baker notes, volunteers at community heritage organisations often strive for professional standards – becoming 'pro-am' – but this is not always achieved.[36] For the ACMS, their comprehensive collection practices combined with limited financial and human resources pose further challenges in terms of cataloguing, curating, exhibiting and making accessible the contents of the museum. Such problems therefore impact on the ACMS' efficacy as a cultural institution and its potential to influence public history by highlighting Australia's contributions to computing technology. This issue has only been exacerbated now that the collection is scattered across multiple sites.

New South Wales Jazz Archive

The ill health and deaths of key figures in the New South Wales Jazz Archive (NSWJA) led to its closure in 2013 after seventeen years of operation. Just over ten years earlier, the archive had been referred to as 'an active and enthusiastic organisation keen to preserve our jazz history',[37] with a collection comprising audio recordings, photographs, programmes, posters, handbills and other ephemera. In a call for donations in a jazz newsletter, volunteer Kate Dunbar highlights the need to document Australia's jazz histories that are at risk of being lost:

Just stop for a moment and look at our young musicians and the impact they are making all over the world. If we here in Oz don't give the right amount of attention and emphasis to our own jazz history – and its preservation – then we undermine its integrity and our own musicians … Keep a scrap book; be quietly conceited about what you have done and are doing; keep dates and places and CDs ansd [sic] records abd [sic] tapes and musicians you work with. Don't throw programs away. Please keep it all and keep it on [sic] good condition.

The Archive's intention to collect and preserve these histories was undermined by ongoing threats to sustainability. In September 2009, the Chair of the archive, Kevin Casey, was replaced by Peter Newton due to Casey suffering a serious illness. In September 2013, Newton died following a period of ill health. At this point, the archive's collection was taken on by another volunteer-managed organisation, the Victorian Jazz Archive (VJA), located in the outer suburb of Wantirna in Melbourne, Victoria, whose volunteers 'drove in and loaded up its [NSWJA's] jumbled and deteriorating collection to bring back to Wantirna for cataloguing'.[38] Despite being a self-proclaimed Victorian institution, the VJA had previously taken on donations from other states, including a personal collection from one of the NSWJA's own curators, Mike Sutcliffe. During our interviews with volunteers at the VJA in 2011, some participants spoke of the struggles faced by the NSWJA prior to its closure. In regard to the Sutcliffe donation, a former general manager of the VJA (31 May 2011) said the collection was sent to them because the NSW archive 'couldn't get themselves organised' and the collection needed to go somewhere more reliable. The collections manager at the VJA (31 May 2011) noted that the 'New South Wales [archive] sort of exists in name but it doesn't really exist in reality, because they haven't got a permanent home for it and they've tried very hard'.

The NSWJA therefore faced multiple challenges that lead to its closure, including the lack of a permanent space for the archive, limited organisation and preservation strategies, and the illness and death of the Archive's custodians. While the NSWJA's collection has been secured by the VJA, it is now housed far from its community of interest in New South Wales. This is ironic, given that state-based community archives of jazz in Australia emerged in response to anxieties that the development of a national jazz archive in Canberra would result in jazz's material culture no longer being accessible to local communities of enthusiasts.[39] However, the accession of the New South Wales collection has enabled the Victorian volunteers to further develop their institution, rebranding it in 2014 as the Australian Jazz Museum. Taking on such a collection does, however, put strain on the Australian Jazz Museum's own sustainability. It is an institution facing equal challenges of succession planning and the recruitment of a new generation of volunteers.[40]

Cairns Museum

Another story of closure, but this time followed by an eventual re-opening, comes from tropical Queensland. The Cairns Museum, operated by the Cairns Historical Society (formed in 1958), had been an entirely volunteer-managed initiative from 1982 until 2013.[41] The Society aims to make 'the history of Far North Queensland accessible for current and future generations'[42] through its collection and display of objects, photographs, archival records and other artefacts related to the local area. In addition to the Museum, the Cairns Historical Society also makes its collections accessible via the Cairns Historical Society Research Centre, which 'holds more than 60,000 items of personal, professional and Government papers and ephemera; books; unpublished reports; newspapers; photographs; journal articles and maps'.[43]

In 2013, the Museum was forced to close due to the Council refurbishment of the Cairns School of Arts Building in which it was located. Volunteers continued to work with the collection during the temporary closure of the museum in preparation for its re-opening in the refurbished building, which included a '$1.6 million museum fit-out' funded by Cairns Regional Council.[44] During the museum's closure, while the archive and imaging section continued to operate from the old post office,[45] many items went into storage and the community expressed concern that objects important to understanding the city's past were no longer available to the community. For instance, it was reported that a miniature, hand-crafted historical display of the city as it was in 1887 was in need of a 'permanent home' following the closure 'so the work can be seen by the community'.[46] The Cairns Museum reopened in 2017 with improved facilities, including one temporary and three permanent gallery spaces for exhibitions. President of the Cairns Historical Society, Clive Skarott, noted that the reopening was significant because 'The story of Cairns has been the missing piece of the Cairns cultural offering for the last three years and we are very excited to be once again sharing our story with locals, tourists and schools'.[47]

The Cairns Museum provides an example of how temporary closure can be necessary for securing a more sustainable future. One news report indicated the building renovation was critical for the museum, explaining 'Society members say the airconditioning [sic] never worked properly, leaving members and guests freezing in winter, and whenever it rained, the roof leaked, so they would place buckets out'.[48] As a volunteer added, those conditions 'put the collection at risk'.[49] The re-opening was accompanied by changes to the operation and funding of the museum. While still being a volunteer-managed organisation, with approximately 80 volunteers and an even larger membership body, the Cairns Historical

Society now benefits from an arrangement with Cairns Regional Council which supports the operations of Cairns Museum, the Cairns Historical Society Research Centre and the management of the Society's extensive collection. This includes the provision of three paid staff. In this case, although the Cairns Historical Society was already a long-running and effective community heritage organisation, stronger partnerships with and support from the local government proved crucial in ensuring their collection remains accessible in the medium- to long-term.

Cobdogla Irrigation and Steam Museum

Founded in 1986 and located in South Australia's Riverland, the Cobdogla Irrigation and Steam Museum emerged from a South Australian 15th jubilee commemorative project of what is now the SA Water Corporation. Employees of the then Engineering and Water Supply Department overhauled a number of significant assets relating to irrigation of the Riverland area, with the museum housing the world's only operational Humphrey Pump. With 'only 12 working units' of the pump 'installed worldwide', it is a significant piece of engineering heritage.[50] Management of the museum was eventually passed to volunteers of the Cobdogla Steam Friends Society Inc. in conjunction with volunteers of the Barmera Branch of the National Trust.

A gas leak in May 2012 which resulted in 'a couple of people injured' led the SA Water Corporation to decommission the Humphrey Pump[51] and by February 2015 SA Water was threatening to 'withdraw its financial support of about $40,000 per annum' from the museum.[52] The 'core group of about 10 volunteers' who run the museum 'with lots of labour, and love', were concerned that they would not be able to 'generate that amount of money to keep this place ongoing' once SA Water funding stopped.[53] In an effort to save the museum,

the volunteers sought public support via a petition and by March 2015 had 'secured a commitment from SA Water to continue to fund' the museum.[54] This was good news for volunteers, who had feared for the museum's future, but the funding commitment did not extend to the recommissioning of the museum's key attraction, the Humphrey Pump, which SA water estimated would cost in the vicinity of $100,000 to return to working order.[55]

In 2019, the museum's website and Facebook page indicated that although the Humphrey Pump had been successfully repaired, another challenge had arisen: SA Water cut off access to the site at which the pump is located, claiming that the building is unsafe. Neil Gow, President of the Cobdogla Steam Friends Society, stated that this turn of events was 'a big blow to the volunteers' who had spent years of unpaid labour working to recommission the pump: 'it's so frustrating that we know we can operate the pump successfully and we were nearly at the stage we could produce it back to the public'.[56] Gow lamented the fact that SA Water had not undertaken any maintenance on the building in the past several decades, which could have slowed its deterioration. There is currently no funding or timeline in place to resolve the issue.[57] Gow stressed that there are only two volunteers left who can operate the pump – one aged in his late 80s and the other in his early 90s – which creates a sense of urgency for them to gain access to the pump so that these skills can be passed on to younger volunteers:

> of course you can read up all about the Humphrey Pump … but to be able to learn how to operate, we actually have to have the pump going. … unless we have the operators to run the pump, we just will not be able to present it back to the public, so we're on a pretty short time limit.[58]

In this example, although the volunteers with the Cobdogla Irrigation and Steam Museum were able to persevere through precarious funding situations, institutional well-being

continues to be threatened by limited access to the heritage they aim to preserve. While this impacts on tangible aspects of this heritage – the pump itself, and the building that houses it – it also threatens more intangible dimensions of heritage – the skills of older volunteers who will die in the near future, without being able to pass on their knowledge.

Challenges to Institutional Well-Being and Sustainability

Flinn has argued in relation to community archives, maintaining institutional well-being in the long(er) term is:

> about being in the position to achieve the ambitions of the organization. It is about being able to look beyond the current project funding and being able to plan realistically for the medium- and the long-term. It means addressing the life-cycle transitions for independent community archives (moving from project-based funding to something more long-term and sustainable, or seeking to hand on from the foundational generation to the next generation of activists) which represent points of danger to the long-term viability for these archives.[59]

As the four cases presented in this article show, the challenges facing organisations in the community heritage sector are often multiple and difficult to overcome. The above examples include tales of ageing volunteers and the ill health and (impending) death of founding members and volunteers, problems with governance and collection strategies, issues with the buildings that house collections, and struggles to secure adequate funding. The case study organisations responded to these challenges in a range of ways: the Cairns Museum had to close temporarily, but reopened with improved facilities and a more sustainable organisational structure; the Cobdogla Irrigation and Steam Museum managed to secure ongoing funding, but is now struggling with making its most valuable asset accessible to the community; the Australian Computer Museum Society is currently battling to maintain its

operations and find a new home; and the New South Wales Jazz Archive was forced to close and offer its collection to a community archive facing its own sustainability concerns. These case studies are therefore illustrative of a variety of challenges and potential trajectories for community heritage organisations.

We suggest that the sustainability of the community heritage sector can be conceptualised in terms of institutional well-being. Considerations of 'well-being' are becoming increasingly common in scholarly and policy discourses. Although often theorised in terms of subjective well-being[60] or community well-being,[61] it can also be useful to conceive of institutional well-being (which is, of course, connected to the well-being of individuals and communities). Although well-being is notoriously difficult to define and measure, in the context of this article, we define institutional well-being in terms of three key attributes: (1) the vitality of the organisation's social and affective dimensions, which make it a pleasurable and meaningful place to work and visit; (2) the effectiveness of the organisation's cultural aims, which is reflected in its capacity to collect, preserve, curate, document and/or display history at a high standard; and (3) the sustainability of the organisation's activities in the short-, medium- and long-term, which encompasses matters of funding and succession planning. These three attributes are intrinsically interconnected and mutually informing – issues with one will influence the others. In this article, we have narrowed our focus to reflections on the third component.

Scholarship on community archives has identified some key challenges in achieving medium- and long-term sustainability that are also evident in our Australian case studies. Newman's New Zealand study of four community archives identified a range of characteristics which she proposes provide indications of the 'likely sustainability' of these organisations.[62] These

characteristics include *organisation*, which comprises factors of governance, funding, skilled staff, collaboration and dynamism; *archives*, or in a broader heritage context, processes, which comprise factors of preservation and archival practices; and *community engagement*, which in Newman's framework largely concerns outreach activities and the active interest of the community in the community archive's programs.[63] Newman noted three additional factors impacting on sustainability relating to: the nature of the collections, the character of the archivist and the level of external support.[64] Aspects of these characteristics are present across the three cases where sustainability remains critical. Threats to community engagement clearly resonate in the case of the Cobdogla Irrigation and Steam Museum which faces significant issues with overcoming lack of public access to its Humphrey Pump. Archives processes emerge in the case of the Australian Computer Museum Society with its collections policies and the nature of its collection at odds with organisation factors relating to space and funding. For the New South Wales Jazz Archive, organisation issues were prominent, with the closure suggestive of problems around staffing, dynamism, funding and governance.

A number of Newman's characteristics were earlier identified by Flinn, Stevens and Shepherd in their UK study which outlined challenges to the sustainability of the community archives of marginal and minority groups.[65] These scholars noted, for example, that it is difficult to sustain a community archive 'beyond the participation of the key founding individuals' given that the running of these endeavours depends on 'immense dedication, enthusiasm and personal energy' which volunteers may not be able to sustain once the 'original driving force moves away or passes on'.[66] This is evident in the case of the New South Wales Jazz Archive and the Cobdogla Irrigation and Steam Museum, both of which faced issues with volunteer deaths and ageing members. Flinn and colleagues also recognised

a key tension between the sustainability of an organisation and its desire to retain autonomy. For example, accessing the public funding which is 'often essential' for operations can be viewed as a threat to the independence of the archive, requiring the archive to 'fulfil all the demands of the funders' and risking its sense of 'independence' from the mainstream heritage sector.[67] This was a tension faced by the Cairns Historical Society in establishing closer links to the Cairns Regional Council for the reopening of the Cairns Museum. Similarly, Flinn and colleagues identify that issues of 'custody and ownership' and the way community archives deal with facing the relinquishment of their collections to other institutions is another factor in organisational sustainability, [68] something that can be observed in the New South Wales Jazz Archive's relationship with the Australian Jazz Museum.

Newman's framework comprehensively captures sustainability of 'archival records and the evidence they contain' as well as the 'custodial structure around the archives',[69] but is less well-equipped to capture the social and affective dimensions of volunteer-managed community heritage organisations – dimensions which produce the kinds of environments that promote volunteer investment in maintaining an organisation in the long term.[70] Baker, in her work on volunteer-managed archives and museums of popular music, observes that the ongoing involvement of volunteers in the community heritage sector is motivated not only by the important work of preservation, curation and display that they undertake, but also by the social and affective benefits that go along with being involved in these cultural heritage activities.[71] While it is difficult to ascertain from these case studies what affective atmospheres these organisations provided for volunteers, Baker's work suggests the creation of a working environment that fosters feelings of love (for objects, other volunteers and the institution) and sociality has been integral to the achievement of medium-term sustainability by the Australian Jazz Museum, now the home of the New South Wales Jazz Archive's

collection. Institutional well-being is certainly impacted by funding, governance and outreach, but also concerns the extent to which an organisation embeds itself in a community by, for example, promoting intergenerational interaction, or providing an atmosphere for volunteers that is playful yet passionate and helps to support their sense of personal well-being.[72] The subjective well-being of volunteers and the institutional well-being of their community heritage organisation can thus be understood as intimately intertwined.[73]

Moving Towards Sustainable Futures

Achieving sustainable futures will require a more robust engagement with the community heritage sector through government policy at the national, state and local levels. Reference to the community heritage sector is largely absent in the Australian Government's *Australian Heritage Strategy*, which is predominantly focused on protecting 'heritage places', and in which mention of community groups is limited to an encouragement to 'better share their heritage stories and events' so as to 'enhance Australia's Community Heritage website'.[74] The National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries offer useful benchmarks for the management of heritage organisations but, to date, there is no national strategy to protect, maintain or sustain the community heritage sector even though it comprises more than half, and likely as high as two thirds, of the nation's heritage institutions.[75]

The heritage strategies of State governments place slightly more focus on the community heritage sector. A NSW Government 'sector snapshot' identified threats including 'an unwillingness to welcome new people and different ways of working, including moves towards professionalism' and 'poor succession planning', and noted that 'poor security and a lack of insurance can prevent volunteer-run organisations from embracing new ways of working (e.g. from developing an online presence)'.[76] In Queensland, the government's

heritage strategy recognises the issue of 'diminishing numbers and ageing of community volunteers working in heritage conservation and interpretation throughout the state'.[77] The provision of grants programs to support the projects of not-for-profit heritage groups is part of a strategy to maximise sustainable investment in Queensland's heritage but, as in other states, this funding is not designed to relieve some of the major economic pressures (capital works, utility costs, rent, etc.) which pose immediate and ongoing threats to the sustainability of community heritage institutions. Support can also be found through the Queensland Museum Network, whose Museum Development Officers provide advice, information and training to regional museums and galleries. In South Australia, the South Australian Community History program offers grant schemes, guidelines surrounding museum standards, accreditation through the Community Museums Program, and 'advice and practical skills training in history practice, museum management and collections management'.[78] Not-for-profit organisations like the State branches of Australian Museums and Galleries Association Inc. are also available to provide support.

The 'lack of policy and equitable funding structures' for community heritage organisations has 'exacerbated' what Winkworth describes as the 'sustainability crisis' facing the sector.[79] There is clearly a need for the community heritage sector to be better represented in State and Federal heritage policy in ways that work to support the sustainability of these cultural organisations – their institutional well-being. In the absence of a strong Federal government program focused on support for the community heritage sector, it is often left to individual organisations to find a way towards a sustainable future.

The role of local councils in life-cycle transitions of community heritage sector organisations emerges strongly in the case of the Cairns Museum. Addressing the institutional well-being

of the community heritage sector will increasingly be an issue at the local government level. Volunteer-managed collecting groups, particularly those focused on local history, will likely call on local councils when dwindling volunteer numbers make the continuation of their activities untenable. A report from Museums Australia (Victoria) observes that 'should collecting groups lose the ability to care for collections relating to the history of the municipality … some local governments may find themselves called upon to accept large collections'.[80] Indeed, the report recommends that local councils 'support the sustainability of community collecting groups' by 'promot[ing] awareness of community collecting groups, and support groups with volunteer recruitment and skill development'.[81] The report also calls on councils to 'work with community collections that are in danger of folding, to build capability of the group and (plan B) help plan for the future of those collections, especially for significant items'.[82] At the Cairns Museum, assistance from the Cairns Regional Council has seen them benefit from operational funding, staffing support and a new building while maintaining a strong volunteer base and remaining a community-led initiative.

However, working closely with local councils is not a desired outcome for many organisations in the community heritage sector. The do-it-yourself approach to heritage resonates strongly in many of these institutions and as such they can be motivated by a desire to retain independence from professional bodies and to operate without the constraints of government agendas.[83] This proclivity is clear in the case of the NSWJA which gifted its collection to another DIY heritage institution rather than to repositories in the mainstream heritage sector, such as the National Film and Sound Archive or the State Library of New South Wales. There is concern in the community heritage sector that 'mainstream heritage repositories break up collections and … reduce accessibility of artifacts'.[84] For many

community heritage organisations, then, a better solution may be found in self-determined strategic planning aimed at future-proofing their activities/institutions.

To this end, some recent resources explicitly address sustainable practice in the community heritage sector. In early 2019, a report entitled *Architecting Sustainable Futures: Exploring Funding Models in Community-Based Archives* was published following a symposium of the same name held in New Orleans, USA.[85] Compiled from the input of community heritage practitioners, GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) professionals, activists, grant funders and academics, the report highlights some of the key issues facing the community heritage sector – for example, the lack of long-term funding opportunities, the desire to remain independent from mainstream heritage institutions, and difficulties with onerous grant application processes. The report also offers recommendations for various stakeholders wishing to support the long-term sustainability of community archives. For instance, it is suggested that DIY heritage practitioners 'would benefit from a peer network offering resources that could support activities related to knowledge and practice sharing, capacity building and sustainability'.[86]

The UCLA Community Archives Lab provides another example from the US that aims to support community heritage organisations in applying for funding. In late 2018, the team of researchers working on this project released the *Assessing the Affective Impact of Community Archives* toolkit. This resources 'provides community archives with the tools to collect, analyze, and leverage stories about the emotional (or affective) impact of their organizations on the communities they serve and represent'.[87] Specifically, the toolkit offers a step-by-step guide as to how community archives can collect data – through interviews and focus groups with their community of interest or other stakeholders – to 'help articulate stories of their

value to potential funders and make stronger cases for support, ultimately leading to increased budgets'.[88]

Although these two examples both originate from the United States, the strategies they put forward are clearly transferrable to the Australian context. However, while both resources aim to empower community heritage organisations to secure better funding, there is still a pressing need for resources that can assist volunteers in dealing with other common challenges outlined in this article – namely, strategies to deal with succession planning and problems with managing collections. In this respect, a 'peer network' system as described in the *Architecting Sustainable Futures* report might prove to be an effective means to share knowledge among community heritage practitioners. Various peer networks exist for different elements of the community heritage sector in Australia. For example, the Australian Museums and Galleries Association currently hosts a Community Museum National Network. However, this group, which requires a two-step paid membership, only focuses on museums. Ideally, a peer network should be accessible to and inclusive of any community museums, galleries, libraries, archives and historical societies – that is, it should encompass organisations from across the spectrum of the community heritage sector rather than replicate the siloed approach of networks in the mainstream heritage sector. Taking an approach that treats these organisations as part of a wider community heritage sector recognises the commonalities among them, enabling community heritage practitioners to exchange ideas and share examples of best practice which will support the sustainability of volunteer-managed heritage activities.

Conclusion

Community heritage organisations serve vital social, affective and cultural functions. They can provide spaces for volunteers and visitors to meaningfully engage with history and with other people, and they have the potential to shape public history through collecting, preserving and exhibiting historical narratives that may fall beyond the scope of mainstream heritage institutions. However, the capacity for community heritage organisations to fulfil these roles is contingent on their sustainability. In the Australian case studies explored in this article, a number of key threats to institutional well-being were identified, including ageing volunteers and issues with succession planning; problems with collection and preservation strategies; struggles to maintain appropriate housing for collections; and difficulties with securing sufficient funding. Achieving long-term sustainability for community heritage organisations will be important if there is to be a diverse, accessible record of the past as it was lived and experienced. Without a focus on sustainability, the presence of the historical past, that in community heritage organisations is so lovingly fostered, could slip beyond the reach of the communities of interest for whom those artefacts and their stories hold meaning. There is, therefore, a need for both government-led policies and innovative, grassroots approaches aimed at safeguarding the sector's longevity.

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