

New Chapters

Organisational Sustainability

and

Đất Nước Library



Edited by Zelmarie Cantillon & Sarah Baker

Series editors

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The Sustaining Community Heritage zine series emerges from an Australian Research Council-funded project, 'Co-creating a sustainable future for the community heritage sector'. This project explores the organisational sustainability of Australia's volunteer-managed galleries, libraries, archives, museums and historical societies which serve important functions in shaping public history through the collection, preservation and display of local, everyday and marginalised heritages. However, the sector faces a sustainability crisis. Mounting pressures pose a threat to the long-term futures of volunteer-run heritage institutions, putting at risk the diversity and accessibility of the nation's historical record. In this project, we collaborate with representatives from community heritage institutions across Australia to co-develop strategies for recognising value, measuring organisational sustainability and creating benchmarks for sustainable practice.

The zines in this series capture the work of the project as it unfolds, enabling volunteers in community heritage organisations to communicate their experiences and knowledge creatively and accessibly. We approach the zines as a way to facilitate a networked, co-designed understanding of organisational sustainability from a range of institutional contexts. The zines in the series identify challenges, but they also seek to build on existing resources, capabilities and ambitions already in place for the pursuit of viable futures.

For project updates and other issues of this zine series, see:
<https://communityheritagetoolkit.com/>

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New Chapters: Organisational Sustainability and Đất Nước Library

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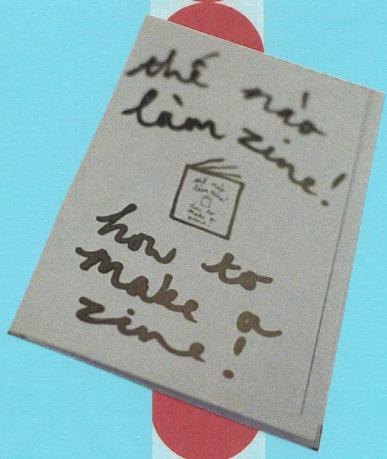
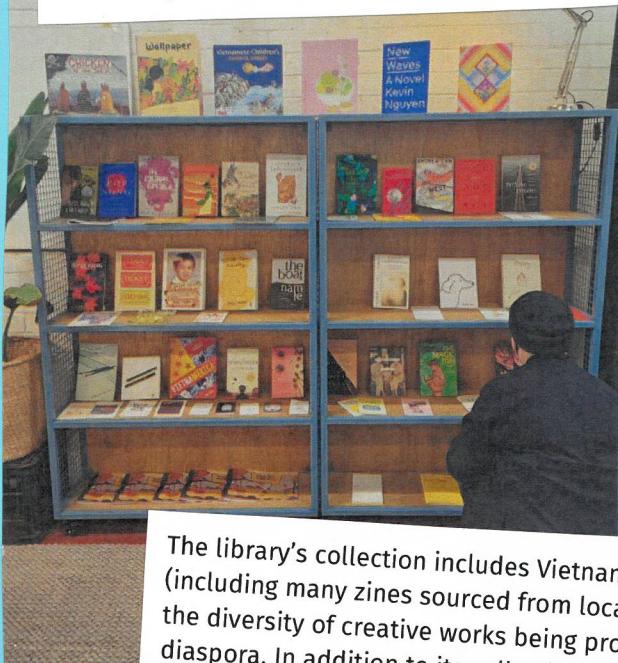
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About Đất Nước Library

Đất Nước Library is a Vietnamese community library based in Naarm (Melbourne). Starting out as a travelling library doing pop-up displays at events, the library eventually found a home at [REDACTED] through the support of a participatory arts hub connected to a not-for-profit health organisation. When the arts hub vacated their offices in Footscray last year, Đất Nước Library also lost its space, with the collection moving into storage – including, in part, at the home of one of the library's co-founders.



The library's collection includes Vietnamese and English language texts (including many zines sourced from local zine festivals) that represent the diversity of creative works being produced in Vietnam and the diaspora. In addition to its collection, however, the library has had an active programming schedule, with author talks, zine workshops and writing workshops.

While the library seeks to assist the Vietnamese diaspora – especially second-generation migrants – in reconnecting with their heritage, it also has a strong focus on supporting contemporary Vietnamese-Australian creatives.



Đất Nước Library is a community-curated library collection of texts from Vietnam and the diaspora. Our aim is to encourage collective literacy, develop shared archives and create connection across the Vietnamese experience.

Growing up in the diaspora on the colonised lands of Australia, much of the literature we have had access to and consumed has prioritised a westernised view of the world which has marginalised our stories and voices.

Đất Nước Library celebrates the plurality of the Vietnamese narrative, and inspires to create a more culturally connected and close community.

What does 'Đất Nước' mean?

đất (dək+tl) - earth, soil, land, ground

nước (n̩iək+tl) - water, move

đất nước (dək+tl n̩iək+tl) - country

For us, 'đất nước' refers to the ongoing fluidity and grounding of identity in the connection we have to the many lands that we inhabit.

1

The library's three remaining volunteers have taken a hiatus during 2025 to rest and rethink Đất Nước Library's next chapter, with an eye to re-commencing events and expanding the collective in the coming years.

Shortly after fieldwork, the Library held their first event of the year at Shop Bao Ngoc (a restaurant and community space in Brunswick), who now house a small borrowing collection from Đất Nước Library.

The title *New Chapters* reflects Đất Nước Library's role as a catalyst for story-making, providing opportunities for author talks, workshops, community events and creative gatherings to spark new narratives and fuelling connections in the Vietnamese diaspora. This story-centred approach to community heritage is also central to the library's organisational sustainability. By cultivating spaces where Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Australian stories can be collected, made, shared and celebrated, the library strengthens the relationships, skills and creative networks that will carry this community-based initiative into its next chapter.

But *New Chapters* also signals how, in this period of hiatus, the groundwork already undertaken for story-making and story-collecting now forms the basis for the reflective work underway to reimagine how the library will sustain itself. The volunteers are taking the time to reflect on the organisation's purpose, capacity and next steps. This zine captures both the imaginative and reflexive approach to writing this next chapter – a next chapter formulated through thoughtful interrogation of what a viable, sustainable and community-led Vietnamese library can be.

Outline of this zine: What's inside?

Content for this zine was created during a two-hour workshop conducted with three volunteers on 11 October, 2025. Zel, one of the project's co-leads, guided the volunteers through three activities aimed at getting them to think creatively about organisational sustainability.

The first activity invited participants to jot down on sticky notes the first words or phrases that came to mind when they thought of 'organisational sustainability'.

Next, we turned to an activity where participants considered a pre-prepared list of keywords relating to sustainability in community heritage organisations. Participants selected a few words that stood out to them most, then stuck these on a page and indicated how various issues/themes are interconnected. For example, Nhu's page highlights the cyclical flows and intersections between tools, finance, community connection and human resources (p. 1), while Kylie's page underscores the interlinking nature of different themes (p. 22).



Our final activity required participants to respond to writing prompts to elicit reflections on sustainability challenges as well as the rewards and costs of volunteering. Nhu wrote about fond memories facilitating a zine workshop for aged residents (pp. 8–11); Kylie explored some rewards and challenges (p. 14); and Phuong-Nghi reflected on how they would feel if the library were to cease operation (see p. 26).



Also dispersed throughout this zine are excerpts from an interview undertaken with co-founder Kylie, as well as snippets of discussions that took place during the zine workshop.

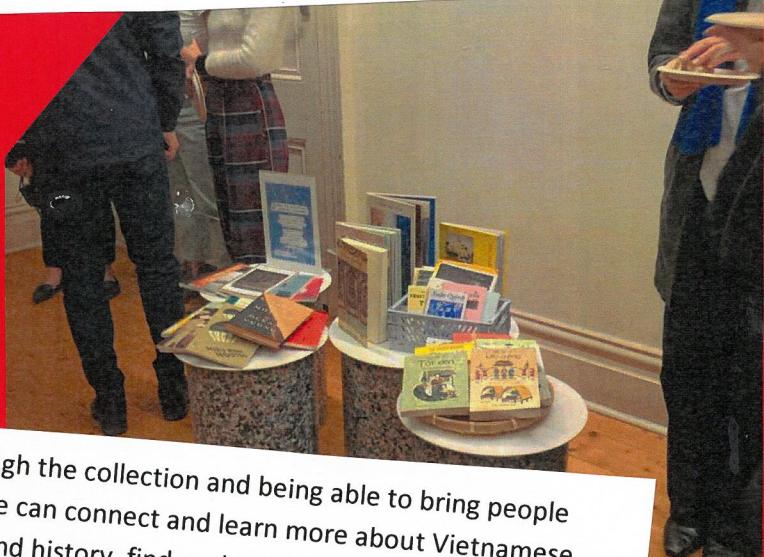
Zelmarie Cantillon
Sarah Baker



Kylie: I think on an individual level, a lot of us felt like we wanted to connect more with our Vietnamese heritage, know more about what is being written or created by Vietnamese artists and connect to Vietnamese community more too. There was also a generational aspect where we felt like we weren't as connected to our parents' generation.



Kylie: The feedback we were getting from people was, 'I don't have a lot of Vietnamese friends. I don't have connections to Vietnamese communities. Attending these workshops and book clubs is a really nice way to do that.'



Kylie: I think it's through the collection and being able to bring people together where people can connect and learn more about Vietnamese culture and heritage and history, find each other, learn about the plurality of Vietnamese experience and support Vietnamese diaspora creatives, be inspired by the amazing stuff that's being produced.

Kylie: I think pretty early on, it was clear that it was about creating a platform for Vietnamese artists in Australia and Melbourne and engaging with them and supporting them. So, purchasing their material and trying to make it accessible and maybe raising awareness around the amazing literature out there that's available. And I think for us, I mean personally it was a surprise for me how little I knew. And there was nowhere that you could go where you're like, 'Oh, how do I know how many Vietnamese artists are out there currently writing, creating and doing amazing work?' So, we kind of saw our mission as a way to surface that for people.

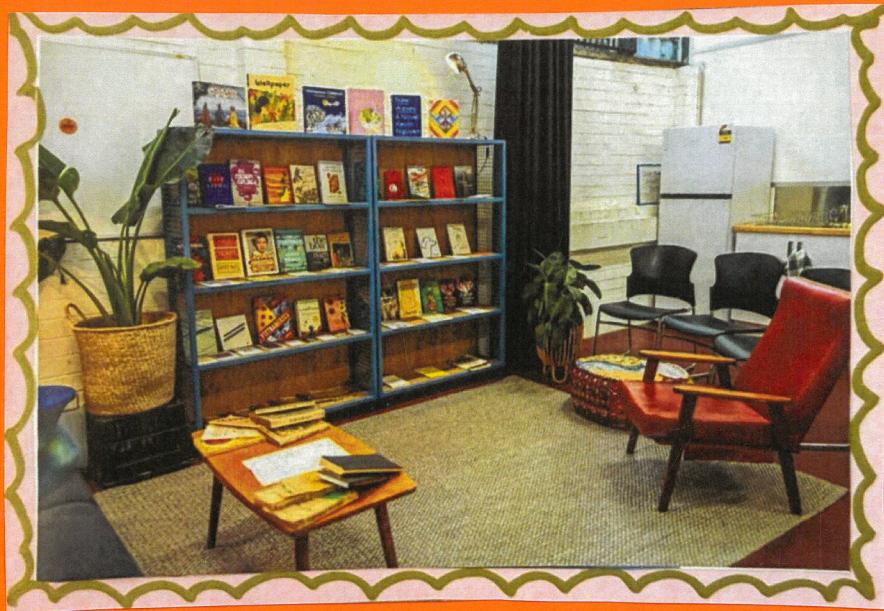




Zel: It sounds like one of the strengths was that you have really good community networks and people are reaching out to you ... Do you have any relationships to local councils or has there been any government [involvement]? Or has it been more like arts organisations?

Kylie: We kind of haven't gone there. I think we're really - I'm probably speaking on their behalf - but personally, I like it that we don't do that, because we've got this freedom to decide who we collaborate with and we don't have to worry about having to be aligned in any way or delivering specific things. We've got that freedom to pick and choose what we do and how we do it.





OUR HOME @  ()

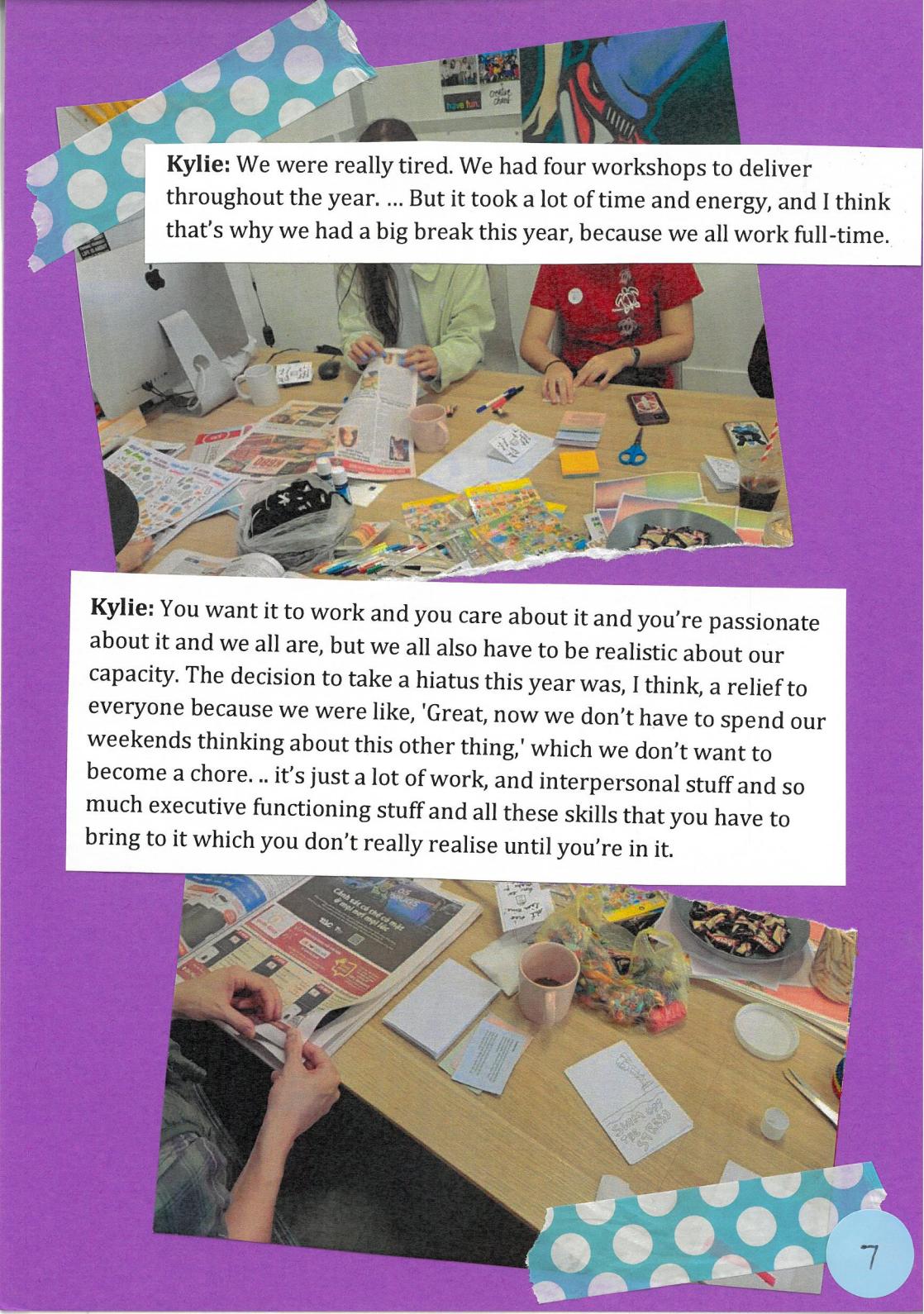
OUR OWN SPACE!

SAFE SPACE!

A HOME FOR
OUR COLLECTIONS
AND THE
COLLECTIVE!



HAVING A PHYSICAL HOME BASE
IS IMPORTANT TO US BUT WE'VE
HAD TO BE FLEET WITHOUT ONE



Kylie: We were really tired. We had four workshops to deliver throughout the year. ... But it took a lot of time and energy, and I think that's why we had a big break this year, because we all work full-time.



Kylie: You want it to work and you care about it and you're passionate about it and we all are, but we all also have to be realistic about our capacity. The decision to take a hiatus this year was, I think, a relief to everyone because we were like, 'Great, now we don't have to spend our weekends thinking about this other thing,' which we don't want to become a chore. ... it's just a lot of work, and interpersonal stuff and so much executive functioning stuff and all these skills that you have to bring to it which you don't really realise until you're in it.



FONDEST

MEMORY WITH

ĐẤT NƯỚC LIBRARY

CREATING & RUNNING
ZINE WORKSHOPS WITH
THE AGED RESIDENTIAL
OUTREACH TEAM.

It was the first time I'd done something like that, and to this day is still one of a kind and ~~of~~ one of my most favourite projects of all times.



First interaction with DNL and the first project I ran with the team.

I felt com
importan
person

It felt amazing being able to bring something fun & social to the senior residents.

the energy & support from everyone, including the [REDACTED]

teams, DNL and the participants is the most memorable thing about this project.

connected to 2 of my most
it identities: as a creative
& as a Vietnamese .

TO SECURE
ĐẤT NƯỚC
LIBRARY'S
FUTURE, WHAT
WE NEED MOST
is



PEOPLE

... who share our values
and have specific skills
to bring.

DEFINED ROLES + PROCESSES

... ie who does what. And
documentation so that
skills can be shared and
handed over to the next person.



Kylie: Working full time is a big barrier. I wish I could dedicate more time and capacity, but I also think the more people, the better, in the collective. And I think we've kind of carried the Library for a long time.

Phuong-Nghi: Oh, yeah, we have.

Kylie: And that diversity of experience and thinking and skills – yeah, I think we all agree it's time to expand and grow that collective to get more people in. Just spread the load. But also, like, see what other people think and what their perspectives are and yeah, kind of evolve as well.

Phuong-Nghi: Well, I will add to that, and what Kylie is saying, that I think the reason we are now at a place within this journey to feel that way is because we've been in it so long that we've gone to a point where we've understood, okay, we figured out all the initial hard parts already. And now it's about the next phase in that. You know, you walk through one door, you get to the next one and you open the next one type thing, or one door closes behind you but a few more open in front of you. It's kind of like that.

Kylie: Yeah, I think we've learned a lot from experiences – what works, what doesn't work. What we need foundationally to set up this collective and the Library to work successfully, work well. I feel really proud that we've just been able to do what we can with what we have. And now, the hiatus, I think, was really good. Just to have some space, and now think about like, okay, like, how do we build, rebuild, and build up again.



CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY HAS
BEEN WHAT HAS SUSTAINED
US OVER THE YEARS. CONNECTED
WITH OLDER GENERATION WAS
SO SPECIAL.

PHOTO FROM AGED-RESIDENTS WORKSHOP



MOST REWARDING...

IT'S BEEN REWARDING TO MEET THE VIET DIASPORA COMMUNITY THROUGH DNL - MAKE CONNECTIONS, SUPPORT VIET CREATIVES & THE AMAZING WORK THEY DO.

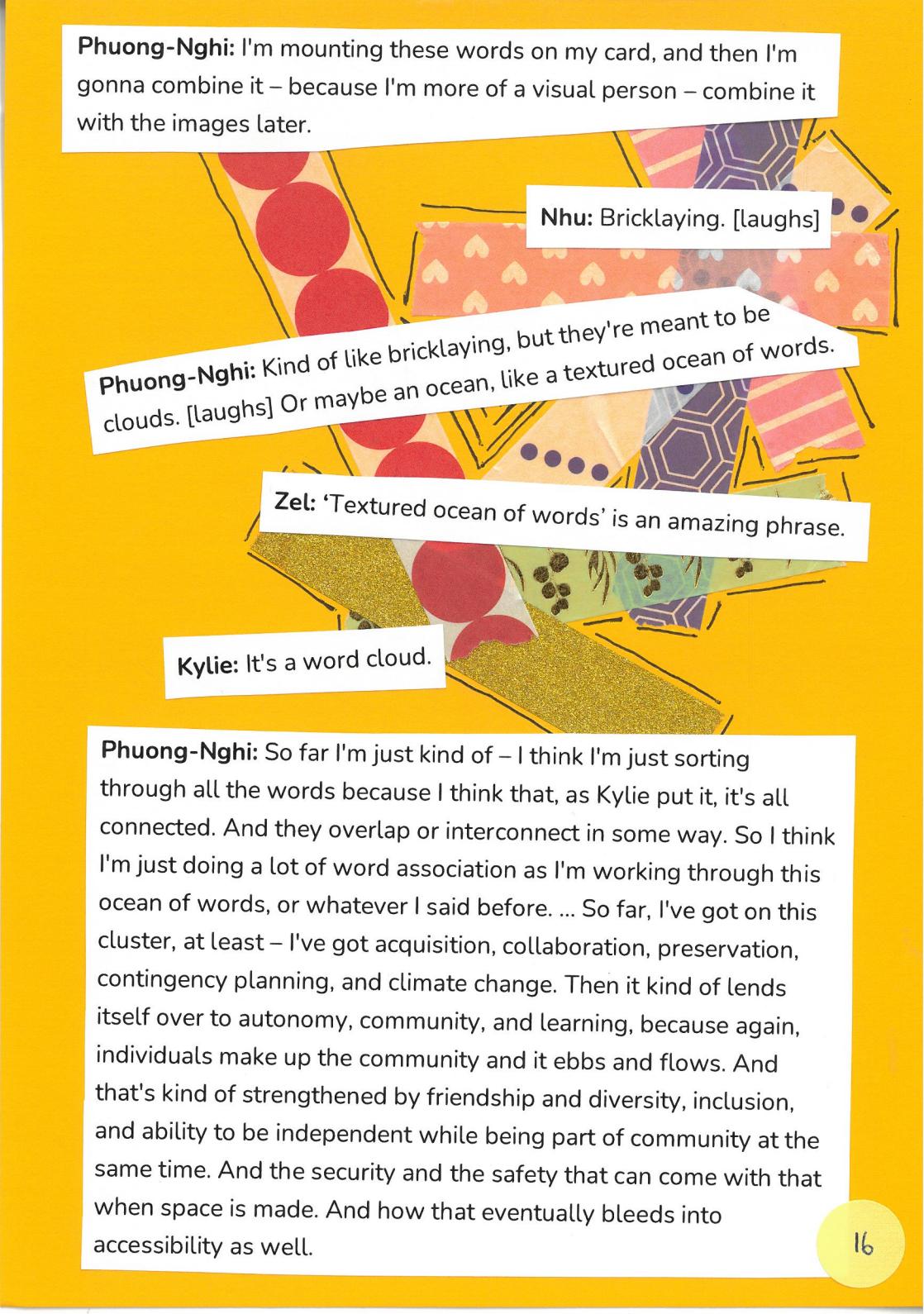
DIFFICULT CHALLENGE...

A CHALLENGE HAS BEEN FINDING THE TIME & CAPACITY TO CONTRIBUTE TO DNL. WORKING FULL TIME HAS BEEN A BIG BARRIER. I WISH I COULD DEDICATE MORE OF MY CAPACITY TO IT! I THINK THAT'S WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO GROW THE COLLECTIVE TO SHARE THE LOAD + BRING IN DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES & LIVED EXPERIENCES.

Kylie: [During the zine workshop with aged residents] we were faced for the first time with this clash between the generations, and obviously, their trauma and their relationship with the war and their life here, and then us being second gen and having a very different experience, and seeing – they call it the American War – through a very different lens. And so, I remember going home, thinking, 'What are we collecting? Who is it really for? Is it for us and people like us?' And I think that's one of the things that we want to think about next year. Who are we for? We can't be for everybody.

Kylie: The other question I've had is, are we just for Vietnamese people? ... So, we've had people bring their friends who aren't Vietnamese but are people of colour and that's been so special, because obviously, there's so much shared experience around the migrant experience and things like that, so it ended up being this lovely conversation about – I think it was the writing workshop – feeling vulnerable about sharing their experience and feeling a bit shy about their writing style. So, that was really special because it wasn't about being Vietnamese necessarily, it's about **the shared experience of being a migrant**. So, I feel like that's another question.

Kylie: So we had a pop-up stall there and it brought in a really diverse group of people, and I remember a few of the older generation people looking at our stall and they're picking out items and going like, 'Why have you got this? Why are you collecting this?' It's been interesting, that question around what are we focusing on, **who's our community? What's our remit?**



Phuong-Nghi: I'm mounting these words on my card, and then I'm gonna combine it – because I'm more of a visual person – combine it with the images later.

Nhu: Bricklaying. [laughs]

Phuong-Nghi: Kind of like bricklaying, but they're meant to be clouds. [laughs] Or maybe an ocean, like a textured ocean of words.

Zel: 'Textured ocean of words' is an amazing phrase.

Kylie: It's a word cloud.

Phuong-Nghi: So far I'm just kind of – I think I'm just sorting through all the words because I think that, as Kylie put it, it's all connected. And they overlap or interconnect in some way. So I think I'm just doing a lot of word association as I'm working through this ocean of words, or whatever I said before. ... So far, I've got on this cluster, at least – I've got acquisition, collaboration, preservation, contingency planning, and climate change. Then it kind of lends itself over to autonomy, community, and learning, because again, individuals make up the community and it ebbs and flows. And that's kind of strengthened by friendship and diversity, inclusion, and ability to be independent while being part of community at the same time. And the security and the safety that can come with that when space is made. And how that eventually bleeds into accessibility as well.

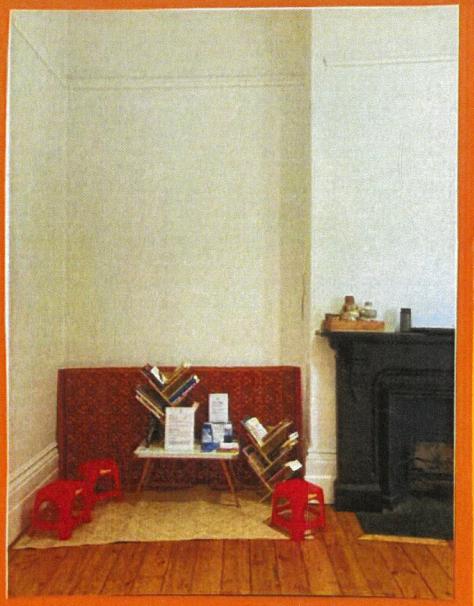


Zel: So, what's the plans going forward or what are your hopes for the future?

Kylie: I think finding a physical space and then being able to loan our books out so people can borrow. And then think about how we engage with the community. Do we want to run things? Who runs them? We've got a tiny bit of funding left still from [REDACTED] so how do we want to spend that or do we want to direct that to growing the collection. We've got a friend who runs a shop, Bao Ngoc, and they're a little Vietnamese restaurant in Brunswick and they've got a few shelves so we're going to curate a little collection to have in there. So, we're just trying to be as resourceful as possible to just make sure that we've got some collections out there in the community but we really haven't – we really need to sit down and talk about it, but I think growing the collective is the other thing, to spread that load. I think Phuong-Nghi and I are probably quite attached to the library, so we're like, 'Alright, if we really want it to run as a collective, we've got to let go of stuff.' I feel like that's another thing that we need to reckon with.



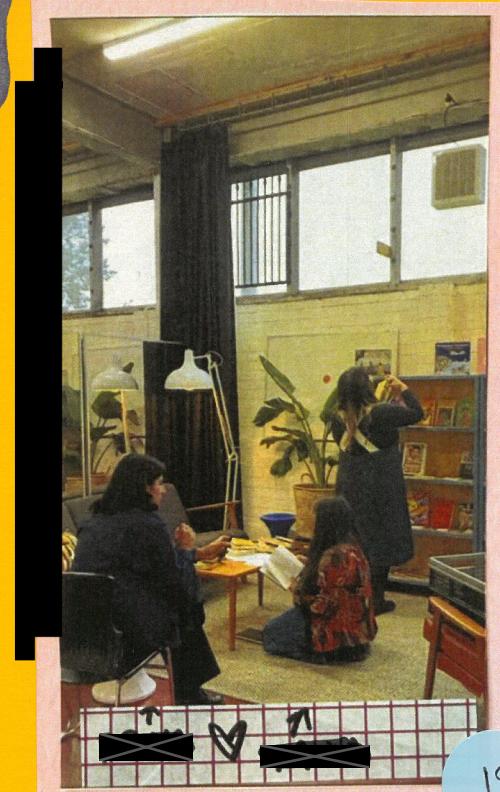
OUR SUPPORTERS
+ CHAMPIONS HAVE
BEEN CRITICAL TO
OUR GROWTH.

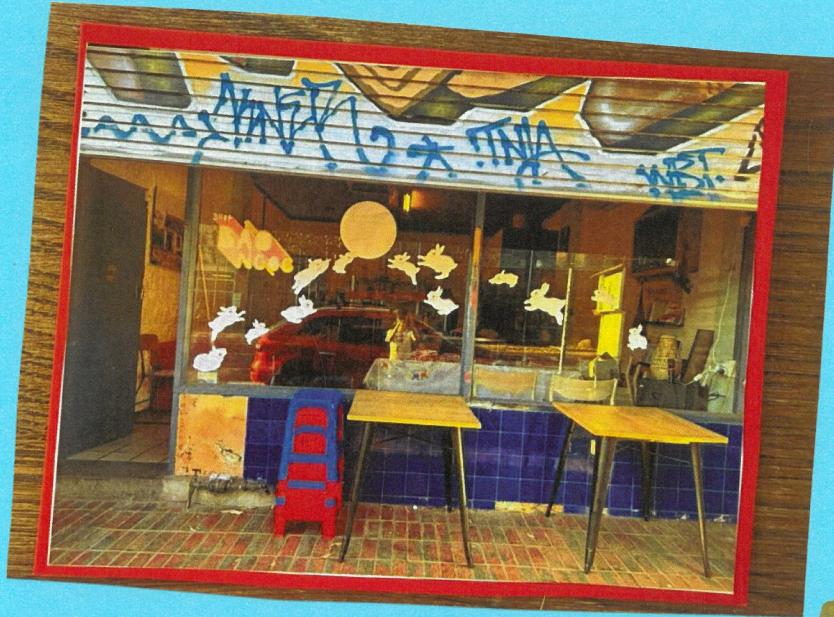


[REDACTED]

INDEPENDENCE +
AUTONOMY IS
SO IMPORTANT TO
US - WE WANT TO
HAVE THE FREEDOM
TO DO THINGS IN
OUR OWN TERMS.

OUR FIRST EVENT -
POP-UP





PARTNERSHIPS + COLLABORATION
HAS BEEN SO REWARDING +
A SUSTAINABLE WAY TO
KEEP THE LIBRARY / COLLECTIVE
RUNNING. RELATIONSHIPS ARE
CRITICAL TO OUR SURVIVAL.

PHOTO OF SHOP BAO NGOC - WE COLLABORATED
ON A MID AUTUMN FESTIVAL

Kylie: I guess the other big question I've had is how do collectives work? Because it's been hard, being part of a collective that's always changing and people come and go and people leave, and what is our role? But you don't really want to be so prescriptive about who does what. You don't want a hierarchy. It's like, 'How does it work?' It's just – for us, it's been a mishmash of sometimes we butt heads about stuff, sometimes we agree on stuff, sometimes we don't have capacity and we have to pull out last minute, so it's just that negotiating that has been a lot of work too. And my big personal question is how does a collective work and who keeps it cohesive?



Kylie: You're like, 'Wait, who's going to do social media stuff? Who's going to respond to emails? Who's going to coordinate events? Who's going to do the funding stuff? Is it all about consensus?' That takes so much time. Surely there's a better way around decision making.

IT'S ALL CONNECTED...

SOCIALISING

DIVERSITY

ENGAGEMENT

INDEPENDENCE

COMMUNITY

PASSION

PARTNERSHIPS

AUTONOMY

COLLABORATION

FRIENDSHIP

CULTURAL
SAFETY

TOP

Kylie: The other question that I've had personally is like, 'Are we duplicating what's already out there?' Do we want to be collaborative and look at how we can work with other community groups?



Kylie: We all kind of came together with this shared experience or desire about what we want the library to be, but we haven't really articulated this stuff around who do we want to partner with. What are the guiding principles in terms of partnerships and who and how we want to run things and what our collection should focus on and who our audience is and how do we run as a collective? I feel like all of that groundwork hasn't been done explicitly and we've just been like, on that treadmill, 'All right, we'll just make it work. We'll just make it work,' and now we're like, 'I think we need to sit down and think about it.'



FOOD HAS BEEN INTEGRAL TO
HOW WE BUILD CONNECTION
WITH COMMUNITY AT EVENTS.



Kylie: And where's the community consultation part? If we're a community curated library, are we talking about us as the community? I think we did a callout to say, 'Tell us what you want to see in the collection so we can source things.' I think being more active in that space – once we know we've got a physical space and we can grow the collection – I think that'll be really special.



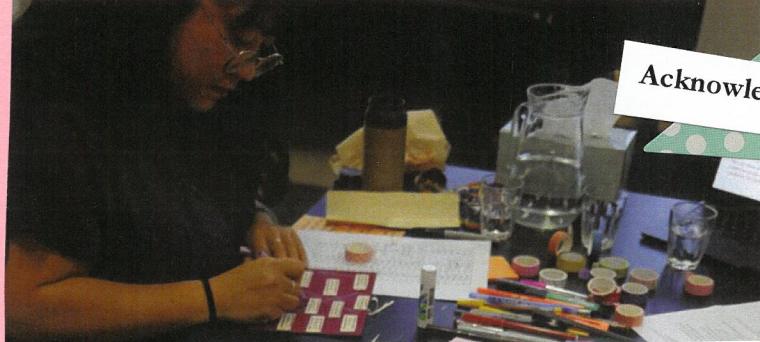
Phuong-Nghi: The second prompt that I chose was if the library was to cease operation, I kind of perceived that prompt as more like cease operation in terms of physical presence, like actual shelves with books. ... I ultimately said that I think things would be fine. As you know, the library started off as an, I guess, amalgamation of various connected ideas. And so it will carry on as such, even if the physical library itself ceases for whatever reason, or ceases for a time, we will always come back in some way, shape or form. And that will change with whatever time and place we're at, which comes back to what the library means to us at least. I wouldn't be – I mean, I'd be a little sad. But I wouldn't be devastated or anything. ... when you talk to enough people, and among all the people that we've met, that underlying desire was always constant. I think that even if we cease operating for a while, that desire will always be there, and when there's a will there's a way. ... I would be a little sad, but I think we'll be fine in the end.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



Kylie: In terms of resilience to change – I think we would be at an 8. I think the key to our continued existence as a library and a collective has been our flexibility and responsiveness to change. We've been through a lot of change over the years including changes in the make-up of our collective, COVID-19 and shifting events from in-person to online, designing and delivering workshops within expected parameters (which was a shift for us), accepting the opportunity to house the collection in a physical space and then pivoting to housing a small borrowing collection at Shop Bao Ngoc, when that space was no longer available. We've had to be very open-minded and open to opportunities that have come our way which has been to our benefit; I think it speaks to our ability to go with the flow with things and why we're still around.

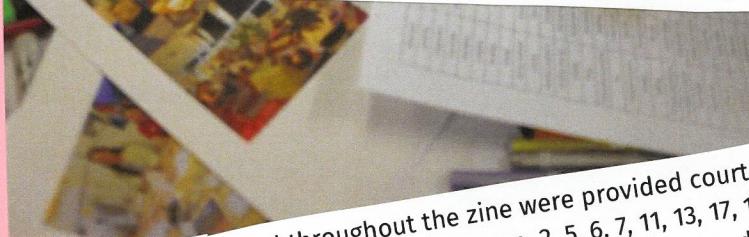
Acknowledgements



Thank you to the volunteers of Đất Nước Library who engaged with this research. Your willingness to share experiences and offer your views on the sector's organisational sustainability are central to creating a zine series that captures viable futures for community heritage organisations.

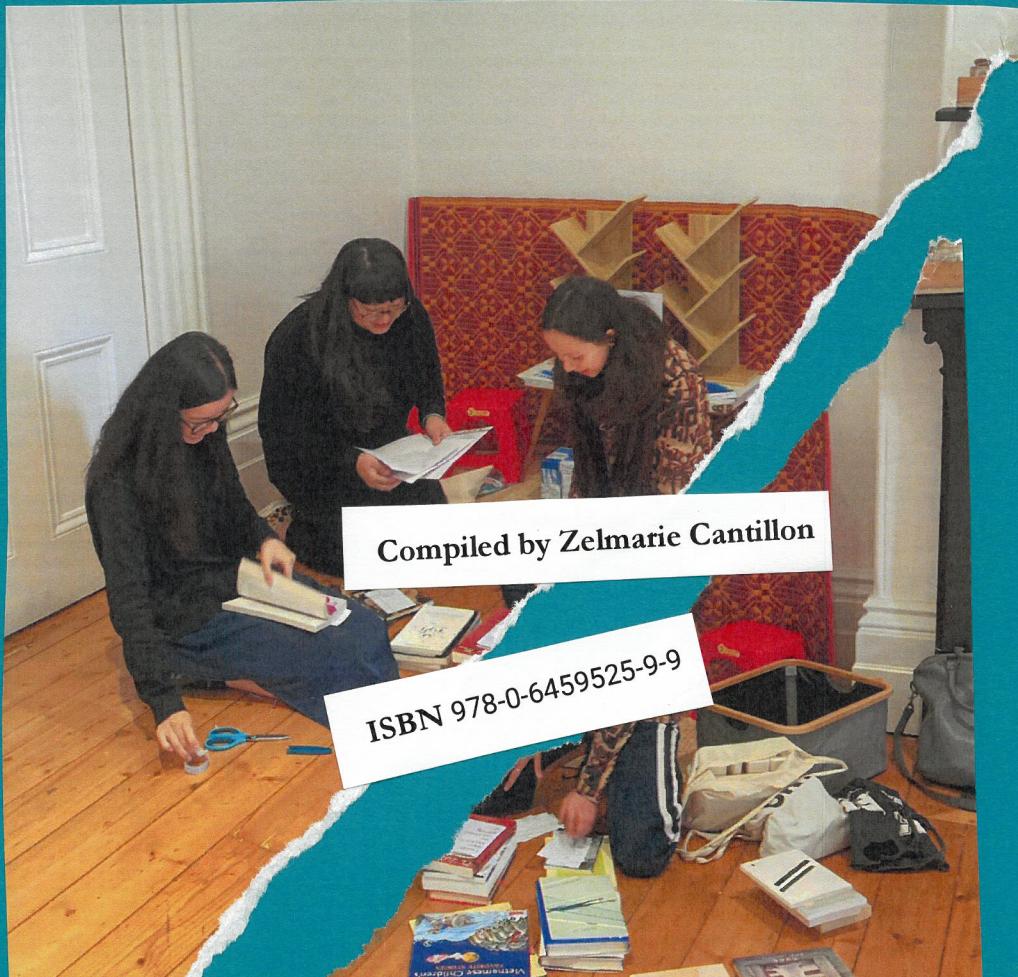


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Images used throughout the zine were provided courtesy of Đất Nước Library (cover and back pages; pp. 2, 5, 6, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 20, 21, 24, 25). Others were taken by Zel during fieldwork or sourced from databases of public domain images. ▲





Compiled by Zelmarie Cantillon

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