ESSAY

The way things work round here

Creating space for change

Cathy Hunt

IN September 2013, four hundred men and women gathered in the Northern Territory town of Katherine for the Women of the World Festival (WOW). This landmark event was a partnership between one of Australia's newest and smallest cultural centres, the recently opened Godinymayin Yijard Rivers Arts and Culture Centre, and one of Britain's oldest and largest cultural centres, the Southbank Centre in London. WOW was created in 2011 for the centenary of International Women's Day and has become one of Southbank's annual flagship festivals. Driven by its inspirational artistic director, Jude Kelly, it is an event for people of all ages and backgrounds to celebrate women's achievements and examine the obstacles that prevent them reaching their full potential.

This is the story of how the Godinymayin Yijard Rivers Arts and Culture Centre and WOW were made possible and the impact on this small, remote yet culturally and strategically important town. It is a story of resilience, a story of leadership, and a story of partnerships. It is a demonstration of how culture – expressed through stories, creativity and the design of welcoming spaces – may remove barriers that inhibit social and economic development and cohesion.

For me, it began eleven years earlier in 2002 when I was engaged to assist a consortium of arts organisations, the Katherine Regional Cultural Centre Steering Committee, to undertake a feasibility study for the development of a cultural centre. Such studies require an understanding of the history and contemporary culture of a place, including the 'way things work round here', crucial to creating a pathway for any new development.

Located just over 300 kilometres south of Darwin on the banks of the river from which the town takes its name, Katherine is the centre of business and government services for a region the size of Victoria. About ten thousand people live in the town and a further eight thousand in the region. More than half the population is Aboriginal. The traditional owners in and around the town are the Jawoyn, Wardaman and Dagoman clan groups and the region includes people from about thirty Aboriginal language groups.

This 'rivers' region is steeped in political, social and cultural history: of exploration (John McDouall Stuart passed through the area in 1862 on his sixth journey across the continent from north to south and named the river Katherine); of communications (Katherine Telegraph Station was established in August 1872 and the Overland Telegraph Line was completed later in 1872); of gold mining; of the defence of Australia in World War II; of pastoralism; and of legends, from Jeannie Gunn's *We of the Never Never* (1908), to *Jedda* (1955), the first Australian film with Aboriginal actors, and the more recent and rather more realistic *Yella Fella* (2005), the autobiography of Ngukkur man and actor Tom E Lewis. Katherine is home to many of the stories that have shaped the national psyche and international understanding of the Great Southern Land.

In many ways, the history of the relationship between Aboriginal and settler Australia has played out here: the destruction of traditional life by colonisation; the strike and walk off by the Gurindji people at Wave Hill cattle station in 1966; the emergence of land rights and the creation of the Northern Land Council and the return of the land comprising Nitmiluk National Park to the traditional owners in 1991. The Barunga Statement was drawn up in a community eighty kilometres south-east of Katherine and presented to prime minister Bob Hawke to demand civil rights – he responded by promising a treaty, a promise that has yet to be realised.

THE TOWN OF Katherine sits in the middle of this culturally rich region: a pioneer town initially servicing landholders and their pastoral properties, where most traditional owners had first contact with white people. Many young men worked for the stations and became reliant on the station owners as hunting grounds were made off-limits. The wealth created from this land did not go back to the traditional owners.

In 2002 when I was asked to come and assess the potential for a cultural centre, the town was still suffering from the devastation of a flood that had claimed three lives and left a damage bill of more than $200 million. Katherine was going through immense social changes. As well as the significant increase in Defence Department personnel at the RAAF Tindal airbase, which over a decade had more than doubled the town's population, there had been an influx of contractors and other government workers in housing, education and health, including the Aboriginal-owned and created Sunrise Health Service, then in its infancy.

This changed the demographics. There were new people in Katherine, many young professionals, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, looking for services and opportunities for themselves and their families. But it was a town still being 'run by the few for the few': a group of small businesspeople and landowners, some with long-term connections to the region, others who had chosen the place to build their businesses and bring up young families.

In one breath people talked about the great sense of community; in the next they revealed how divided that community really was.

The transfer of ownership of Nitmiluk National Park to the Jawoyn people had pioneered joint management arrangements, signifying an important shift. It quickly became one of the biggest businesses in the area, with nearly 250,000 visitors a year, even before the building of the Ghan railway between Adelaide and Darwin. Cultural tourism, incorporating traditional and contemporary Aboriginal art and culture, the natural environment and the history of the early pioneers, had been recognised as a sector of growing importance to the future economy, alongside agriculture and the airbase.

Katherine Regional Arts, Mimi Arts and Territory Craft recognised that cultural development could also unite and strengthen the community for the future, but knew they needed assistance with a feasibility study to

ensure that the Cultural Centre was one that suited their needs, and one that they could afford to fund and build. This process also enabled the proponents to reconsider why they wanted a *building* and explore other ways of achieving their objectives. At that time, cultural buildings were beginning to lose government policy support. Purpose-built spaces were seen as costly to build, expensive to run and inflexible in the face of social and technological change. There was a growing trend in urban Australia towards 'pop up' and 'temporary' facilities.

But this was far from the minds of people in Katherine, where the only community hall, an underused corrugated iron structure built in the 1950s, had been demolished even before the 1998 flood wreaked havoc on the infrastructure of the town. The annual Katherine Prize exhibition was hung in the council building because there was no other public space. Rooms were available at low cost in the old high school for offices, workshops and smaller exhibitions. But for performances, the only options were pubs, clubs, an inadequate school hall or the expensive and work-intensive business of creating outdoor spaces for one-off festivals and events. People in Katherine were fed up with the cost and discomfort of temporary venues for cultural and community activities, sick of missing out on performances and exhibitions moving up and down the track, and they knew they needed something better for their own community and creative development.

Katherine also lacked the investment in Aboriginal art centres that was occurring elsewhere in the Territory. Artists and communities throughout the region were relying almost entirely on the excellent, but under-resourced, services of Mimi Arts. In the 1990s the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) spent a lot of money on studies for an Aboriginal cultural centre in the town, but nothing was built: the idea was not widely supported in the Aboriginal community; ATSIC did not consider partnerships with other government bodies; there were no links with the non-Aboriginal community, and there was a mistaken belief that a centre could become financially viable within five years, despite evidence to the contrary.

On the first day of consultations I met the outgoing mayor, who told me quite bluntly that it was all a waste of time. The people of Katherine didn't want or need anything like a cultural centre and the committee should not expect

any support from Council. This view was reflected in the decision to build a new pavilion for the Katherine Show after the floods, rather than replace the only community hall in the town. Over the next six months of extensive consultation a very different community view became clear. In the first report in 2003 I wrote: 'The time is right – there is a desire for the town and the region to promote its true cultural identities – perhaps a contemporary meeting place of black and white Australia – it is a place with many stories to tell.'

An early vision emerged from that consultation: 'A cluster of inter-linked arts and cultural facilities all providing opportunities for the presentation of and participation in the cultural and creative life of the Katherine region – it will be a meeting place for all communities, a celebration of all cultures, a place for learning and a symbol of reconciliation in the process of "growing" the township and region for the future.'

As well as being a centre with the technical capacity to host professional touring performances and exhibitions, it was to be a cultural centre in the true sense of the word: a gathering and meeting space, a learning space and a story space with culture and creativity at its heart; a focal point that expressed everyone's pride in the region. And most important of all, it was to be for the many, not for the few.

IT TOOK NINE years before the Katherine community was able to go ahead. I was pleased to return to assist in preparing the first business plan, securing investment from stakeholders and helping the inaugural board articulate its vision and recruit its first director. There are always challenges for a project of this kind, involving three levels of government, a range of cultural traditions and aspirations, and competing community interests, which helps explain the delay.

The Centre was eventually built because of the persistence of a group of long-term residents who pursued the project despite professional and personal pressure from the small group of loud critics. Of the twenty-two people on the original steering committee, only six were still living in Katherine when the Centre was opened a decade later in 2012. The six had never given up.

It took more than persistence; it took the leadership of Bill Daw and Craig Lambert as chairs of the board, mayors Anne Shepherd and Fay Miller,

Jawoyn leader Lisa Mumbin and former Northern Territory chief minister Clare Martin, and the dedication of two remarkable Katherine community leaders Jayne Nankivell and John de Koning who, once the book is written, will get a chapter each.

This group was able to break the entrenched way of working in the Territory with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal development occurring in parallel, without interaction. A new framework for financing, governance and management of the Centre was needed, one that would reflect the inclusive and cross-cultural nature of the proposed facility and serve the whole community. The initial consultation had resulted in the first formal meeting between the Jawoyn Association and Katherine Town Council. An eventual partnership and land use agreement with the Northern Land Council secured the site and ensured a governance structure that truly reflected the stakeholders and community.

The extraordinary depth and breadth of consultation and planning in the early stages created the vision. There had been very little development in Katherine in the decade after 2002 – apart from the arrival of McDonald's. The Cultural Centre was a project that many people had a stake in shaping and wanted to own.

With funding secured from Arts NT, and construction already underway, the board appointed the first director, Cath Bowdler, who had curatorial and venue management skills and deep knowledge of contemporary Australian art, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. Her belief in providing arts experiences of the highest quality, regardless of place and context, made her the ideal person to realise the vision articulated by the community.

The first year's program threw up surprises and delights. For the first time people experienced curated exhibitions combining the work of local and national, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists; performances in a purpose built venue; and the opportunity to see more work reflecting the stories of life in Katherine and the Territory. Gradually even those who had vowed to never cross the threshold turned up for events and started to book the space for their own meetings and celebrations.

WHEN I ATTENDED the opening of the Godinymayin Yijard Rivers Arts and Culture Centre in June 2012 I realised how crucial the women in

the Katherine community were, not just in art and cultural development but in all walks of life, on communities, in the public sector, business, and politics. Women had instigated and sometimes led the changes that are transforming Katherine, making them pioneers in a quintessential 'man's town'. Few of these women, particularly the Aboriginal women, were in recognised positions of power.

Successful working partnerships are created between individuals and organisations who share the same goals, ideas and dreams and bring different skills and experiences to the table, regardless of size or distance. Knowing the Southbank Centre London was forming partnerships around the globe to bring the WOW Festival to more countries, I encouraged Cath Bowdler to go to WOW London and create one in Katherine. She raised the money, she went and she did.

WOW is a festival underpinned by a clear set of values; its success has as much to do with process as presentation. Following the London WOW formula, two 'think-ins' – or community meetings – were held to determine what the women of Katherine wanted to see and hear in their festival and to ensure the program focused on their voices and creativity. This built on the Centre's philosophy of cross-cultural engagement and two-way learning, so that audiences would hear stories from all communities in Katherine, especially from women who had formed long-term working relationships based on sharing knowledge, understanding and respect. Putting this together with the WOW format of panel debates, short talks, workshops, performances, invited national and international guests, a marketplace, the unique 'speed mentoring', and significant partnerships with ABC Radio Darwin and ABC Open, proved a recipe for a successful event.

But WOW Katherine was more than a good day out. Collating the feedback received during and after the event, the organisers realised something very special had happened. 'I thought I understood the women in my community, I now realise how little I know. This has opened my eyes and my heart,' mayor Fay Miller commented.

There had never been a gathering like it before in Katherine: four hundred people from all the diverse communities gathering in one place,

sitting next to each other, realising their shared experiences, finding out about each other's skills and celebrating their successes. Those who went wanted more and those who chose not to go regretted their decision.

By focusing on culture – stories of lives lived, sharing creative skills through workshops and the experiences of women from all sectors and walks of life – a range of issues affecting the community were discussed and shared publicly in ways that traditional forums do not allow; stories of women tackling the challenges of life in remote communities, taking on roles 'owned' by men; of relationship to land from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal experience; of courage in the face of challenges – with all their uniqueness and differences.

The Administrator of the Northern Territory, the Hon. Sally Thomas, called for a future where women's leadership, accomplishments and equality are normalised. Clare Martin described her time as chief minister as tough, sometimes even beastly, exhausting, exhilarating but ultimately an absolute privilege. Northern Territory MLA Bess Price called on the strong women in the audience to consider the help that Aboriginal men need right now. Jaowyn leader Lisa Mumbin, in her moving and powerful address, echoed the feelings of many: 'Katherine is an important town; we need to work together, not have the hate, work together to thrive.'

And what became clear as the weekend progressed was that the Centre was not only a welcoming but also a neutral space, where people could shed the baggage of their own cultural background, drop the defensiveness built up over years and engage with something new. WOW made it possible to detach ego from past failures and focus on current issues impacting on the lives of the women living in this remote region. The environment and the event generated empathetic responses, reasoned debate and informed discussions. WOW was a place and an event where existing community 'agendas' were left at the door – there was no right and wrong, no us and them and no black and white.

Being given a platform to tell their story, in a quality venue and in a high-profile festival, was hard for some. But it gave women confidence, generated pride and built new networks. There were tears and cheers and a new spirit was grafted onto the old resilience.

SIX MONTHS AFTER the WOW weekend, the success of the event endures in the experiences and interactions between the four hundred participants who went away inspired, with their eyes and hearts opened, understanding the importance of a cultural space to enable interactions in a community. But it is also the starting point for a different debate about the future of the region. The creation of new alliances and new ways of thinking about 'the way things work round here' to shape the culture of the place. And those plans include a further WOW in 2014 where the conversation will continue.

For me, it was also a triumph for the women and men of Katherine who had fought for twelve years to create a cultural heart, and change the face and perception of their community. The long struggle to build the centre had paid off. It was an event owned by the community in a centre built by and for the community.

It's customary for governments, particularly as investors, to focus on economics, on the contribution cultural centres make as visitor attractions and through job creation. It's early days for Godinymayin Yijard Rivers Arts and Culture Centre, and it has begun to measure and report on these outcomes. But the value in the long term may be in real cultural and social innovation; a new way of doing things, in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can come together in an explicit partnership to enrich life and advance development of their community.

I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land in and around the town of Katherine, the Jawoyn, Wardaman and Dagoman people and thank the Katherine residents who have contributed to this story.

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