

Regional Arts And Social Impact
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CASE STUDY

ARTESIAN ORIGINALS
AND
THE SHOP OF OPPORTUNITY

The Regional Arts and Social Impact research project

The Role of the Creative Arts in Regional Australia: A Social Impact Model is an Australian Research Council Linkage Project presents a rare opportunity to address the long-standing problem facing regional and remote communities in Australia of how to strategically communicate and effectively evaluate the social impact of the creative arts in their communities. The consequence of this ongoing issue is the lack of policy for regional arts funding that responds to community capacity and need, which is potentially failing regional communities. The term regional arts is a catch-all for vastly different activities and areas, from large prosperous regional centres to isolated remote townships.

The Centre for Social Impact (n.d., p.1) defines it as “the net effect of an activity on a community and the well-being of individuals and families”. While social impact is an increasing field of research and investigation its application to the creative arts has not been significantly understood or examined from an end user perspective. This research collaborates with two geographically opposed regional communities, central western Queensland and the northwest corridor of Tasmania, both of whom face considerable challenges while also having a vibrant and activated creative landscape.

The central western Queensland site, also the focus of the case study, comprises seven local government areas and has the highest rate of youth unemployment in the country at 28.4%. Situated on Bidjara and Iningai country, the small communities of Blackall, Tambo and Barcaldine are home to thriving arts and cultural ecosystems, encompassing high-profile programs and events alongside numerous local craft groups and volunteer-led activities. This is also a region experiencing significant challenges, such as the long-term social and economic effects of unrelenting drought. Central western Queensland has been drought-declared since 2013, and the towns of Blackall, Tambo and Barcaldine are ranked in the lowest quintile of the Socio-Economic Disadvantage Index. Yet, community members highlight their heritage, culture and landscapes as crucial local assets, and embrace their creative skills and craft traditions as innovative avenues to address the challenges they face.



On Bidjara and Iningai Country near Barcaldine, central western Queensland.

This case study examines two social enterprise initiatives in central western Queensland – Artesian Originals and the Shop of Opportunity – which mobilise the creativity of community members to enhance individual and collective wellbeing. Located in the remote town of Barcaldine, Artesian Originals and ‘Shoppportunity’ are explicit responses to the effects of social isolation and loneliness. They represent innovative efforts to address limitations in mental health and community support service provision within the Barcaldine Regional Council area and demonstrate the value of art, culture and creativity for providing accessible and inclusive avenues for participation in community life. This case study was informed by interview data, information from social media, and data obtained through field observations during visits to the central western Queensland region during 2020 and 2021. Community consultation workshops facilitated in June 2021 also illuminated community members’ perceptions of Artesian Originals and Shoppportunity. The following sections describe these initiatives and explore their contribution to social inclusion and wellbeing on both individual and collective levels in central western Queensland.

Artesian Originals Cooperative

Artesian Originals Cooperative is a shop which brings community members together to sell their art, craft and handmade items to support their own wellbeing and the work of vital health and care services. In 2019 a group of women, through their personal and professional experience living and working in the remote Barcaldine region, recognised that social isolation and loneliness were profoundly affecting the wellbeing of women in their community. Simultaneously, they recognised the diversity of creative talent in the region and the potential for a community-run shop dedicated to selling local art, craft and handmade items. Consciously embedding the values of social inclusion from the outset, the founders drew on the local knowledge, ideas, and practical support of the whole community to establish Artesian Originals. A business owner provided an empty shopfront on Barcaldine’s main street and a Facebook page was set up to share ideas for the shop with the broader community. Via Facebook and face-to-face meetings community members were involved in decision-making processes to determine the shop’s name and logo, and the range of functions it could perform in the community. Donations of paint, furniture and shelving, along with several community working bees, helped prepare Artesian Originals for its official opening in February 2020.

Artesian Originals currently stocks the works of art and handmade crafts of 59 local makers, creators and craftspeople aged between eight and eighty. It includes a gallery space, book exchange, and seating for customers and community members. The commission it earns from the sale of makers’ products is donated to local charities and services. Its aims are “to be community minded and give back to who’s given to us” (interviewee CWQ016) and provide “a community meeting point to combat social isolation encouraging the community to come chat and have a cuppa” (Artesian Originals n.d.). In striving to meet these goals, Artesian Originals supports wellbeing in multiple ways, for individuals as well as the broader community.

Addressing loneliness to support wellbeing

Artesian Originals seeks to decrease loneliness for people who live in Barcaldine and on surrounding remote cattle properties by fostering a creative community of interest and the socially supportive relationships foundational to wellbeing. The cooperative structure of Artesian Originals means all artists, makers and creators who sell items are engaged as volunteers who are fundamental to the shop’s day-to-day functionality and long-term sustainability. For these individuals, involvement in the shop provides a sense of shared purpose, and an avenue for inclusion in community life. An interviewee described:

[O]ne of the really significant things that I have learned is that there's a terrible thing of just being lonely. Often there are multiple things that go on in people's lives, but if they feel like they have a purpose and a reason and they're included ... Those are the little things that I think make life a little more bearable for people (interviewee CWQ015).

Artesian Originals "creates not only groups with like-minded people but it also gives people a social outlet ... My experience is that I've created a lot of friendships I would not have created because the shop brought us together" (interviewee CWQ016). The positive atmosphere and camaraderie of Artesian Originals were highlighted as key benefits: "I go there every Saturday morning just to get a dose of the energy and the smell and just catch up with the girls and see what's going on ... I just love going" (interviewee CWQ015). By providing opportunity for makers and creators to work together to make the shop a success, Artesian Originals fosters a sense of shared motivation and extends social networks – factors known to reduce loneliness and support social inclusion (Fancourt and Finn 2019, 9).



Artesian Originals, Oak Street, Barcaldine: "We rise by lifting others".

For people who live in rural and remote communities such as Barcaldine, the opportunities for social inclusion that art, culture and creativity provide are significant. Loneliness and social isolation are linked with a range of adverse physiological responses and mental illness (Wakefield et al. 2022, 386; Fancourt and Finn 2019, 4; APPGAHW 2017, 126), and rural communities are considered to be at significantly greater risk of social isolation and loneliness compared with metropolitan communities (Australian Psychological Association 2011; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2022). On the other hand, social inclusion – understood as improving the terms of participation in society for individuals and embracing greater equality and tolerance (United Nations 2016, 20) – promotes a wide range of positive health outcomes and is a determinant of wellbeing (Fancourt 2017, 39). A multidimensional concept distinct from mental health but inextricably linked to an individual's overall health, wellbeing encompasses happiness and positive affect, a sense of purpose and meaning in life, general satisfaction with life, human flourishing, and resilience in the

face of adversity (Fancourt 2017, 32-33; APPGAHW 2017, 17-18). Through supporting grassroots community participation, social inclusion and connection, art, culture and creativity have an important role to play in improving wellbeing for individuals and entire communities (Rentschler et al. 2015a, 15; APPGAHW 2017, 123).

Broadening definitions of arts and culture artist and maker to promote inclusion

One of the strategies Artesian Originals employs to include and engage community members is to adopt broad definitions of artist, craftsperson, maker and creator. The only requirement for inclusion in the shop is that items are handmade or homegrown by people who live in the Barcaldine Regional Council area (interviewee CWQ016). Subsequently the shop stocks the work of professional and hobbyist milliners, woodworkers, leatherworkers, jewellers, sewers and dressmakers, gardeners and bakers. Describing Artesian Originals' rapid growth from its early group of 10 makers to now almost 60, interviewees said the shop inspired and incentivised people to be creative:

we've had quite a few people join [as makers and volunteers] saying this inspired them to move forward with what they thought they might like to do, but never have done. People who want to make earrings, for example, they're inspired to do it ... Then they are selling them and it is an incentive to make more and be more creative (interviewee CWQ016).

Artesian Originals' "anything goes, as long as you make it, bake it, sew it, grow it" (ibid.) approach "gives people the confidence to do something" (interviewee CWQ015). This enables it to extend the benefits of arts and cultural participation throughout the community, beyond those who may normally consider themselves an artist or creative practitioner.

The shop's broad definitions of maker, creator and artist aligns with calls for a more expansive and inclusive terminology and definitions of arts and culture. Recent research undertaken for Australia Council for the Arts and Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture & Heritage, New Zealand, illuminated a strong need to make 'arts' framing more inclusive of people and practices (Gattenhof et al. 2020, 9). The research found:

Using the term 'creativity' as part of the lexicon may open up avenues of practice and meaning in a more inclusive way. The term 'creativity' is viewed as experiential, able to break down perceived barriers of elitism ascribed to the term 'arts', and is seen as belonging to everybody (ibid.).

As argued through this report, using the terms art, culture and creativity together better acknowledges and includes the wide spectrum of activities and practices that are undertaken in – and impactful for – diverse communities (Gattenhof et al. 2020, 76-77).

In the context of rural and remote communities, Mahon et al. (2018, 214) note the need for "an alternative conceptualisation of creativity in the rural, not one derived from urban-centric notions ... but rather one that reflects the ways in which rural places and communities have made the arts and culture relevant to them". Gibson (2010, 6) also outlines important discussions of "what counts as creativity within small, remote and rural places" and the diversity of activities – including whip-making, tattooing and gardening – which exist alongside traditional arts and cultural activity and are fundamental to the social and cultural life of community members. These findings are reflected in central western Queensland where grassroots social enterprises such as Artesian

Originals and The Lost Art¹ are part of the rich creative ecosystem that sustains communities. Research participants described high profile arts and cultural events and activities including *Dress the Central West*, along with small community craft groups and workshops as “another extension of our community social interactions. It’s just part of the culture of small communities” (community consultation participant, June 2021), and “part of our lives ... part of the psyche” of remote communities (interviewee CWQ008).



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The need to encompass “everyday creativity” in understandings and discussions of art and culture is echoed in arts and health literature which notes “everyday creativity, which may be undertaken alone or in company ... has an immense contribution to make to happy, healthy lives” (APPGAHW 2017, 21). For communities such as Barcaldine, widening definitions of arts and culture to include a broader range of creative activity provides an important and powerful avenue for engaging people who live in remote places as active participants in community life.

Artesian Originals’ broad call for any and all handmade and homegrown products supports social inclusion and self-esteem for people at particular risk of social isolation due to their geographic remoteness and lack of face-to-face contact with others. An interviewee described a community member from an isolated cattle station who expressed a desire to become involved in the shop but did not self-identify as ‘creative’ and therefore lacked the confidence to volunteer:

Initially she just started baking for the shop and over the first 12 months she is a changed person. She said ‘if this shop didn't come into fruition I don't know where

¹ Based in Blackall, central western Queensland, The Lost Art is a social enterprise activity which supports job seekers and provides social inclusion for disadvantaged groups to learn new skills in traditional bush leather craft, wood and metal work. See <https://www.redridgeinteriorqueensland.com/shop>

I'd be'. She said 'I'd be a basket case'. It has given her so much direction. She is now our treasurer – her background is in finance – it just got her out of a slump. Now she sews and makes earrings and bakes and she has a whole new group of friends ... It completely turned her life around (interviewee CWQ016).

For another, elderly community member, the shop provided social support, a source of joy, and a reason to be creative following the death of a spouse. The interviewee reported: "she says to me nearly every time I see her 'thank you so much – it has given me so much purpose, because what would I do all day?'" (interviewee CWQ016). These anecdotes demonstrate the multifaceted ways engagement in arts, cultural and creative activity can support personal wellbeing. In addition to wellbeing outcomes produced through stimulation of personal expressions of creativity and imagination (Sonke et al. 2019, 13), Artesian Originals provided these community members with an increased sense of purpose and an avenue for connecting with others which are determinants of social inclusion (Sonke et al. 2019, 38; Fancourt and Finn 2019, 21; APPGAHW 2017, 52).

Economic innovation

Artesian Originals' founders are explicit that the shop's core goal is to support social inclusion in the community, though also note important local economic outcomes. For instance, "the philosophy is about friendship, spreading the love, connection, supporting one another ... It is not about making a lot of money and selling product, though that is a purpose" (interviewee CWQ016). Another interviewee described "the benefit of you making some money was a bonus. It was about bringing all these people together in a place with like-mindedness that improves mental health, gives back to community, is a great tourist attraction locally for people to come to" (interviewee CWQ015). In addition to potential tourism outcomes, these interviewees noted the significance of economic and business development outcomes for some makers and creators (interviewees CWQ015, CWQ016). In 2021, Artesian Originals collaborated with Queensland Government initiative the Regional Arts Services Network to offer a weekend product development workshop which provided an introduction to business planning and creation of merchandise within an arts or creative practice (Artesian Originals 2021). The shop has become the main source of income for a number of makers and provided important opportunities for them to grow their small businesses (interviewee CWQ016). Reflecting the case of Dress the Central West, Artesian Originals supports research by Bartleet et al. (2019, 164) which demonstrates that the social and economic outcomes of engagement with art, culture and creativity are often inseparable for individuals and communities.

Acknowledging the contributions that art, culture and creativity made to social inclusion and wellbeing in their community, Barcaldine residents also feel creative and community-led initiatives such as Artesian Originals "breathe new life into the town" (community consultation participant, June 2021), foster civic pride, and contribute to the overall vibrancy of place. Research by the Regional Australia Institute finds "[a]ccess to and participation in arts and cultural activity contribute to a town's 'cultural vitality'" (Houghton and Vohra 2021, 21) and that creativity plays a role in local innovation and liveability (Achurch 2019, 5). Public art, festivals and events also 'activate' and inject vibrancy into towns by transforming public spaces into creative places and instilling in residents a greater sense of ownership and pride in the places in which they live (Rentschler et al. 2015b, 13). Occupying one of the formerly empty shopfronts on Barcaldine's main street, Artesian Originals is a vibrant space which represents new business activity in the town centre and contributes to local economic vitality. Barcaldine residents not directly involved in the shop describe it as an example of how their community has embraced its creativity to address complex problems, such as social isolation and regional decline (community consultation participant, June 2021). For Barcaldine, the creativity of community members was a critical resource which could be leveraged to enhance the wellbeing of community members, helping them to engage with society with wider economic gains.

The Shop of Opportunity, or ‘Shoppportunity’

Building on the success of Artesian Originals, the founders opened its ‘sister shop’, The Shop of Opportunity, in May 2021. ‘Shoppportunity’ is an op shop which donates all proceeds to local community groups and services such as Barcaldine Aged Care. It was initiated to address the limitations of existing health and care services and the need for additional, accessible financial and social support for community members. While Artesian Originals primarily engages artists and makers in processes which support and strengthen their community, Shoppportunity “is for people who are not artists, but they want to be able to do something and it helps the community” (interviewee CWQ015).



As is the case with Artesian Originals, supporting social inclusion in Barcaldine is one of Shoppportunity’s most effective functions. Through volunteering at the shop, community members develop confidence, connect with others, and actively contribute to supporting and strengthening their community. Volunteering is closely associated with social inclusion as it provides opportunities for marginalised individuals to participate in community life and builds a sense of connectedness and belonging with others (Rentschler et al. 2015a, 13).

While anyone may volunteer at Shoppportunity, elderly people, youth, and community members who are unemployed are cohorts interviewees identified as at particular

risk of social exclusion and who it particularly strives to engage and include. Reflecting the values and particular advantages of the voluntary sector for social inclusion, the op shop is able to reach cohorts who are, for various reasons, cut off from community services and social activities and engage with these community members on their own terms (Redmond et al. 2019, 234; APPGAHW 2017, 123). For instance, “[s]ome of the older ladies don’t want to work on the counter, they don’t want to have to interact too much, but they will fold or hang clothes so there is capacity for inclusion” (interviewee CWQ015). Other volunteers “have a degree of insecurity and are just a bit lost and wondering what do I do with life” and Shoppportunity provides a sense of purpose and pride in being able to contribute to the community (interviewee CWQ015).

Creatively supporting frontline health services

Place-based and community-led initiatives such as Shoppportunity and Artesian Originals have significant potential to alleviate pressure on frontline health services by improving social inclusion and enhancing the wellbeing of entire communities. Two the founders of Artesian Originals and Shoppportunity are health professionals whose experience of the limitations of remote health and community care services inspired Shoppportunity: “when you are involved [in health and care services] in a professional capacity you see where the system lets people down ... there are people who need help and I am just sick of the system of how difficult it is to be able to help them” (interviewee CWQ015). These personal experiences are reflected in national statistics which note that rural and remote communities are at greater risk of poor health and wellbeing than metropolitan communities due to the limited availability and accessibility of health services, small and ageing populations, lower incomes, and higher unemployment (Australian Psychological Society 2011; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2022). In Barcaldine, interviewees noted that limited funding, staffing, lengthy administrative processes and long waitlists meant that many community members were unable to access mental health care when they needed it, and Shoppportunity and Artesian Originals both had a role in supporting mental health services by providing social support:

The best thing for me is that it [Shoppportunity] brings so many people joy. Whether it be a little trinket or a bargain or being Brian that makes all the hangers for us, or the boys that volunteer and tidy up the shed. That thing of bringing people together and people being able to take some little bit of joy away from it ... it is the same for Artesian Originals – there are women there that definitely say the shop has saved them. They really talk about the mental health component of what the shop has done for them. You know that meeting people when they are in a dark place, that support network that came. It’s the same for Shoppportunity (interviewee CWQ015).

Adequate social support and a sense of community and belonging are associated with good mental health, quality of life and overall wellbeing, and therefore can reduce primary healthcare use (Wakefield et al. 2022, 387). For communities whose access to primary care is limited, community-led initiatives such as Shoppportunity and Artesian Originals provide important avenues for addressing social factors that contribute to poor wellbeing.

Creative interventions anchored to the places in which they operate have the advantage of being highly responsive to local needs and attuned to the economic, social and cultural circumstances that affect people’s access to healthcare. Reflecting the benefits of place-based health and care described in the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing’s (APPGAHW) 2017 *Creative Health Inquiry Report*, Shoppportunity harnesses the specific capacities and strengths of its community – including local knowledge, lived experience and creativity – to provide targeted, appropriate support for individuals and community services (APPGAHW 2017, 70-72). For example, Shoppportunity supports the emergency response work of Uniting Care Community by providing clothing, household items and money to people in need. An interviewee described that under-resourced providers were not always able to meet the needs of community members and Shoppportunity ‘plugged the gaps’ in timely and respectful ways:

We just fly under the radar. You don’t want to embarrass people, but if people need something we can just buy it for them and no one even needs to know. There are people in town who have been in really tough predicaments ... so we just pack up bags of stuff to give to them (interviewee CWQ015).

In small, remote communities such as Barcaldine, strict boundaries on self-disclosure and limited anonymity can be disincentives to mental health-seeking (Australian Psychological Society 2011). In

response to this, Shoppportunity's anonymous Book of Wishes invites people to note down items they need, then a call-out is made to the community via Facebook to ask whether anyone can supply those items and bring them to the shop. Interviewees noted the generosity of the region's residents and how the shop encourages and enables community members to support and care for each other (interviewee CWQ015).

Since opening in 2021, Shoppportunity has formalised its approach to supporting local health and wellbeing service providers. It has developed partnerships with remote Queensland mental health and wellbeing organisation Outback Futures, and the Remote Area Planning and Development (RAPAD) board's employment and training service, RESQ. Men involved in the Remote Employment Services and Opportunities, Queensland (RESQ), and the Work for the Dole program assist Shoppportunity by installing shelving and repairing furniture, and Outback Futures will provide mental health support training for the shop's volunteers. The need to equip volunteers with knowledge and tools to engage with and support mental health and wellbeing arose during the shop's first year as its founders recognised its role in bringing people joy, addressing loneliness and connecting community members (interviewee CWQ015). Through equipping volunteers with the skills and confidence to respond to the mental health needs of their own community Shoppportunity may be seen as 'catalysing a health-creating community' that strengthens its own ability to care for itself, thereby augmenting the work of local services (APPGAHW 2017, 72).



Landsborough Highway, Barcaldine.

Summary

Artesian Originals and Shoppportunity are underpinned by the philosophy that collective wellness in a community can be achieved by investing in its people. Each initiative places human connectivity and community-led creativity as central aspects and value the knowledge and skills of local people as critical resources for advancing community-wide wellbeing. As Fancourt (2017) notes, the

social benefits of arts engagement most commonly linked to health pertain to decreased loneliness and social isolation, which are essential for enhanced collective wellbeing. Artesian Originals highlights how broadening definitions of art and culture to encompass the range of creative activity that is locally meaningful provides accessible and inclusive avenues for social interaction and community engagement. Shoppportunity further demonstrates the value of initiatives designed specifically for the people they are for and the community-wide benefits that may be realised through enhancing inclusion for people at particular risk of social isolation. Both cases signal that genuine impact is possible where efforts to engage and connect are community-led and responsive to the unique characteristics and needs of specific places.

Read more about Artesian Originals and Shopportunity

Blog post: Community-led craft hubs drive social and economic wellbeing in remote Queensland, Regional Arts and Social Impact blog, 7 August 2021.

<https://research.qut.edu.au/raasi/2021/07/08/community-led-craft-hubs-drive-social-and-economic-wellbeing-in-remote-queensland/>

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