

**ADRC Extended
Abstract**

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Placemaking as a catalyst for building resilience—using arts, culture and creative practices to co-design new social and spatial infrastructure for high-risk communities

Placemaking Clarence Valley was conceived on the unceded lands of the Bundjalung, Kulin, Gumbaynggirr and Yaegl peoples. We acknowledge Indigenous connection to creative practice and pay respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We pay special gratitude to Elder Aunty Patricia Laurie, Yaegl Elder Aunty Diane Randall and Gumbaynggirr Elder Uncle Gary Brown for welcoming us to Country and sharing with us stories and knowledge of their places at various points throughout this project.



Image: Placemaking on Yaegl Country (Woombah), Yuk Chun (Amy) Kwong, 2023.

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'Place' is an unequivocal aspect of people's experiences of disaster. From phenomena such as topophilia marking people's love of place (Barton 2017), and solastalgia capturing one's sorrow of its destruction (Barton 2017), processes that shine a light on rehabilitating places to build resilience and prepare for disasters are critical. These highly sensory and environmental experiences of disaster strongly relate to Aboriginal perspectives on Caring for Country, and offer a decolonised view of space as inherently linked to time (Smith 2012); a process, not only an outcome (Massey 2012). Such ways of thinking about place supports and accelerates the movement towards place-based programs, and community-led processes.

Government, not-for-profit and philanthropic organisations in Australia are increasingly turning to place-based approaches, acknowledging that a collaborative and community-led focus can generate shared understandings that can unlock systemic issues. Place-based programs and initiatives recognize that communities themselves are often best placed to understand their unique local needs, and to do this they facilitate community participation methods to tackle challenges, including entrenched disadvantage and compounding disasters. Myriad programs such as *'Stronger Places, Stronger People'* (Geatches, Preston, Putnis 2023), *'The Nexus Centre'* (Geatches, Preston, Putnis 2023), and Aboriginal community-controlled health care initiatives such as those funded by the Lowitja Institute (2024), highlight this burgeoning national place-based reform agenda. In the same vein, Paul Ramsay Foundation (PRF), have developed diverse place-based resilience-building programs such as Fire to Flourish, since the 2019-20 bushfires. Their 2023 report *Where are we? Place-based approaches to tackling community challenges in Australia* (Geatches, Preston, Putnis 2023), points out that such approaches are fundamental to First Nations empowerment, and that this way of working has immense potential to reimagine top-down relationships that have historically created barriers for diverse communities with differing needs. Thus new opportunities arise for community-led approaches.

With many design, participatory and built environment disciplines naturally working in place-based ways, 'placemaking' (Hamdi 2010; Projects for Public Spaces 1975-2023) and similar 'co-design' (McKercher 2020) methods have emerged with the potential to offer innovative pathways that can shift current inflexible structures and models. When melded with creative practice, Aboriginal leadership and research, place-making offers a compelling tool to activate place-based resilience initiatives.

The Placemaking Clarence Valley (PCV) program (Monash University 2024), a key piece of action research within Fire to Flourish, put such an approach into practice. Composed of a local community team, design researchers and a group of architecture and urban planning postgraduate students, this novel collaboration was formed to support a group of communities with diverse resilience ideas, many increasing in need following the 2019-20 bushfires. Across 2023-24, four localities situated across Bundjalung, Gumbaynggirr and Yaegl Country (refer map), came together to generate rich ideas for new or upgraded spaces, places and concurrent services that aimed to work in concert across multiple modes; for everyday social resilience as well as during emergencies. Doing so has revealed that placemaking is a highly relational process that activates participatory principles in place-based settings. It aims to support community resilience planning through a socially-engaged process of co-creating ideas for places, as well as through built and infrastructural outcomes generated from that process.

The community leaders, creative practitioners and researchers, who spearheaded this initiative share five key learnings that have emerged from the program. These learnings capture anecdotes and evidence of how creative placemaking enhances resilience. However what is also revealed are the existing barriers to developing robust opportunities to augment such ways of working within the disaster resilience sector.

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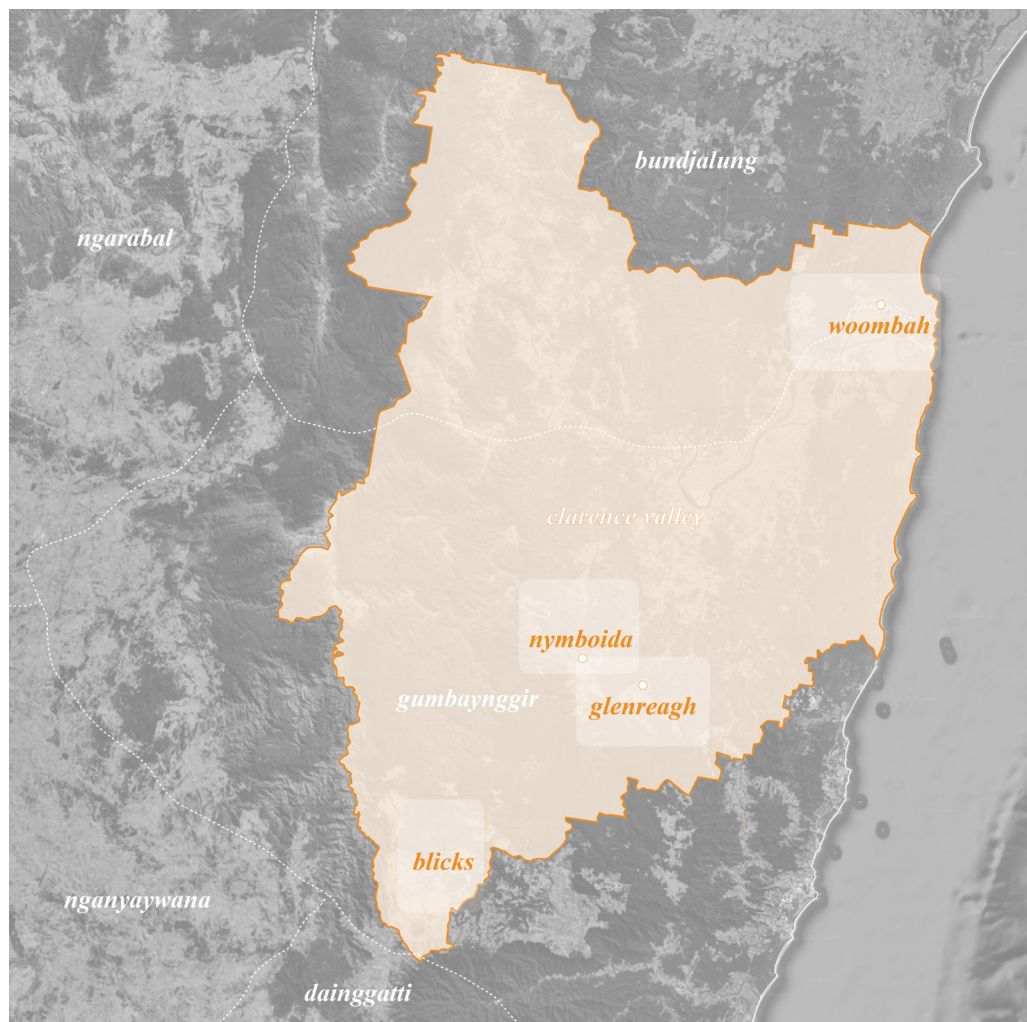


Image: map of Bundjalung, Gumbaynggirr, Yaegl Country and Clarence Valley Local Government Area

Discussing ‘place’ explicitly brings people together

Aboriginal people and communities have known and practised the importance of connection to each other and Country (place) for many generations. This connection has been intrinsically linked to Aboriginal health, well-being, resilience and ability to prosper. Aboriginal scholar and educator, Marion Kickett defined resilience in Aboriginal communities as:

‘The ability to have a connection and belonging to one’s land, family and culture, therefore an identity. Allowing pain and suffering caused from adversities to heal. Having a dreaming, where the past is brought to the present and the present and the past are taken into the future. A strong spirit that confronts and conquers racism and oppression, strengthening the spirit. The ability not just to survive but to thrive in today’s dominant culture.’ (Usher et al. 2021)

Wiradjuri/Ngemba woman Roxanne Smith initiated PCV to provide a vehicle that enabled communities of diverse backgrounds to come together, dream of the future and link their lives with the places, spaces and Country they live in. Smith recounts that:

‘Exploring needs, connection points and access for services, entertainment and culture highlighted those links and in doing so, broke down many barriers. People’s resistance to ‘dreaming’ dissipated and in turn created a series of connection cogs that helped progress and incite action in the dreams that resonated across the community. The creative and visual practices that focused on the community members’ places encouraged even the biggest cynics to eventually “jump in the ring”. They wanted to highlight their knowledge, their connection to their places and share dreams about their

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Country, they wanted to be engaged! They could see this was about them and a better future for all, it was visual, it was physical, it was connected and heartfelt. It had a purpose!

Smith's observations highlight that people, places, services, systems and Country are interconnected in reciprocal overlapping relationships, and resilience can be amplified when groups of people interact and collaborate effectively in a physical context. Although proximity and relationship with physical 'place' are what enable these people to self-organise and solve problems in a crisis, we cannot extricate the physical aspects of 'place' from this more complicated and dynamic set of social relationships and practices.

Time is critical to place-based initiatives

For researchers and practitioners alike to gain valuable insights, the importance of exploring a locality, meeting people, visiting homes and experiencing 'problems' in real time, cannot be overstressed. To truly understand a place however can take a lifetime—'enough' time is always an issue.

People from the four localities consistently erred away from using PCV to resolve the consequences of recurrent firestorms or vast systemic problems in their areas. This was likely due to insufficient time and that there wasn't holistic expertise in the room to do so. Rather, people attended with the intention to join a facilitated conversation with fellow community members on how to prepare for next time, to better help themselves and others, in the context of improving shared places. To augment this shared understanding and to grapple with the tension of time, the collaborative team stimulated each community by providing a methodology and creative place-oriented tools to consider next best steps. Specifically, the time barrier was "hacked" through long-standing relationships the community leaders and extended teams on the ground already had with local people. These pre-existing, deep levels of trust enabled this novel process to emerge powerfully in each context, within a relatively short period of time. Thus despite many of the postgraduate students not fully grasping the underlying rural mindset, social boundaries and at times language, they were still able to support in effective ways.

Key contributions included synthesising community-led findings into a collective vision and key action projects housed within "Strategic Placemaking Frameworks", that galvanised well informed project proposals derived from each locality. Additionally, creative renderings and spatial drawings of proposed solutions to problems, needs, and undeveloped potential of sites fast-tracked thinking across the fourteen month period of the program.

Supported by seed funding, the prevailing mood was steady and hopeful that meaningful improvements could be made in due course, but critically, projects were catalysed by various creative tools and outcomes designed to assist with decision making, after the "research" was over.

Creative practices have the power to transform how disaster resilience is framed for communities

Placemaking Clarence Valley experimented with creative, community-led approaches to building disaster resilience. Rather than solely focusing on ever-present risks and emergency response, processes considered community needs and priorities during the "good times" too.

Gathering in communal spaces the collaborative team employed embodied strategies like walking, photographing, drawing, mapping with tactile materials, listening to Elders on Country and participating in Aboriginal-led weaving and yarnning circles to engage people from each locality. People were invited to reflect on

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their locality's social, natural, and cultural assets, including built infrastructure. This holistic thinking, combined with placemaking approaches enabled communities to leverage local knowledge, identify their strengths, enhancing adaptability to one another's ideas, thus promoting forms of social cohesion that are valuable day-to-day let alone at times of crisis.

Accompanying the hands-on placemaking tools was action research designed to contribute to a growing body of evidence on the high social impact of creative recovery approaches (Creative Recovery Network 2023). Importantly action research provided tangible resources for involved communities (Monash University 2024). Local data, photos, maps, quotes, results of surveys and ballots were presented in accessible formats, within Strategic Placemaking Frameworks. These resources facilitated ongoing community and stakeholder engagement, with a shelf-life well beyond the program's duration.

Technical barriers can inhibit resilience building, but creative placemaking processes can help

Place-based initiatives often rely on diverse technical skills to augment the ways in which community-led insights can influence resilience building. From discrete processes such as mapping, transposition of paper-based data, grant writing and digital tasks to more technical activities such as developing feasibility studies or concept designs, significant challenges exist for some communities to take next steps (Cavaye 2001), even when funding is available. PCV experimented with how place-based partnerships can effectively bridge these gaps through knowledge and skills sharing. Leveraging the skills of postgraduate students and practice-based researchers bolstered the involved communities by offering technical inputs that might normally require expensive consultancies.

A key example where such skill sharing took place was through the implementation of both online and in-person voting systems for community-led decision-making processes. Ensuring that community engagement was enhanced with highly visual information, along with both digital and paper-based voting platforms, led to considerable participation rates. In some instances these ranged as high as 32% of the population of one of the involved localities. Such outcomes expose that there is still much room to improve participation in community-led decision making, but that nuanced systems coupled with technical support can generate strong place-based insights. Additionally supporting community development with approaches like 'service learning'—involving students—can disrupt volunteer fatigue and pro bono consultancy arrangements, which can often lead to a deprioritization of projects due to immense personal and financial loads on individuals and organisations.

Successful resilience building processes depend on “deep context”

Data and research are “dirty words” for many remote and regional communities, particularly Indigenous people (Smith 2012), yet when derived from the ground up and governed in a self-determined way, can be a powerful asset for local groups to lead their own resilience building initiatives. PCV generated various forms of local data to assist involved groups develop and justify a collective case for change.

Discrete research activities were fortified with creatively driven community engagement devices, in parallel to engaging key members of the local council. This ensured diverse touchpoints with the program were available to all stakeholders across its duration. This also assisted in building momentum towards participatory granting processes culminating in each locality.

An example of how local data informed the research design is through placemaking surveys developed and distributed by the local leadership team. Formatted in both digital and paper formats and made available on social media or at key community spaces, they asked in plain language; what were people's places of interest, 'how could they be improved' and 'what needs to be protected'? Responses to these

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highlighted places of interest that then informed the research team's site and context analysis and placemaking workshop design.

Engagement with the community-led survey piqued interest in the research itself, with 127 people across each locality attending the workshops. A community exhibition of outcomes from the workshops coupled with feedback forms, allowed participants to not only explore the findings some months later, but to engage with visualisations of design possibilities along with mechanisms to offer critique. The culminating participatory granting encountered close to 400 votes for a range of project applications across the four engaged localities, enabling community-led decisions around what was ultimately granted.

This gradual uptick in engagement evidenced the viability of projects in terms of community needs. Since various projects required planning approvals from the local council, the aggregated community consensus offered key members from both strategic planning and community engagement offices within the council the confidence to support projects and more broadly engage with the program. To assist in mobilising projects, the local government offered several rounds of preliminary regulatory advice along with planning fee waiver pathways, to ensure granted projects could hit the ground running.

Conclusion

Placemaking Clarence Valley's program design experimented with how creative and participatory forms of data generation and community-led research can transform into an engaging and reciprocal process within broader place-based initiatives. Whilst focused on 'place' and improvements to physical infrastructure, the process enabled a dynamic set of social relationships and practices to emerge. Although limitations existed in relation to the scale of participation reach and breadth, reflections in the learnings begin to unlock answers for how creative participatory processes can work better, articulated through a set of emerging principles. Beginning with local people themselves, an acknowledgement of the value of spending *time in place together*—as Kickett affirms is intrinsic to Aboriginal peoples' wellbeing—develops the critical ingredient of relationality between the different players in resilience building initiatives. Using arts, cultural and creative practices to co-design new infrastructure and services can provide the opportunity to develop meaningful and ongoing conversations, creating a platform to share knowledge and collaborate. Whilst gathering evidence and evaluation through robust data will be important, co-design and placemaking methodologies already demonstrate the sort of adaptable processes that place-based programmes need, in order to move away from the dominant paradigm of top-down approaches.

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