



THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST

CHURCHILL FELLOWSHIP 2003

**RESEARCHING AND CONTRASTING MODELS OF DISABILITY-LED
COMMUNITY BUILDING AND ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN. AN INVESTIGATION
OF THE MEANS AND CONTEXTS OF TRANSFORMING ENVIRONMENTS
THROUGH THE ARTS FROM ADAPTIVE TECHNOLOGY TO LOCAL COMMUNITY
TO INTERNATIONAL EVENTS. FURTHER ESTABLISHING AND
STRENGTHENING THE LINKS FROM MACRO TO MICRO.**

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Dated

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Précis and Acknowledgements

This report details the findings of my Churchill Fellowship research trip to England, Northern Ireland and the U.S.A. where I researched models of disability inclusive community building and environmental design and investigated the means and contexts of transforming environments through the arts. Specific areas of study included:

- Looking at local to global models of inclusive community development.
- Exploring strategies to strengthen the micro to macro links and networks.
- Looking at the role and power of technology and adaptive technology to communicate and to produce art.
- Examining the impact of major events such as festivals and conferences on the development of 'Disability Culture' from local to global.
- Looking at the efficacy of the 'Disability Culture' model and its relationship to the cultural mainstream.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for selecting me and resourcing my research trip. Some benefits were personal and immediate and other benefits, particularly to the Australian community, continue to present themselves.

My thanks also go to the numerous individuals, organisations and event managers in England, Northern Ireland and the U.S. A. that extended a warm hospitality and willingness to share information and experiences.

I must also express appreciation to the owners of the hundreds of 'right arms' that, as a blind person, were essential to my transport and mobility.

Programme

London 16th September

- Musicians in Focus, London Royal College of Music
- Drake Music Project

London 17th September

- Musicians in Focus, London Royal College of Music

Cheltenham, Gloucestershire 18th - 22nd September

- Above and Beyond Disability Culture Festival
- Equata Management

Belfast 24th September

- Festival Management, Feile an Phobail (West Belfast Festival)

Belfast 25th September

- Belfast Community Circus

Belfast 26th September

- Community Arts Forum

Belfast 27th September

- Arts and Disability Forum

Manchester 29th September

- Touchdown Dance Company (for vision impaired)

Manchester 30th September

- 'Blind Sight' (vision impaired theatre group)

York 1st - 2nd October

- Drake Music Project (York Branch)

Liverpool 3rd - 6th October

- DaDa Fest (North West Disability Arts Forum)

Manchester 8th - 13th October

- Praxis One (International Caritas Project)

Washington USA 14th - 16th October

- VSA Arts and International Festival Organisers

FELLOWSHIP REPORT

Background

I am providing some background information about myself because I believe it's relevant to understanding the timing and nature of my Churchill Fellowship research trip.

I have had vision impairment all my life and it's of a degenerative nature; I currently have around 1% of 'normal' eyesight. I've traveled extensively and have worked in a range of fields, however, my love for music and the arts and people led me into the field of arts and disability. My thinking was, if it's hard for me to get to people and places, I shall attract people to me by organizing interesting and exciting events. I increasingly wanted the festivals and concerts that I organized to include people with disabilities as artists and audience. In other words, I wanted those communities to be diverse and inclusive, just as my taste in the arts is eclectic and inclusive.

This all led to my 12 year incumbency as Director of Arts in Action, South Australia's peak arts and disability organization, and further to the inauguration and my directorship of the High Beam Festival, an Adelaide-based international multi arts festival that highlights the creativity of people with disabilities.

I resigned from these positions in early 2002 and successfully applied for an Australia Council Community Cultural Development Fellowship. I have been a strong advocate for the development of an arts based disability culture movement from local to global, and I have a keen interest in developing, supporting and sustaining models of inclusive community. An exciting aspect of developing inclusive communities is that the beneficiaries are not only people with disabilities but people of diverse background, colour and creed and hence the whole community.

My research trip has enabled me to build on my past work and experience, to extend my global networks and to disseminate information about the fruits and benefits of the inclusive model for human beings.

Research Report and Findings

Musicians in Focus, London Royal College of Music

This agency is based at and in partnership with the London Royal College of Music. Its purpose is to teach disability accessible computer software programs that enable students that are either vision impaired or for other reasons cannot use conventional computer software to create music. It's currently run by a professional musician and academic who is blind and gets around with a guide dog. Jackie is assisted by a trainee who is also a college music student. They have access to the college's technology.

I spent several hours with them over the course of two days during which time I was shown around the college and its facilities, sat in during student lessons, had a personal demonstration of two different software packages, discussed the philosophy and aims of Musicians in Focus and was interested to see how the college had adapted the environment to make it more accessible to Jackie and her dog and hence to others.

This small agency is an essential resource for many people from around Britain and a few from other countries. It's a model of the kind that is required in order to make institutions like The Royal College of Music accessible and inclusive.

Musicians in Focus, over the few years of its life, has gradually extended its service to include college based tutoring sessions, regional visits to and tutoring sessions at other colleges throughout Britain, and is in the process of setting up an online service which may open up this resource to a few people from other parts of the world. I have expressed my personal interest in accessing this facility from my home base of Adelaide. I'm not aware of such a resource that is based in Australia. I know that the Musicians in Focus agency as it is can provide this service to a finite number of people. I would like to be a contact and perhaps a future resource for any similar Australian based initiative.

The benefit of such an initiative would make artistic careers more accessible and available to people with vision impairment and other disabilities, make our institutions more inclusive and democratic and position Australia in the future as the generator of such services and models to people with disabilities in our geographical region and other parts of the world.

The Drake Music Project

I met in London with Adele Drake the founder and director and in York with the computer engineer. The Drake Music Project has developed a computer software program that is designed to maximize access to making and playing electronic music and sound. The engineer, in collaboration with York University Music Faculty, has developed and continues to refine a program called E-Scape. Drake now has tutors based in several locations throughout Britain who work with groups of people in schools and other institutions. Some of the work is training teachers to use and teach this technology.

During my time in York I had the opportunity to learn enough to use E-Scape, albeit minimally. It gave me a much clearer understanding of what E-Scape enables one to do. Although I didn't get to attend any student tuition a couple of videos highlighted their methods of working and some of the amazing outcomes.

Apparently E-Scape access for people with vision impairment hadn't been as developed and refined as some of the other aspects of access. My host, Tim, took advantage of my learning process to identify a number of programming changes he could make. I have heard since that these have now been incorporated into the latest version of E-Scape.

The E-Scape design caters well for people that have limited movement. The software is combined with a range of triggering mechanisms so that people can utilize even minimal body movement to activate the software.

My discussions with the Drake team canvassed possibilities of: face to face and/or online 'trainer training' in other parts of the world, like of course Australia, and the E-Scape software potential as a community development vehicle by forming networks of users or by using it within the context of group or community based creativity.

The Above and Beyond Disability Culture Festival, Cheltenham, UK

This four-day international multi arts 'disability culture' festival was inspired by the KickstArt Festival held in Vancouver in 2001. The KickstArt Festival was in turn inspired by the 1998 High Beam International Festival, an ongoing festival based in Adelaide, of which I was the inaugurator and director. Above and Beyond was the biggest arts event of the European Year of Disabled People and the only British event to involve performers from abroad. It certainly felt like a global reunion of many artists who formed professional connections and friendships through the abovementioned and other events.

This was a time to share each other's recent works and innovations; an opportunity to experience emerging artists and new work and a time to exchange and develop ideas both formally through the conference program and informally through the social opportunities that a well planned festival can offer. The cutting edge excitement of this festival was evident during the plenary panel discussion, which, as a panel member, I found very stimulating. The discussion certainly explored the local to global links and I'm still part of a small active network exploring strategies to realize a series of international 'disability culture' events.

I used the conference forum discussions to promote the next Adelaide High Beam Festival in May 2004 and to exchange arts and community development models including the "Somersault" program, a component of my Australia Council Fellowship work. This is about disability-led community cultural development.

A memorable occasion that somehow captured the friendly and creative ethos was when I reconnected with a man named Sidiki whom I'd met in Los Angeles at yet another 'disability culture' festival some years ago. Sidiki is a rather outstanding percussionist and builder and player of all sorts of odd instruments. He and I sat in the park opposite the Cheltenham Town Hall and started playing music together. I had some Celtic 'low' whistles with me. We soon gathered a friendly audience and continued our impromptu performance for a good couple of hours. Sidiki has no legs and was getting around in a rather beaten up hired wheelchair which he jumped out of at every opportunity possible including our performance.

Equata Management

Equata Management was responsible for organizing the Above and Beyond Festival which took quite long term planning to procure the British and European resources to make the event successful. The festival director and several of the Equata team were people with disabilities. I believe this contributed to the excitement and adventure of the festival and positioned it as a benchmark of 'disability culture' events.

My time at Cheltenham endorsed the value of spending face-to-face time with people. With both people that I'd met previously and those that I'd had just email contact with. The benefits of having several occasions through which to pursue and develop ideas was invaluable. It also enabled me to make new friends and reinvigorate my connection with old friends.

Belfast:Feile an Phobail (West Belfast Festival)Belfast Community CircusCommunity Arts ForumArts and Disability Forum

Despite some illness and the airline losing my suitcase for two days, I managed to meet with four organizations in Belfast. They are linked through their work with the same or connected communities. Much of the work they do is designed to engender cross-community development through the arts. In the wake of sectarian division and civil unrest, this city of less than half a million people has attracted a significant amount of European Union developmental money and has managed to combine a certain amount of community healing and reconnection with the development of a vibrant and creative community culture. This was reflected in the levels of hospitality that I experienced during my stay.

The Feile an Phobail Festival, now the biggest in Belfast, were in the process of developing policies to increase the inclusion of people with disabilities as artists and audience. They have already employed a person with a disability to co-ordinate the development and implementation of these strategies. This two-year position is funded from European Union resources. They were also keenly interested in becoming a part of any global circuits for artists with disabilities. I have since provided them with information about Australian and other outstanding artists with disabilities and they have included me on their mailing list so we can continue to contribute to one another's work.

The Belfast Community Circus is another example of local benefits from European Union funding. In the past few years they have been able to procure and purchase mid-city premises and have had major redesign and renovation work carried out to transform it into a suitable circus training and rehearsal venue. In this Belfast context, the use of circus skills is a clear and deliberate strategy to break down barriers and rebuild community connections and community pride. A number of specific projects and programs target adolescents and young men, partly because most of the circus skills aren't dialogue based, which avoids head on conflict and because circus skills have a 'bit of a bravado' ethos which appeals more to many of Belfast's young men than the perceived 'soft brush' arts. These factors enable the community circus to work in the heart of troubled areas with impartiality and respect. Despite some difficulties in matching people with disabilities and circus skills, they have in the past run projects with students with disabilities with a degree of success.

The Community Arts Forum plays a central and pivotal role in community arts collaboration. They also play a role in developing links and partnerships between projects and programs in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. It is a membership-based organization with an affiliation of over 300 groups and 150 individual members. All sections of society are represented across all areas and their activities cover all art forms. A new structure of community arts provision is emerging which goes well beyond current mainstream arts structures and which is reaching thousands of new people each year.

CAF has recently convened an inter-organisational forum developing policies and strategies to increase community access through the arts for people with disabilities. CAF advocates for long-term sustainable community development programs designed to maximize community participation and control.

The Arts and Disability Forum advocates for the development of an arts and disability culture and for equal access for disabled people to the cultural mainstream. The key roles are filled by disabled people who campaign strongly for disability control of the disability culture movement. Paradoxically, perhaps, their premises were on the second floor of a city building and the main person I spoke to was in a wheelchair; the day I visited them, the only lift broke down and of course I'd arranged to meet Donal at the front of the building. It was one of those classic clashes of disability where I wasn't sure where to go and couldn't see to get there anyway, and he couldn't get down to greet me. It was eventually resolved by the arrival of a third party who guided me up the stairs. The good news is that they are just about to move to ground floor premises in the main city mall.

Although the Arts and Disability Forum's primary focus is local, they were eager to hear about what was happening in other parts of the world. I was able to provide information about major events and networks based in Britain, Australia, New Zealand and the USA. Although most of the component organizations of the disability culture movement know about a few events elsewhere, there is a clear need for a better global information flow. People with disabilities seem to be invariably excited by the development of global networks and circuits of major events and opportunities.

As Belfast is emerging as a vibrant, energetic and creative community, there is an enthusiasm to play on the global stage and this pertains to their disability culture movement.

North West Disability Arts Forum (Dada Fest)

I attended the opening weekend launch of DaDa Fest, a two-month long festival of events and activities in the Liverpool area. It was one of several British events celebrating the European Year of Disability. Although there was a sprinkling of non-Liverpuddlians, a few of us from other countries, this festival launch weekend had a very strong mix of local creativity and community spirit. The key organizers, again 'disabled people', tended to be long-term workers within those local communities. A number of the performers, using a variety of art forms, were in the very initial stages of public performance. There was not only a sense of 'giving people a go' but there was strong common pride in their innovation and creativity. The opening night concert blended a mix of amateur and professional performers. It all ran perfectly to time and it just 'worked'. The mixture of the DaDa Fest spirit and the local energy and drive from people with disabilities, friends and family opened a wide horizon that embraced global and future.

Despite missing a more formal pre-festival meeting with the North West Disability Arts Forum team due to technological breakdown and messages not being passed on – the usual stuff – I had several informal and sometimes spontaneous conversations with festival organizers, artists and performers. It gave us the opportunity to raise and develop ideas and possibilities. The dialogue was all the richer, perhaps, for being interspersed with activities and performances. Some of the dialogue from the Above and Beyond Festival was resumed at the DaDa Fest. Liverpool has recently been awarded 'Capital of Culture' in 2008'. If the vision of a global series of 'disability culture' festival/conference type events is realized, then Liverpool's hand is up to organize one of these major events in Liverpool in 2008.

The 'Capital of Culture' status means access to a large pool of European Union developmental funding. The continuing 'conversation' with an extended global network since my return to Australia, is strongly supportive of the Liverpool proposal. With a major event of this sort and the nature of the funding criteria for European Union money, there's the potential to develop a broad range of community cultural development programs that will journey into and beyond the major event. This future event is perceived within the 'disability culture' framework as enhancing and contributing to the local cultural diversity and celebration of difference. To host this event the city of Liverpool will have to improve access to accommodation, public places, transport and customer service awareness. These developments will all reposition Liverpool as a responsible, inclusive community that can host large-scale inclusive events and attract a broader range of tourists and visitors. Of course I am interested in the future possibility of one of these major events being held in Australia.

Praxis One

Praxis One, the brainchild of Wayne Ruga, a global mover, shaker and academic, was conceived as a trans-disciplinary gathering of pioneers who have the courage to use their diverse, sometimes disparate, expertise and experience to develop strategies to create environments that improve peoples' lives.

The premise for Praxis One was that “a new community of global leaders will emerge with fresh understandings and bold solutions. These leaders will work together to find answers to the critical questions we face as a human society:

- What role does culture play in creating social and physical environments that have respect for human dignity at their very core?
- Is the current state of healthcare delivery a crucial human rights issue?
- Could more sustainable systemic solutions be found within the domain of “human technologies”?
- How can we create a supportive learning community to enable each one of us to be more effective in our leadership roles?”
- Praxis One is not concerned with quick fixes, “flavour of the month’ trends, or unsustainable short term gains. Its purpose is to create pathways towards developing policy, producing research, and using practicable techniques to create intentional, human-centred cultures that will improve peoples’ lives. Praxis One is about learning new methods of integrating innovative thinking and practices into work plans to produce demonstrable results.” (Quoted from the Praxis One invitation)

Praxis One was limited to 150 invited participants. This unique four-day journey appropriately started off with lunch on the Orient Express. Although it had conference elements to it, presentations, discussion forums etc, part of what made Praxis different were the constant changes of scenery, both in the physical environments and in our minds. Wayne successfully demonstrated the value of creative people-friendly environments. Our collective response was to lower our defenses and to engage with openness, honesty, humility and humour. It was about listening to and learning from each other.

This “alive” and stimulating event was shared by people from many different parts of the world and from a broad range of disciplines, industries and backgrounds. The focus embraced specific and broad notions of human health, architecture, environmental and technological design, the role of arts and culture and the development of global networks and strategies. The people at Praxis One were inspirational. It was a highlight of my research trip and a component that I’m confident will bring me and my local communities ongoing benefits.

VSA Arts, Washington

VSA Arts is an international nonprofit organization founded in 1974 by Jean Kennedy Smith to promote education and lifelong learning opportunities in the arts for people with disabilities. Nearly 5 million people participate in VSA Arts programs annually through a network of affiliate organizations across the world.

The object of my visit was to create an opportunity to meet with the key organizers of the VSA International Arts and Disability Festival to be held in Washington in June 2004. In some cases this was reconnecting with people I've had a history of meeting at past festivals and events, overseas and in Australia. It was also a chance to meet the current Festival Director. Our discussions covered specifics about the 2004 Washington festival and a broader range of issues and aspirations in relation to the global arts and disability network. As a past Director of an international 'Disability Culture' festival, I had experiences and ideas to share.

VSA is the most extensive arts and disability organization globally. It has branches in more than 60 countries throughout the world and attracts a very large pool of resources in comparison to other organizations with an international focus. This is partly due to the size of the population of over 280 million people, and partly to the wealth, prosperity and philanthropy of that nation.

The VSA International Festival is held every 5 years in a different geographical location, mainly in the United States. My participation in the 1999 Los Angeles based 'Art and Soul Festival' provided me with an opportunity to effectively market the Adelaide based High Beam Festival. It also led to a rapid broadening of my global networks, and subsequently resulted in several artists and performers participating in the High Beam Festival. The 1999 Festival all happened within a giant international hotel complex whilst the Washington festival is designed to use and engage with numerous cultural locations and centers from local theatres to The White House. This will enable the festival to model inclusive community values to a much broader community.

A direct consequence of my visit and the support material that I was able to share with VSA staff is an invitation to an additional innovative 'Aussie' to be billed as a star performer in the festival. I also have been invited to perform at the Washington Festival in addition to a number of other Australian artists.

Summary / Overview

I wish to acknowledge the value of being physically present at events and able to communicate face to face with people. Although the email system and websites are invaluable tools, they aren't a substitute for being there in the moment where so much more communication goes on. My trip had unexpected nooks and crannies, some were positive and others quite a challenge. Overall, however, it was very close to what I wanted it to be. A concentration of people, ideas, events and models that can't be all evaluated at any one time because the totality of my Churchill Memorial Trust experience is something that is still living and developing within me. I continue to be stirred and stimulated by many of the people I met and I know that the long-term fruits of this opportunity aren't all yet evident.

Another benefit of travel is that it gives one an alternative perspective on the human race to that gleaned from the mass media. For those whose only impressions of the world are mass media based, perhaps they can be forgiven for perpetrating the cynicism of this era. My local transport system is the human right arm, the owners of which were generally plentiful and offered in a friendly and inclusive spirit. Many people went out of their way to assist me. This predominantly friendly spirit was common to every culture including China, which I visited at the conclusion of my research trip. I inevitably extended some of my inquiry and analysis to that nation.

In other measures there were some polar differences. The disability culture movement in the UK is full of excitement and energy, partly due to so many key decision making roles being held by disabled people. And despite British Airways losing my suitcase on two occasions, some of the services in Britain are becoming quite sophisticated. A significant part of my travel in England was by train. By making a phone call the day before, I could arrange to be met at a taxi drop off point, assisted onto the train and assisted off at my destination. This kind of resource simply makes independent travel for blind people possible. It takes a while for community education and marketing of some services to establish their use. In Britain the programme to assist people with disabilities to use trains has been refined over recent years. When I left Manchester to travel to York, the railway employee who assisted me happened to mention that just that day and from that one railway station there were 50 disabled people traveling 10 of whom were blind or vision impaired – and this was off-season. By contrast, in Guangzhou, China, a city of over 10 million people, and growing palisades of skyscrapers, the *only* people with disabilities evident were street beggars.

The reason I am interchanging the terms 'people with disabilities' and 'disabled people' is because of the different cultural attitudes to these terms. I have argued that we should put the 'people' first and the 'disability' as a secondary description. In the UK, though, there's been a reclaiming of the term 'disabled people', and it's considered that 'people with disabilities' is a more formal bureaucratic term. I simply support people with disabilities choosing our language when so much of the disability lingo is thrust upon us. In the Disability Culture movement we are not asking to be normalized, social role valorized nor necessarily 'challenged' and we don't always want to be 'very special'. In other words we invite the world to stop being condescending and patronizing towards people with disabilities even when the intentions are well meant.

We are about developing models of inclusive communities. Our work is essential to the refinement of democratic systems and accessible universal design. Despite the initial nature of our current democracies the hallmarks of a mature democracy must include cultural diversity, a celebration of difference and the active participation of all sectors of the community in the development of policies and in the nature of accountability. Even the neo-liberals are remiss in not extending access to all markets to people with disabilities. The notion of accessible universal design is about creating access without clumsily separating out community groups. For instance, electronically triggered doors are not only useful to people in wheelchairs, blind people etc, but are helpful to elderly people, parents with kids and pushchairs and simply people with their hands full. One of our slogans is "when you get it right for people with disabilities, you get it right for the whole community". And who in their lives will not experience disability? With creative accessible design people with disabilities could currently have far greater access to information, public places including cultural events, services and facilities.

We are already using computer technology to link what's happening locally with global developments and to establish a global Disability Culture community. As we all journey through the initial stages of globalisation it's increasingly relevant to consider the human race as a whole. I would like to see the Disability Culture movement lobby for and be active in the creation and development of international and global institutions and governance. These should essentially be based on inclusive values and policies for the health and well being of humanity. Although I, like so many people with disabilities, face numerous barriers endeavoring to achieve my short and long term goals, I perceive an important future role for people with disabilities as our access to technology, training and each other increases. That is, to do with our knowledge and experience and the role we can play in developing and modeling inclusive communities.

At this point I believe our festivals and conferences play an important part in opening up access to this future role. My interaction with festivals and festival organizers endorsed my belief in the potential of festivals to bring to life local community spirit and to inspire community as well as individual innovation and creativity. Rather than something imposed upon a community, an effective festival can be an inspirational landmark in that journey of achievement. Whilst Director of Adelaide's High Beam Festival, I acknowledged two components that sometimes overlapped: professional showcase, which highlighted and modeled professional creativity and innovation, and community celebration, which reflected the health, vitality and creativity of local communities. Just as the individual artist can spend years refining their work and performance, effective community celebration at festivals should be a manifestation of ongoing community development, activity and creativity. The idea I referred to earlier of a series of international major festival/conference events is still alive and the subject of ongoing discussion. It's perceived that such events will stimulate ongoing local community cultural development and opportunities to establish inclusive communities. Such a series could also establish international circuits and opportunities for artists with disabilities.

Here in Australia the DADAA (Disability in the Arts, Disadvantage in the Arts, Australia) network links and enhances initiatives in the arts and disability field. DADAA represents peak arts and disability organisations from each state and territory. In South Australia the organisation is Arts in Action, which hosts the High Beam Festival. Since my return to Australia I attended and participated in the Asia Pacific Wataboshi Music Festival held at the Brisbane Powerhouse. This was organized by the Queensland member organization Access Arts. The DADAA network has played and will continue to play a crucial role in Australia's development of Disability Culture and inclusive communities. DADAA is an affiliate member of the Washington based VSA arts that I visited during my research trip.

Perhaps this report will give the reader an insight into some of the events and processes happening here in Australia, in other parts of the world and globally in relation to the arts based Disability Culture movement. In Australia we've achieved a lot, particularly in the last ten years, with the underpinning of the Disability Discrimination Act. However, there's still a long way to go before we can call ourselves an inclusive community. In accordance with Disability Culture values I would like to see many more people with disabilities in key decision making positions and roles in Australia.

My Churchill Fellowship trip has enabled me to significantly extend my knowledge and networks and I believe it is continuing to fulfill the 'fellowship' criteria of enhancing my professional career and contributing to Australian society. There has been an article about my trip in Arts SA's publication "Artstate" and I've had the opportunity to discuss aspects of my research at a series of forums at the Asia Pacific Wataboshi Music Festival and through my keynote presentation at an Adelaide based national symposium on vocational opportunities for people with disabilities. And I look forward to many more opportunities to endorse the value of the Churchill Fellowship and in particular of my trip, its findings and ongoing benefits.

Tony Doyle
Adelaide, December 2003