

# Art in Public Spaces Report

This program has been assisted by the Australian Government through its principal arts investment and advisory body Creative Australia. We thank our partners GapFiller, Life in Vacant Spaces, and Toi Ōtautahi, alongside the incredible individuals and organisations involved in this program. The generous exchange of ideas, perspectives and experiences will enrich the creative landscape of both regions.

This report was written by Holly Ahern. Ahern is an emerging artist, researcher and producer living and working on Bundjalung Country. She holds an Honours degree from Southern Cross University, with a focus on practice-based research, collaboration and contemporary installation. Her work is a continuous dialogue between interdisciplinary artistic practice and research that centres upon collaboration, connection, and witnessing/intervening in public spaces. Holly spent five weeks in Ōtautahi, Christchurch in 2023, to research and develop Expansive Encounters, facilitate and evaluate the efficacy of the pilot program, and conduct research to advocate for the future of Art in Public Spaces in the Northern Rivers region.



**ANR.**

Christchurch  
City Council 



Life  in   
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Acknowledgement of Country	4
Abstract	4
Key objectives	5
Introduction	7
Background	8
Recovery Streams	10
Art in Public Spaces	13
Development	15
Partners	17
Expansive Encounters Program	18
Pilot Program	19
Artists	20
Evaluation	
Art As A Vehicle For Connection And Renewal	22
Nature And Play-Based Immersion	22
Shifting Goals And Immersive Experiences	23
Personal Transformation And Empowerment	23
Relationship Building And Healing	24
Perspectives On Public Space And Recovery	24
Impact	24
Further Insights	25
Play and Innovation	26
Community-Led Spaces	28
Temporary vs Permanent	30
Street Art as a Catalyst for Urban Transformation	32
Empowering Youth Voices	34
Embedding Cultural Narratives in Public Landscapes	36
Recommendations	38
Conclusion	45
Appendix	
1. Professional Development with Deborah McCormick	50
2. Descriptive Account of the Immersion	51
3. Evaluation Survey- Overview	53
References	56

# Acknowledgement of Country

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We respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which this research report is compiled. We pay our respects to the Bundjalung people, past, present, and emerging, who have nurtured and cared for this land for thousands of years. We also acknowledge the mana whenua of the Ngai Tahu tribe, who have been the kaitaki of these lands since time immemorial. We honour their enduring relationship with the land and their commitment to preserving its cultural significance. As we engage in this research, we commit to honouring and respecting the land, its heritage, and the traditional custodians whose wisdom and stewardship continue to guide us.

## Abstract

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Arts Northern Rivers initiated Expansive Encounters as a response to the impacts of the devastating 2022 floods on the Northern Rivers region. Expansive Encounters is a reciprocal exchange between the Northern Rivers, Australia, and Ōtautahi Christchurch, Aotearoa (New Zealand). Over a four-week intensive in September 2023, two Northern Rivers artists participated in an immersive research and development opportunity to increase their professional practice within art in public spaces.

The aims were to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural strands and values that have shaped art in public spaces in Ōtautahi Christchurch since the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes. The successful participants explored diverse practices and deeply engaged with the ecology of the public arena post-earthquake.

This pilot program has established the parameters of an ongoing relationship between the two host countries. Through the lens of creative recovery, this exchange has strengthened the capacity of artistic practice in post-disaster communities.

This report presents a comprehensive overview of the Art in Public Spaces recovery stream, offering valuable insights, findings, and recommendations for stakeholders and artists working in public spaces. This report also outlines the development of the Expansive Encounters Reciprocal Exchange program, an evaluation of the pilot program, its participants, and the crucial role of arts and culture in the aftermath of disasters.

## Key objectives

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1. To examine the role of art and culture in post-disaster recovery and community renewal.

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2. To identify the main themes and findings that emerge from immersive experiences and interactions of the Expansive Encounters program.

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3. To provide actionable recommendations for stakeholders, councils, funding bodies, and artists in the Northern Rivers.

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Kaupeka Tae, Akiri Creative Construction Hoarding, Christchurch City Council



# Introduction

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In times of crisis and disaster, communities face various challenges requiring multi-faceted recovery and renewal efforts. This report examines the role of art and culture in the aftermath of disasters, offering valuable insights, findings, and recommendations for stakeholders, councils, funding bodies, and artists working in public spaces.

This report presents an overview of the Art in Public Spaces recovery stream, an initiative that has brought together two distinct regions: the Northern Rivers and Ōtautahi Christchurch. The report outlines the development of the Expansive Encounters Reciprocal Exchange program, an evaluation of the pilot program, its participants, and the crucial role of arts and culture in the aftermath of disasters.

The report also sheds light on the dimensions, outcomes, and implications of the Art in Public Spaces recovery stream. It provides a comprehensive understanding of its varied dimensions and impact on the participating regions. Throughout the report, the outcomes and impacts of the Art in Public Spaces recovery stream are assessed, offering an evaluation of the effectiveness and significance of the program.

The successful participants, their intentions, engagements, and contributions to the initiative are also explored. Six key findings are examined: Play and Placemaking, Community-Led Spaces, Street Art as a Catalyst for Urban Transformation, Empowering Youth Voices, and Embedding Culture in Public Landscapes. These observations of these key findings provide a valuable understanding of the program and its broader significance for post-disaster recovery efforts.

The report concludes with actionable recommendations for leveraging the power of art and culture for post-disaster recovery and community cohesion. It seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Art in Public Spaces recovery stream and its implications for post-disaster recovery.

# Background

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In early 2022, the Northern Rivers region on the Far North Coast of New South Wales grappled with unprecedented and devastating flooding events.

These floods were characterised by their exceptional magnitude, surpassing the 2017 'one in 100-year' flood levels by more than three metres in many regional areas. Triggered by a combination of factors, including higher-than-average rainfall, La Niña weather patterns, and a high-pressure system off the coast of New Zealand, the region experienced massive rainfall throughout February. The consequences were catastrophic, with widespread inundation, displacement of residents, and significant damage to infrastructure and property.

The flooding events left a lasting mark on the Northern Rivers, emphasising the urgent need for disaster preparedness and recovery efforts to address the region's vulnerability to extreme weather events. Recognising the severity of the situation, Arts Northern Rivers took proactive steps by hosting a two-day [Creative Industries Recovery Forum](#) in July 2022 in collaboration with research agency Patternmakers. This forum served as a crucial platform for more than 200 artists living and working in the Northern Rivers to engage in open discussions regarding the future of the creative industries in the aftermath of the flooding events.

The Creative Industries Recovery Forum keynote address by Lara Strongman served as a powerful reminder of the vital role of art and culture in the face of adversity. In her address, Lara emphasised the importance of embracing art as a tool to reclaim public spaces. She touched on the ethical considerations and permissions necessary to activate public spaces effectively. These insights resonated with the forum attendees as she discussed the resilience of local culture, the fragility of creative work, and the need to bring together organisations and the broader community in response to disaster. This address was a powerful call to action, emphasising the significance of the arts shaping the Northern Rivers region's recovery and future.





In The Heart, Holly Ahern and Eden Crawford-Harriman Image: Brendan Beirne

# Recovery Streams

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The Creative Industries Recovery Forum report highlighted that the sustainability of regional creative industries hinged on the capacity of creatives to secure ongoing paid work and access diverse spaces to present works.

**The report documents the impact of the disaster on creative practice and practitioners, highlights critical areas for recovery, and provides recommendations on strengthening the creative sector in the aftermath of disasters.**

The report has underscored the commitment of the creative community to actively participate in the sector's recovery. By thoroughly analysing the data, Arts Northern Rivers and Patternmakers outlined five interrelated areas of necessity that emerged within the region's creative industries (Patternmakers, October 2022):

**1. REPAIR—Supporting artists and organisations to replace losses and rebuild their practices.**

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**2. PREPARE—Helping artists and organisations disaster-proof their practice and strengthen resilience.**

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**3. INFLUENCE—Advocating for the creative industries and ensuring artists are central to recovery.**

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**4. WORK—Creating opportunities for artists to work, generate earnings, and support community recovery.**

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**5. THRIVE—Working towards a more equitable, vibrant, and flourishing arts sector.**

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**These identified areas form the foundation for a comprehensive strategy to revitalise and strengthen the creative industries in the region.**

Based on these findings, Arts Northern Rivers initiated three recovery streams to address crucial areas of recovery and renewal:

- 1. Art in Public Spaces**
- 2. First Nations Forward**
- 3. Dance Sector Uplift**

The Art in Public Spaces recovery stream identifies the areas of **INFLUENCE** and **WORK** as critical in the aftermath of disasters.

**INFLUENCE** outlines the need to 'rebuild creative opportunities for artists and advocate for the creative industries, ensuring they have a strong voice in policy decisions, investment allocations, and diverse representation' (Patternmakers).

**WORK** seeks to empower artists to 'work, generate earnings, and support community recovery' (Patternmakers), aligning with the report's call for support through residencies, workshops, and professional development.

**This recovery stream seeks to directly address these areas through opportunities to enhance professional practice within Public Art.**

This stream is a crucial component of Arts Northern Rivers' disaster response. As we confront the increasing challenges posed by climate change and the growing frequency of disasters, recognising the potential of Art in Public Spaces becomes ever more critical in envisioning resilient and thriving communities.



# Art in Public Spaces

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Public Art is a multifaceted field encompassing a range of outcomes that are intentionally planned and executed outside of gallery contexts. This field has evolved beyond traditional sculptures and muralism. It encompasses diverse spatial practices and processes, including but not limited to site-specific installation, ephemeral art, performance, community engagement, digital art, and placemaking. These practices go beyond aesthetic embellishment; they serve to engage with the community and provide new ways to experience our civic spaces.

Artists working within public practices engage with the broader public, seeking to understand their needs, aspirations, and cultural values. Artistic interventions can transform public spaces into vibrant, inclusive, and accessible areas to encourage social interaction and well-being. Such transformation has a lasting impact on the community's relationship with the environment.

Public Art practices thrive on collaboration among artists, designers, planners, and architects. These collaborations bring together diverse perspectives to reimagine the built environment. Artists, in particular, offer unique insights and interventions that contribute to our understanding of how people use and experience public spaces.

These practices and outcomes typically respond to a community's unique characteristics, history, and context, often reflecting cultural identity and heritage. By celebrating traditions, histories, and values, communities can reinforce a sense of agency and pride in their public spaces while attracting cultural tourism. A contemporary and holistic approach recognises Public Art as evolving and diverse. In this respect, the practices within this field are a source of aesthetic value and a tool for cultural preservation, economic development, social cohesion, education, and environmental awareness in regional settings.

The flooding left the Northern Rivers community displaced, disoriented, and disconnected from their artistic and cultural roots. Public Art can serve as a crucial healing mechanism for individuals and communities in recovery. Impacted communities can find solace and express their emotions through creating and engaging with art. By incorporating local and Indigenous narratives, traditions, and historical elements into artistic intervention, these practices enable communities to reconnect and re-establish a sense of belonging. Arts and cultural interventions in public spaces not only aid in the emotional recovery of individuals but also contribute to a collective identity.







# Development

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In January 2023, Arts Northern Rivers executive director Jane Fuller and Northern Rivers independent artist Holly Ahern travelled to Ōtautahi Christchurch, through the guidance and connections provided by Lara Strongman. The similarities between the two regions drove the impetus to connect with arts organisations in Ōtautahi through their shared experiences recovering from significant disasters.

This three-day trip explored potential collaborations and partnerships, laying the foundation for a reciprocal exchange program between the Northern Rivers and Ōtautahi. Despite lacking previous connections, this engagement aimed to gain valuable insights from a city that has effectively integrated arts and culture into its recovery following the devastating earthquakes in 2010 and 2011. This visit to Ōtautahi was met with generosity and a mutual understanding of the complexities of post-disaster recovery.

Their brief immersion in the local arts and cultural landscape left them inspired and optimistic about the potential of Public Art in the Northern Rivers. This initial research trip laid the groundwork for invaluable partnerships with Toi Ōtautahi, Gap Filler, and Life in Vacant Spaces. These organisations generously assisted in shaping the framework for the subsequent Expansive Encounters program.

An immediate outcome of these interactions was inviting Deborah McCormick, the previous executive director and founder of SCAPE Public Art, to participate in a panel discussion and facilitate a professional development workshop for practitioners in the Northern Rivers. (1) This outcome is in the appendix.

The primary focus of the Art in Public Spaces recovery stream is to empower creatives to contribute to the reimagining of public spaces. The broader objectives of this stream include:

**1. Explore how arts practitioners can engage with new markets and audiences in the context of Art in Public Spaces.**

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**2. Empower artists to develop and create projects that respond to the unique challenges and opportunities in post-disaster contexts.**

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**3. Facilitate skill and capacity building among regional artists, including adapting to changing circumstances, engaging with diverse communities, and effective collaboration.**

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**4. Learn from and understand the dynamics of post-disaster communities and their evolving needs.**

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A core outcome for this recovery stream was to provide accessible opportunities for research and development amid the region's transition from short- to midterm recovery.

# Partners

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## GAP FILLER

An urban development and placemaking organisation established after the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes in Ōtautahi Christchurch. With expertise at the crossroads of urban design, public art, and community activism, Gap Filler has been instrumental in transforming neglected and vacant spaces into vibrant community environments throughout the city. Championing community-driven urban resilience and advocating for collaborative efforts in rebuilding and reimagining cities, Gap Filler has set international benchmarks for urban renewal and participatory design in post-disaster recovery.

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## LIFE IN VACANT SPACES

A non-profit organisation committed to revitalising vacant and underutilised urban areas through creative action. Founded as a response to Ōtautahi Christchurch's post-earthquake landscape, the organisation serves as a broker between property owners and community, art, and social initiatives. Specialising in short-term leases and pop-up events, they facilitate diverse projects that breathe life into dormant areas, from art installations to community gardens. Their work intersects urban planning, community engagement, and social entrepreneurship.

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## TOI ŌTAUTAHĪ

Toi Ōtautahi is Ōtautahi Christchurch's arts and creativity strategy; a partnership project between Christchurch City Council (CCC) and local and national stakeholders and implemented by the Community Arts and Events Team at CCC. Toi Ōtautahi acknowledges the critical role of arts in enhancing people's well-being, identity, and connection, revitalising the city, attracting visitors, and boosting the local economy. Toi Ōtautahi represents a collaborative and innovative approach to nurturing and celebrating the arts and creativity within the city.

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## SUTTON HOUSE

A historically and culturally significant site, serving as the purpose-built home and studio of New Zealand artist William (Bill) Alexander Sutton. Despite being situated in Ōtautahi Christchurch's 'red zone', which led to the demolition of most neighbouring houses due to land damage caused by the earthquakes, Sutton House was retained. This was due to its historical significance and the efforts of heritage advocates. It stands restored at the original site and is owned and maintained by Christchurch City Council. The house is managed by the Sutton Heritage House and Garden Charitable Trust, a board comprising arts and cultural workers throughout Ōtautahi Christchurch.

# Expansive Encounters Program

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‘Artist residencies provide space, time, and concentration for making art, doing research, and for reflection. Residencies are crucial nodes in international circulation and career development but also invaluable infrastructures for critical thinking and artistic experimentation, interdisciplinary knowledge production, and site-specific research.’

Office of Public Art (2014)

The Expansive Encounters program emerged as a research and development opportunity for practitioners working within the parameters of Public Art. This program aimed to provide a unique platform for practitioners to expand their practices, establish international networks, and enhance their professional capabilities through the lens of Public Art and post-disaster recovery.

Throughout a four-week immersion in Ōtautahi Christchurch, the program participants would gain valuable insights into the cultural strands and values that shaped the city’s recovery. Through the support and collaboration with partners Gap Filler, Life in Vacant Spaces, and Toi Ōtautahi, participants would have the opportunity to engage in planned networking events and opportunities for learning and participation. The program’s pilot would establish the parameters between the two host countries by exploring a diverse set of engagements within the community.

In April 2023, Northern Rivers creative practitioners were invited to respond to the program guidelines via an open callout. This opportunity was open to artists at all career stages who work within or showcase a demonstrated interest in public practices. The pilot of this program aimed to highlight an empathetic approach to creative capacity, with guidelines that did not require urgent outcomes. These guidelines asked that applicants submit research and project proposals or a line of enquiry for the residency period. To assist potential participants with the pilot application process, the project coordinator facilitated several enquiry sessions to offer support with their project ideas. Applicants who proposed further outcomes with community-engaged or public projects upon their return were considered highly, with the guidelines stating that Arts Northern Rivers would provide further support where applicable.

As a result of the open callout, 15 applications were submitted. These applications outlined significant lines of enquiry and project proposals surrounding research, development, and community engagement. The selection process assessed the proposals to four points of criteria: the capability to actively engage with hosts in a meaningful way, a previous engagement with public practices, ideas that have the potential for further public outcomes, and an interest in reimagining public spaces in the Northern Rivers. The assessors from Australia and New Zealand expressed excitement for the successful candidates' sincere motivations for participating in the program and their exceptional potential to enact positive transformation in the Northern Rivers through their artistic endeavours.

The development and guidelines of the Expansive Encounters program serve as a rough blueprint for future iterations. In 2024, this program will be offered to two arts practitioners from Ōtautahi participating in a reciprocated immersion in the Northern Rivers, subject to funding confirmation. It is hoped that the pilot and its reciprocation will develop the parameters of a long-term exchange centred on revitalising public spaces and renewing communities through arts and cultural intervention.

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## PILOT PROGRAM

In June 2023, Arts Northern Rivers announced the two successful candidates for the Expansive Encounters program. The successful participants, Antoinette O'Brien and Erica Gully, would undertake the program's pilot, engaging in a four-week immersion throughout September 2023.

Antoinette O'Brien and Erica Gully brought diverse practices to the pilot of Expansive Encounters, complementing the program's objectives in unique ways. Both artists' proposals for the program and subsequent engagements throughout the immersion reflected their dedication to enriching arts and culture in the Northern Rivers, contributing to the reimagining of public spaces and aligning with the broader objectives of the Art in Public Spaces recovery stream.

'How do residencies meet the changing needs of individual artists?  
How can residencies provide alternative openings and  
infrastructures to nurture artistic work in the midst of current societal  
transformations and environmental crises?' Office of Public Art (2014)

# Artists

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## ANTOINETTE O'BRIEN

Antoinette O'Brien is a mid-career artist whose practice explores multidisciplinary outputs, including ceramics, concrete, ice, beer, frozen milk, and immersive installation. Her figurative works capture the human form in various social and natural settings, exploring a diverse spectrum of emotions from joy and anger to pleasure and alienation. These emotions are often intertwined with the natural elements of the sea, sky, and soil. Antoinette is a dedicated community activist who is deeply involved in the activism group Reclaim Our Recovery (ROR). Her approach to community engagement highlights a disconnect between the decisions made by those in power and the social consequences of their actions.

Antoinette's proposal for the Expansive Encounters program highlighted a commitment to expanding her knowledge of the processes of Public Art and advocacy within post-disaster communities. She proposed an approach characterised by 'humility, openness, and a profound appreciation of shared experiences'. In alignment with her ROR advocacy, she sought to develop projects that explore the multi-faceted themes of recovery, providing a platform for knowledge sharing and art processes inspired by collective experiences. Antoinette's line of enquiry for the program explored actively engaging with the community by facilitating workshops, skill sharing, and making meaningful connections.



Antoinette O'Brien at Hassels Lane Community Hub



## ERICA GULLY

Erica Gully is a mid-career practitioner specialising in street art, design, and community engagement. Her creative practice is deeply rooted in facilitating meaningful outcomes within public spaces, emphasising profound connections to place and community. Over the past 10 years, her practice has significantly shifted from an individual artist to a producer, educator, and facilitator. Erica's practice is firmly positioned within social and community engagement in public spaces and street art. While her experience lends itself to diverse outputs, her primary focus is developing and facilitating projects that engage young individuals within their regional centres.

Erica's proposal for the Expansive Encounters program was centred on the reclamation of space and positive engagement through creative processes. She aimed to actively engage with local communities, collaborating with and learning from those involved in Ōtautahi's post-earthquake recovery efforts, emphasising projects designed to engage young people in meaningful ways within public spaces.

Building upon her experience with Lismore-based Street art project Back Alley Gallery, she hoped to develop projects that would actively involve young people as primary participants and produce outcomes that resonated with a broader audience. The proposal acknowledged the importance of collaboration in achieving long-term recovery. Erica intends to cultivate a network of supporters and collaborators who share her vision of contributing to sustained recovery efforts that benefit young people.



Erica Gully at the Climate Action Campus

# Evaluation

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The methodology of this evaluation centres around observational and thematic analysis, primarily focusing on collecting and analysing data from observations, interviews, participant surveys, and photographic documentation. The approach has enabled a rich, firsthand account of the participants' experiences, thoughts, and reflections throughout the immersion. This analysis seeks to provide an understanding of the data collected, ultimately identifying key themes that serve as labels for different aspects of the experience.

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## **ART AS A VEHICLE FOR CONNECTION AND RENEWAL**

Throughout their immersion, the participants gained valuable insights into the art-making process, highlighting the role of art as a means to rebuild connections and renew public spaces within communities after disasters. Erica expressed her excitement and inspiration, underlining how Public Art and placemaking practices can 'serve as a vehicle for community connection and renewal'. She is motivated to utilise art-making processes to re-establish connections and a sense of identity within the Northern Rivers community.

Antoinette's experience underscored the transformative power of art and its potential to rekindle connections and promote renewal within communities. Her reflection on the program emphasised the importance of recognising community needs and advocating for community recovery. In this way, her motivations shifted to engage with the community in the sharing of 'love, tea, and life' as a means of advocacy.

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## **NATURE AND PLAY-BASED IMMERSION**

The participants found comfort and renewal in their interactions in the natural environment. Antoinette stressed the importance of moments in nature, emphasising its role in grounding her sense of self and forging connections with the natural world. Erica shared a similar perspective, highlighting how immersing herself within the environment positively impacted her well-being and gave her perspective on her own community.

Both participants also acknowledged the power of play as a universal language that engages the community on multiple levels. Erica emphasised the significance of play in communication and learning, reconciling with the notion that it is limited to children and youth. These shared observations underscored the potential of play-based experiences in bridging social gaps and promoting unity within communities.

## SHIFTING GOALS AND IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES

The program's progression led to re-evaluating personal and professional goals and outcomes, with the participants embracing the immersive nature of their experiences. Erica noted this shift, stating that her 'goals have shifted and expanded. They are ongoing, and my hope is that they will continue upon my return home.' This experience highlighted the fluidity of goals and the value of immersive experiences over rigidly set objectives.

Both participants acknowledged that the immersion fundamentally changed their perspectives and expanded their possibilities. Erica described the program's impact: 'I feel like I've changed on a fundamental level.' Antoinette also spoke of this shift, saying, 'I have been able to adjust the lens to focus more on those goals and gain some battery power' to pursue meaningful projects in her practice moving forward. Both outcomes emphasised a renewed perspective in pursuing their long-term goals in arts practice.

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## PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION AND EMPOWERMENT

Both participants reflected on how stepping out of their comfort zones and leaving their disaster-affected community has been a transformative and robust experience. Antoinette highlighted, stating, 'The confidence to travel is something that I'd really lost, and the personal achievement of being able to come here is so big.' These realisations indicated a shift in confidence and a newfound sense of empowerment within the participants.

Erica's experience supported this sentiment, emphasising that it was 'the bravery that came from stepping out of my comfort zone and being removed from a place where we haven't really had a chance to process what's happening'. She said it is evident that safe and creative risk-taking in an unknown environment has 'enabled (me) to actually open my eyes up to the possibilities'.

Erica expressed that she and Antoinette were 'in deficit when we arrived here, absolutely depleted'. The four-week immersion in Ōtautahi encouraged healing through the ability to take crucial time and space for reflection, engagement, and personal development. At the close of the program, she acknowledged that going 'back home with my cup half-full and giving something back is ... pretty damn powerful'.

## RELATIONSHIP BUILDING AND HEALING

The participants emphasised the significance of meaningful connections throughout the immersion. Erica expressed that ‘the generosity and knowledge sharing has been overwhelming’. These connections were considered valuable for collaboration and support in developing future projects. Antoinette amplified this significance, stating, ‘Connecting with Deborah McCormick around the possibility of public art submissions and the potential of my practice to move in this direction feels like a potential door opening for realising future works.’

Antoinette highlighted that being with another artist from the Northern Rivers allowed her nervous system to relax, emphasising the value of relationships and companionship during the program. Both participants recognised the importance of addressing challenges and providing feedback to support their well-being and overall experience within the program. They suggested that scheduled well-being check-ins throughout the immersion would benefit future iterations.

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## PERSPECTIVES ON PUBLIC SPACE AND RECOVERY

The participants identified parallels between Ōtautahi’s river system and the Wilsons River in Lismore, indicating that their learnings encouraged them to reflect on the interconnectedness of nature and community. They expressed a desire to activate public spaces in their communities to foster connection and unification, addressing the fracture in their communities.

Both participants also recognised the importance of engaging the community through arts and cultural activations in public spaces to foster community connection. They advocated for making public art more accessible and distributed across different areas within a community, not just centralised locations. Their shared understanding of the non-linear nature of recovery underscored the importance of engaging with the environment and reflecting on natural processes as part of the healing journey.

## Impact

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The artists were not just participants but active contributors to an ever-widening circle of impact and inspiration in the context of post-disaster recovery. With this, they will embed new perspectives and experiences to reimagine the Northern Rivers’ public spaces.

The participants extended their practices beyond their boundaries and expanded their understanding of what public spaces can signify and offer to communities. This experience has invited artists to develop their creative capacities, explore new frameworks for interpretation and expression, and broaden their impact on the community and public engagement. The concept of expansion underpins every aspect of the initiative, from the diversity of thought encouraged by cross-cultural exchange to the impact of employing art as a catalyst for communal healing and renewal.

## Further Insights

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These further insights explore concepts in six key areas: Play and Innovation, Community-Led Spaces, Temporary vs Permanent, Street Art as a Catalyst for Urban Transformation, Empowering Youth Voices, and Embedding Cultural Narratives in Public Landscapes. These insights offer valuable lessons for post-disaster recovery efforts, underscoring the importance of creativity, community empowerment, and interdisciplinary collaboration in shaping dynamic and resilient environments.



*Christchurch Art Gallery*

## PLAY AND INNOVATION

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Ōtautahi is a noteworthy example of urban planning prioritising play and work–life balance. Initiatives such as the Urban Play program and the creation of urban play trails demonstrate the city’s commitment to encouraging play and exploration. This approach to urban development serves as an inspirational model for communities seeking transformation and revitalisation. Play and imagination emerged as crucial factors for progress and innovation. In the post-disaster landscape, imaginative thinking is needed to propel society forward, highlighting the necessity of creative thinking when confronted with complex challenges.

Observing a landscape that lends itself to play and exploration highlights its significance in fostering innovation, rebuilding communities, and creating vibrant urban environments. It underscores the idea that play is not limited to children and should be embraced by adults to encourage creativity, exploration, and community engagement in city planning and development. Play and imagination are often overlooked in the rebuilding process after disasters. Through interventions such as placemaking, communities can use these tools to create spaces that are not only functional but also fun and engaging. This can create a new sense of normalcy and hope for a better future.

### Key Example: #chchswing and Detour Track

The #chchswing and the adjacent Detour Track represent an innovative approach to engaging with imagination and play in urban environments. These initiatives have transformed the urban site into a dynamic playground that encourages people to take a detour from their daily routines. These projects have become a cherished destination for families, children, youth, and adults within the city. They inspire moments of play, creativity, and physical activity that encourage participants from all demographics to engage throughout the day. The site is located in proximity to Rauora Park and Margaret Mahey Playground, as well as a basketball court, offering regular open-air cinema and family-friendly events to engage with. These initiatives redefine the role of urban areas, turning them into dynamic playgrounds that encourage connection and create lasting, memorable experiences in the centre of the urban landscape.





#chchswing and Detour Track, Gap Filler, Central City

## COMMUNITY-LED SPACES

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Community-led spaces serve many purposes, from meeting the immediate needs of their communities to shaping the future. They are dynamic places that continually adapt to meet the evolving needs of their communities. In times of persistent uncertainty, they become vital anchors, providing continuity and a sense of place. These spaces give people the power to take ownership of public areas, benefiting people from all walks of life within the community. The agency and management of these spaces are handed over to the community, encouraging a community-centric approach that brings vitality and support to these areas.

The importance of community-led spaces is highlighted by observations made at numerous public sites in Ōtautahi. These sites underscore the notion that when individuals are empowered and given agency, they can shape their environment in ways that are not only imaginative and aesthetically pleasing but also socially and emotionally enriching. One of the most significant challenges faced by communities is recovering from losses. While it's acknowledged that the losses suffered by communities may never be entirely recoverable, hope resides in the collective power to envision and enact new possibilities guided by individuals possessing bold knowledge, hope, and unconventional, creative thinking.

### Key Example: East X East

This initiative stands as a prime example of community-led redevelopment. Situated on nine hectares of classified 'red zone' land, East X East has undergone a series of community projects that have significantly enhanced local engagement. The transformation was initiated by a pilot project that established a framework for effective collaboration among stakeholders, including Life in Vacant Spaces, government agencies, and community groups, who collectively sought to revitalise the area. This shared vision established a freely accessible multipurpose area dedicated to recreation, health and well-being, conservation, and artistic activation. The East X East initiative serves as a model for community-driven activation in post-disaster landscapes. The successful transformation of this area of the 'red zone' into a vibrant community asset underscores the potential for collaborative efforts to create inclusive, multifunctional urban spaces that cater to the needs of diverse stakeholders. Throughout its development, East X East has hosted an array of activities, including a dog park, coffee carts, a skateboard ramp, drone racing competitions, disc golf, interactive artworks, and an educational learn-to-ride bike track for children.



*Community Pump Track, Parkitect, East X East*



*Regeneration Planting, Environment Canterbury, East X East*



## TEMPORARY VS PERMANENT

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Public art projects, both temporary and permanent, play important roles in post-disaster recovery efforts, each offering unique contributions to the urban landscape. Temporary art installations provide immediate relief and creative engagement to communities grappling with the aftermath of a disaster. They often involve local artists and volunteers, fostering a sense of unity and purpose within the community. Additionally, they can serve as therapeutic outlets, allowing individuals to express their emotions creatively.

Permanent public art projects are enduring monuments to the strength and perseverance of a community. They become integral to the community's identity, weaving cultural and historical values into public landscapes. They can potentially attract visitors, boosting local tourism and economic recovery. Furthermore, they can provide ongoing educational and cultural enrichment, encouraging a sense of pride and connection among residents. The activation of public spaces through art is a powerful means of strengthening communities in the wake of a disaster.

## Key Example: SCAPE Public Art

Utilising both temporary and permanent public artworks, this organisation has become a prominent example of how art can transform a city. Their key initiative, the SCAPE Public Art Season, is an annual event that showcases temporary art installations throughout the city. These installations vary in scale and medium, and are designed to engage the community and provoke critical thought. The season is developed and facilitated over several months of each year, bringing together artists of diverse backgrounds and career stages to engage with the community through thought-provoking artworks. These installations have now become an integral part of Ōtautahi's cultural calendar, inviting residents and visitors to explore and interact with art in the urban landscape. SCAPE has also commissioned more than 15 permanent artworks, which collectively form an immersive public art trail throughout the city. These artworks, created by both local and international artists, have left an indelible mark on the urban landscape. They celebrate the city's cultural heritage, acknowledge its Indigenous traditions, and encourage conversations about the role of art in public spaces. SCAPE's dedication to temporary and permanent art projects unequivocally underscores their commitment to making art an accessible and integral part of the city's identity.



*Cognitive Reorientation, Eddie Clemens, SCAPE Public Art Season 2022-2023*

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*Flour Power, Regan Gentry, SCAPE Public Art*

## STREET ART AS A CATALYST FOR URBAN TRANSFORMATION

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Street art has a transformative role in reshaping the urban landscape of post-disaster communities. It adds vibrancy and uniqueness to a city's visual identity, integrating with the urban environment. In the aftermath of disasters, street art and muralism present a unique opportunity to reimagine and rebuild an urban landscape disrupted by catastrophic events, while providing a public platform and career pathways for youth and emerging artists.

Street art is robust and interactive, allowing public audiences to engage with art and culture in ways that diverge from the traditional art gallery experience. Street art becomes a living, breathing part of the city, fostering community and connection. Urban art practices have emerged as powerful tools for placemaking, encouraging community pride and engagement in public spaces. Participatory street art projects that involve community members in the creation process have been observed to foster a sense of ownership and connection to the artwork. Street art not only integrates with the existing culture of a community but also reinforces and celebrates its unique identity.

### Key Example: Watch This Space

This is an innovative street art initiative in Ōtautahi, led by Reuben Woods, an art historian, writer, and curator who holds a PhD in post-earthquake graffiti and street art. In the aftermath of the earthquakes, Watch This Space emerged as a comprehensive online database in response to significant murals and street art activations throughout the city. The online database showcases an interactive map with the locations of more than 500 artworks within the city and its neighbouring areas, recognising the artists who have contributed to the evolving urban landscape. Its primary aim was to provide an immersive experience for residents and visitors, allowing them to explore the evolving urban landscape while learning about the history, culture, and artists who work in public spaces. The initiative has evolved to offer residents and visitors guided street art tours, and partners with a range of stakeholders throughout the city to provide urban artists with opportunities for temporary and permanent activations, festivals, community talks, and events. Watch This Space acts as a dynamic conduit between art, community, and urban development, supporting emerging and established urban artists.





*Wāhine Toa Mural, Kophie Su'a-Hulsbosch and Janine Williams*

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*Stencil Artwork, Central City at the Watch This Space Oversized Spray Cans*

## EMPOWERING YOUTH VOICES

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Post-disaster recovery can be daunting and overwhelming for communities, and is particularly challenging for young people. The impact of disasters on young people can be profound, and it is often overlooked or misunderstood. Artistic programs can provide a space for young people to actively engage in the recovery process, express their perspectives, and contribute to community rebuilding efforts. This is significant, as it helps to empower young individuals and gives them a sense of agency. It also allows them to feel that their contributions are valued and that they have a meaningful role to play in the recovery process.

The unique challenges and opportunities young people face in post-disaster contexts are numerous. For example, young people may struggle with the loss of friends or loved ones, disruption of their education, or displacement from their homes. They may also need more access to resources and support systems. This is where artistic programs can play a crucial role. They can allow young people to express their experiences, emotions, and ideas through various creative processes and mediums. This can be a powerful tool for healing and building capacity amid disasters.

### Key Example: Climate Action Campus

This alternative educational initiative in Ōtautahi collaborates with 16 schools dedicated to empowering students to address climate concerns through meaningful action. By engaging in regenerative gardening, educational programs, and hands-on projects, the campus equips students with the knowledge and skills needed to enhance urban biodiversity. Situated on nine hectares of classified 'red zone' land, this innovative campus repurposed a former private girls' school severely damaged by the earthquakes. Climate Action Campus encourages students to take ownership of their learning and actively participate in practices that support a more sustainable future. The initiative instills a sense of responsibility and empowerment among students through mentorship, youth-led projects, and climate education. In collaboration with local artists throughout the city, the campus integrates artistic projects and installations that not only enhance its aesthetic appeal, but also raise awareness about critical environmental issues.





*Student-Led Play Area, Climate Action Campus*

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*Campus Greenhouses, Climate Action Campus*

## EMBEDDING CULTURAL NARRATIVES IN PUBLIC LANDSCAPES

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Cultural preservation and the integration of cultural narratives into public landscapes are crucial in the endeavour to connect people with their environment. The narratives woven in these spaces celebrate the cultural values, traditions, and history of Ngāi Tūāhuriri, acknowledging the rights and guarantees established under the treaty of Waitangi while respecting the mana of local hapū, iwi, and all who reside within the land. This approach aims to help others understand, share, and embrace these narratives, which encompass various elements such as whakapapa, significant sites, landmarks, geographical features, historical events, relationships with flora and fauna, local language, local stories and symbols.

The post-earthquake landscape provided a platform for the people of Ōtautahi to embrace and learn about traditional ways of narratives being passed down through generations of Ngāi Tahu and Māori communities. The public landscape is more than just physical space; it's a collective story of a city's history, culture, values, and creative expression. It shapes how people identify themselves, each other, and their environment. The historical narratives within Ōtautahi serve as a guide for designing the public realm and understanding the intricate relationship between Māori culture and the environment. Within this relationship lies the potential to create public spaces that honour local cultures, restore the environment, and respect traditional value systems.

### Key Example: Te Papa Ōtākaro/Avon River Precinct

This stands as a landmark project that marked an extensive transformation of public space in Ōtautahi. The project revitalised more than four hectares of the city along the Avon River. At the centre of its development was the integration of Māori cultural expression, paying respect to the history and traditions of the Ngāi Tahu. The revitalisation went beyond physical changes to the location; it thoughtfully interwove Māori cultural expressions throughout the environment. Te Papa Ōtākaro not only established a resilient landscape connecting the city to its river system but also provided an intricate network of pathways, welcoming pedestrians and cyclists to engage with the city's rich heritage. This innovative project not only honours the city's cultural legacy but also underscores the profound connection between its people and the environment.





*Pou Pou, Riki Manuel Victoria Square*



*Te Papa Ōtākaro, Literary Walk*

# Recommendations

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This section provides practical suggestions for Northern Rivers stakeholders, councils, funding bodies, and creative practitioners. It is important to understand that these recommendations are not stand-alone actions but parts of a comprehensive strategy. They offer a roadmap for utilising art's potential in public spaces to encourage resilience, recovery, and community cohesion.

Public spaces in the Northern Rivers are complex but vital platforms that involve various stakeholders. As the region faces multiple uncertainties during the recovery process, art and culture, from grassroots initiatives to high-quality public art, play an increasingly critical role in advocating for them. Incorporating the recommendations listed below is crucial to providing the Northern Rivers community with the necessary tools to navigate the complexities of post-disaster recovery.

By embracing these recommendations and remaining attuned to the evolving needs of the people, the Northern Rivers can utilise the transformative power of art to recover from adversity and thrive in the face of continued uncertainty. This commitment to artistic expression and community engagement will shape the region's recovery and support a flourishing arts sector, demonstrating the robustness and creativity of its people.



# Recommendations

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## 1. PLANNING & COLLABORATION

**Community Consultation:** Prioritise community needs and voices as an integral part of the planning process for public art and urban development projects. Ensure that these projects align with the needs, desires, and histories of the communities they serve.

**Partnership Opportunities:** Seek out and cultivate long-term partnerships between arts organisations, grassroots initiatives, corporate entities, and government agencies to ensure sustained funding and logistical support for public projects.

**Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement:** Engage various stakeholders, including educational institutions, landowners, contemporary organisations, advocates for positive change, people helping those in need, and community leaders in collaborative efforts.

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## 2. RESILIENCE & PREPAREDNESS

**Long-Term Preparedness:** Recognise that disasters are ongoing challenges and that recovery timeframes are non-linear. Strengthen arts and cultural policy, aiding those in need and reconnecting in spaces with traumatic histories in an ever-changing and uncertain post-disaster landscape.

**Community Resilience:** Integrate art in public spaces and community-led initiatives into broader community resilience and disaster preparedness plans with a community-centric approach, flexible funding options, collaborative partnerships, and professional development opportunities.

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## 3. IMPLEMENTATION & ACCESSIBILITY

**Adaptive and Responsive Framework:** Consult with arts practitioners to create an adaptive and responsive framework for public art initiatives, allowing for swift action in response to community needs.

**Streamlined Permitting:** Simplify permitting processes for creative projects (temporary and permanent) and events in public spaces to encourage broader community participation and reduce bureaucratic obstacles. Consult with practitioners to develop an understanding of needs.

**Access and Trust:** Promote access to the region's public art and cultural sites. Encourage councils and organisations to broker sites for creative activations. Cultivate trust in the community's ability to reimagine underutilised spaces.

# Recommendations

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## 4. EDUCATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

**Education and Training:** Invest in community education and professional development programs that empower local artists, urban planners, and community organisers with the necessary skills to develop and manage projects in public spaces. Implement curriculum in schools and tertiary institutions, and provide opportunities for students to gain experience within the region's arts sector.

**Documentation and Reporting:** Develop comprehensive and accessible mechanisms to assess art's effectiveness and community impact in public spaces. These mechanisms will provide the groundwork for ongoing funding and support.

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## 5. PUBLIC ART, COMMUNITY-LED SPACES, & URBAN DEVELOPMENT

**Public Art and Temporary Placemaking:** Advocate for integrating both in the Northern Rivers landscape. High-calibre public art can attract tourism and enhance cultural offerings, while temporary placemaking projects remain equally invaluable in creating communal bonds and activating public spaces.

**Community-Led Spaces in Recovery:** Actively support community-led spaces in recovery. These spaces empower communities to take ownership of public areas, benefiting people from diverse backgrounds.

**Dynamic Urban Development:** Recognise that cities and towns are dynamic places that must continually adapt to meet the evolving needs of their communities. Arts and culture should be considered an essential element of urban planning and development.

## The path of Ōtautahi Christchurch's recovery following the earthquakes has seen numerous phases, from innovative short-term responses to long-term rebuilding efforts.

There was an initial burst of bold creativity and imaginative solutions in the aftermath. However, as the years passed and the city embarked on its roadmap to 'rebuilding', this bold innovation faced obstacles in policies, large-scale infrastructure builds, and a shift towards returning to pre-quake 'normalcy'.

Recovery is not only about services and the built form of a city but also about the process of rebuilding communities (Brand, Nicholson, and Allen 2019). Negative transformations of the urban landscape can challenge people's sense of identity and belonging to a place. This underscores the importance of social capital, which encompasses networks, relationships, and social connections within a community. These factors are pivotal in disaster recovery by facilitating mutual support, trust, and collaboration among community members.

Disaster experiences can enhance interpersonal relationships as individuals come together to support one another during the immediate recovery. In Ōtautahi Christchurch, community-led, temporary, and placemaking projects emerged as vital elements in the city's recovery process. These approaches bridged the large gap between emergency response and long-term recovery, showcasing the determination of Ōtautahi Christchurch's residents to reimagine their city through collaborative efforts.

The earthquakes initially brought communities together, but the long aftermath and rebuild remained an ever-present reality and a frequent topic for many years. Crises make previously hidden or private issues communal (McCloud et al. 2014). The entire community needs to engage in conversations about collective values and future aspirations. The recovery objective among residents was not merely to engineer a 'better' city but to create an environment where a better city could organically emerge.

**'The difficulty with city planning is finding the balance between the hunt for an outward identity and valuing the everyday life of its citizens'** (McCloud et al. 2014:110).

Significant research acknowledges that the recovery phase is often the least understood and can be slow and inefficient (Brand, Nicholson, and Allen 2019). There is importance in facilitating the conditions for positive change within a city, rather than imposing external influences that dictate what positive change within a rebuild should look like, as this will continue to build frustration among community members.

## **In the aftermath of disasters, innovative solutions are imperative. Public art practices and placemaking are crucial in this context.**

Creative thinking becomes paramount, and public art practices significantly contribute to the well-being of individuals and communities. Gap Filler's approach to creative placemaking demonstrates how temporary, low-cost projects in public spaces can connect communities, provide platforms for citizen participation, and build favourable ecosystems. Their initiatives engage communities and promote playful experimentation. Gap Filler's experience showcases the potential for placemaking projects to encourage experimentation and express different modes of city-making that can evolve and contribute to long-term urban development plans.

Working parallel to Gap Filler, Life in Vacant Spaces became an intermediary between creative projects and physical spaces. The organisation's model provides opportunities to experiment with creative projects, with the flexibility to discontinue if they don't work out. This model promotes trying out bold ideas without the pressure of permanence, with creatives encouraged to make the most of the limited timeframes and support from the organisation. This temporary approach allows projects and sites to evolve throughout their time.

It encourages creatives to think about all aspects of their projects, from development to successfully wrapping up a project at its close. In Ōtautahi, these approaches filled the significant gap between emergency response and recovery, demonstrating how residents were committed to rethinking and regenerating their city through collaborative processes. Grassroots responses such as placemaking initiated a critical phase in the city's recovery and contributed to building resilience.

## **Toi Ōtautahi's Arts and Cultural Strategy spans from 2019 to 2024 and provides a compelling example of how the broader benefits of arts and creativity can positively impact a city's recovery.**

This strategy, extending beyond the arts sector, emphasises its ability to improve the well-being of residents, enhance their sense of identity, activate urban spaces, attract visitors, and boost the local economy. It embodies the importance of adaptability, acknowledging that it is 'a living document that will evolve' (Christchurch City Council 2019), ensuring its continued relevance in addressing emerging challenges.

Following the Northern Rivers floods, community-led and guerrilla placemaking projects emerged as creative responses to the widespread devastation.

**These efforts not only revitalised damaged and disrupted spaces but symbolised the determination of the local communities to reclaim their environment and rebuild their sense of place.**

In these instances, creatives and community members have taken it into their own hands to reimagine what is needed or necessary in recovery.

We must recognise our responsibility to engage with and support creatives in the Northern Rivers community. Our duty of care extends beyond mere acknowledgement; it requires active involvement in addressing their concerns, needs, and perspectives within the framework of planning and decision-making processes. This approach will foster trust and contribute to the overall well-being of our community members. We must establish a transparent, inclusive, and community-led way of working to achieve this. Our approach should be considerate, transparent, collaborative, and adaptable to evolving circumstances, emphasising continuous communication and listening to those in need.

**The Expansive Encounters program and the subsequent learnings have the potential to bring about significant changes at a civic level in the Northern Rivers.**

Reflecting on the lessons learned, it becomes evident that empowering individuals and granting them agency can create innovative and emotionally fulfilling environments within our region. By investing in further education and engaging directly with the community, we can equip creatives with the necessary skills to conceive and manage impactful public art projects. This approach ensures the sustained growth of our vibrant arts sector.

**By embracing the provided recommendations and remaining attuned to the evolving needs of our community, we can navigate the complexities of post-disaster recovery and continue to thrive in the face of uncertainty.**





*Dafodil, Raymond Herber, Christchurch Botanical Gardens*



# Conclusion

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The Art in Public Spaces recovery stream and its subsequent Expansive Encounters pilot project have demonstrated the power and potential for public innovation and artistic renewal in the Northern Rivers and Ōtautahi regions. This collaborative initiative is driven by a shared and ongoing commitment to post-disaster recovery and community renewal, illuminating a path towards an innovative and engaged future for the Northern Rivers community. In recovery, the role of the creative at first is difficult to understand and place; however, public spaces and public art play a crucial role during times of uncertainty.



*Labelled Affirmations, Francesca Rengel, The Back Alley Gallery, Lismore*

## THE NEXT PHASE OF RECOVERY WILL OCCUR IN PUBLIC SPACES

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If we intend to redesign our public spaces to be more resilient, adaptable, and attuned to the new needs of residents, policymakers must incorporate the voices of architects, designers, artists, artisans, and other creatives from the outset. The expertise of public-space partners is essential to finding new ways to inspire and connect community members during this challenging time.

## A FERTILE MOMENT FOR EXPERIMENTATION

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Recovery is an important moment for urban and social designers to redefine the 'essential parts' of public spaces and re-examine disciplinary intent and the challenges of delivering art, culture, and connection. For creatives, recovery creates an opportunity for a broader conversation about the role of architects/creatives/designers/artists in contributing to conversations about equity, social practice, and accessibility in the built form.

**Thinking global and local: While we may not be experiencing these challenges equally, we are all globally connected in a shared experience.**

We must think at both the local and global level, considering our shared experiences and learnings that we can share and assist in our localised recoveries.

Through this project, we have found that working in public spaces in recovery and renewal is bound in connectivity, as physical urban experience is irreplaceable in many ways, offering incomparable forms of human connection. Arts and cultural interventions are essential in post-disaster recovery, nurturing growth, resilience, and community renewal. This project was an adaptable response to the challenges of our time. It catalysed the stages of recovery, fostering dialogues and connections between the community, professionals, businesses, and governments across our region. This project will have a lasting impact that resonates beyond the duration of the residencies, positioning arts and creativity as thriving forces for renewal in the region, nationally, and beyond. Within artistic and creative communities, dynamic and collaborative ideas are in abundance.

**Expansive Encounters has shed light on the fact that now is the time to increase funds to the agencies and organisations that steward our public realm.**

Now is the time to invest in the ongoing management, programming, and refinement of public spaces rather than expensive capital improvements alone.

In council budgets, cities could treat public spaces as what they are: fundamental building blocks of our health, social resilience, and democracy. Parks and other public spaces have long been a last priority across the board compared to other types of infrastructure. Other investments in public space management, such as through business improvement districts, are based on assessing surrounding property owners, leaving behind communities that cannot pay to play.

## **Place managers can provide the logistical muscle we need to bring more and more of our daily lives outdoors.**

They can serve as the great connectors, breaking down the silos between placemaking, transportation, public health, economic stimulus, food systems, social justice, and social services. They can take on the task of inviting community members into the process of recovery—and in neighbourhoods that lack such managers, cities can strengthen local leadership by investing in existing neighbourhood groups and by building inclusive new coalitions through training and funding.

## **By working together, municipalities and place managers can help lay the groundwork for fairer and more resilient cities and towns.**

But this all depends on whether or not cities have the political courage to embrace one simple fact: recovery will happen in public spaces.

When envisioning the future of the arts sector in the Northern Rivers, we imagine a deeply personalised transformation guided by a shared vision of adaptability, creativity, and inclusivity.

Our public spaces hold the potential to evolve into vibrant expressions of our community's identity, driven by a strong commitment to prioritise the voices and needs of our artists and residents. Through collaborative partnerships that bridge arts organisations, grassroots initiatives, corporations, and government agencies, we can secure sustained support for projects and public interventions that inspire unity and cultural richness.

## **These public spaces will become more than just physical landscapes; they will be significant sites where we collectively share our stories, aspirations, and shared values.**

Adaptability and innovation will be the defining characteristics of our region as we integrate arts and culture into our forward-looking plans. Recognising their crucial role in shaping our future, we can embrace a community-centric approach, flexible funding, and partnerships that empower us to navigate changes and challenges together. Our commitment to accessibility and inclusivity will simplify processes, ensuring that all members of our community can actively engage with public art and cultural sites, amplifying a sense of belonging and cultural vibrancy within our region.





# Appendix

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## 1. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITH DEBORAH MCCORMICK

Arts Northern Rivers invited Deborah McCormick to the region as an immediate outcome of the short engagement in Ōtautahi. With 25 years' experience in bringing art into public spaces, Deborah is a renowned industry leader and visionary in public art. During her time in the Northern Rivers, Deborah participated as a panellist in the final session of Art Practice in 3 Bites and facilitated a workshop through PRACTICE 101. On 30 June, the third and final instalment of the 3 Bites series focused on the crucial role of public art in nurturing vibrant communities, pushing the boundaries of audience engagement, and shaping the identity of place. As an active participant and panellist, Deborah shared her extensive experience and profound understanding of public art as the keystone to a vibrant and thriving city.

On 1 July 2023, Arts Northern Rivers hosted PRACTICE 101: Public Art, a professional development session with Deborah McCormick and 16 creative participants from the Northern Rivers. The two-and-a-half-hour interactive workshop explored how artists responded after the earthquakes in Ōtautahi Christchurch during the city's rebuild, and unpacked the temporary and permanent public art commissioning processes. Participants of this workshop were encouraged to be active agents in working collaboratively and collectively with communities, arts organisations, people, and places to create stimulating, rigorous, sophisticated, and generous public artworks.

With the support from current SCAPE Public Art director Richard Aindow, an online resource was developed as an outcome of the workshop, offering a comprehensive overview of 'How to Develop a Proposal for a Public Artwork', with example budgets to support artists in taking their art into new contexts.

# Appendix

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## 2. DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT OF THE IMMERSION

During the Expansive Encounters program, a blend of planned and organic networking events, meetings, and guided tours ran parallel to spontaneous, genuine encounters with the participants. While it's impossible to fully capture the richness of the entire experience, a few standout moments deserve recognition.

The lead-up to the immersion was a whirlwind, marked by double-checking packing lists, ensuring international phone plans were activated, and navigating the immense emotions of leaving loved ones behind. Antoinette spent her final days in the Northern Rivers de-installing a powerful collaborative exhibition at Elevator ARI, while Erica lovingly prepared a month's worth of meals to stock in the freezer for her family.

**The two artists arrived in Ōtautahi at 3:30am on Friday 1 September, tired, wired, and excited by the immediate experience of public art at the airport entrance and along the drive to Sutton House.**

They shared chamomile tea and chocolate before heading straight to bed. On the first official day of the program, seven hours after their early morning arrival, the participants waited patiently to have photos taken with Ōtautahi's enigmatic public wizard in the street. This encounter was followed by a warm and generous welcome with gluten-free cake and assorted beverages at Toi Ōtautahi, offered by strangers who would quickly become peers, collaborators, mentors, and friends.

The initial days of the immersion felt like weeks, as the participants relished their freedom from domestic responsibilities and excitement for exploring an unknown urban landscape.

**Bill Sutton's studio quickly became a meeting place for long conversations about community, care, motherhood, trauma, recovery, and the nuances of diverse art practices.**



The following weeks were filled with introductions, knowledge exchanges, guided tours of activated sites, and a shared understanding of the multi-faceted stages of recovery. Chance encounters with tradies, shopkeepers, and volunteers at the local op shop sparked genuine and authentic conversations about the experience of disasters and an awareness that recovery often lacks a clear finish line.

## **The participants experienced two earthquakes during the immersion, likened to the sensation of a drunk elephant stampeding through the house.**

Phone calls were made to the hosts to assess immediate safety and consider booking flights home. These anxieties were eased by the knowledge that ‘approximately 14,000–15,000 earthquakes occur in and around the country each year’, and ‘most earthquakes are too small to be noticed, but between 150 and 200 are large enough to be felt’ (LEARNZ). In the moment, this felt like an oversight in their preparation, but they found comfort in the reassurance and access to GeoNet. This online resource showcased that the recent earthquakes were of ‘weak to moderate’ magnitude, appearing as hundreds of small orange circles on a map.

Antoinette grappled with the decision to practice or continue to meet with the long list of engagements offered within the program. Following long discussions on the precarity of time as a mother, activist, and artist facing housing eviction upon her return, she began experimenting with large-scale mural concepts and a clay/ice boat to be released into the river adjacent to Sutton House. Erica installed a paste-up on an abandoned building within the city as a tribute to one of the students she connected with on the DEFIANT project. Supporting this activation on the anniversary of his one-year passing was both heart-wrenching and powerful to engage with.

## **The sheer joy of witnessing Erica and Antoinette roll down a perfectly manicured hill in Amberley through tears of laughter was palpable. Immersive encounters in nature became integral throughout the four weeks and emphasised the importance of well-being within the program.**

These moments of respite in the landscape offered a much-needed break from the recovery pressures. Lime scooters became an exciting means of exploring the city, while leisurely walks allowed them to engage with every aspect of the public landscape. Multiple nights were spent eating fish and chips from the takeaway shop around the corner, and Bill Sutton’s studio gradually filled up with to-do lists, experiments, and the artwork of two mothers with the time and space to practice.

The Expansive Encounters program officially closed by bringing 32 artists and arts workers from Ōtautahi together for a Share Kai Culture event facilitated by InCommons and an Eritrean group of cooks. Directors sat beside artists, sharing food and engaging in conversations on culture, connection, and community. The immersion unofficially concluded a couple of nights later with one last dinner in Lyttelton, where participants shared highlights and exchanged heartfelt hugs with their hosts, who had become friends over such a short period of time.



# Appendix

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## 3. EVALUATION SURVEY- OVERVIEW

### Antoinette O'Brien

#### PRE-EXCHANGE

In her initial assessment, Antoinette demonstrated a clear understanding of the program's goals and objectives. She expressed feeling well-supported by the program organisers. However, she also mentioned having some concerns about her own preparation and the presence of loose ends before her departure. These concerns indicate that, despite external support, she felt a need for more personal readiness. Antoinette's commitment to her artistic goals was evident as she articulated them clearly and aligned them with the program's focus. Antoinette expressed genuine excitement about engaging with the local community and participating in cross-cultural exchanges. Her focus on being present, humble, and respectful in these interactions reflected a positive intention of community engagement.

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#### MID-EXCHANGE

During the mid-exchange evaluation, Antoinette acknowledged her progress towards achieving her artistic goals. She appreciated the support by host coordinators, however, she also mentioned challenges related to the clarity of expectations, commitments, and goal setting within the program. These challenges suggested there might have been structured opportunities for improvement in communication and engagement. Antoinette highlighted the significance of her interactions with local artists and practitioners, emphasising the potential for future collaborations and the impact of these connections on her artistic practice. These experiences showcased the value of cross-cultural exchange in encouraging creativity and personal growth.

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#### FINAL INTERVIEW

Antoinette's final interview reflection provided insights into the impact of the flood on her practice. She acknowledged that her inspiration from nature and local landscapes added depth to her overall experience. She expressed her strong commitment to advocating for the creative industries and community recovery. She highlighted the need for short-term and long-term support, acknowledging the ongoing nature of recovery efforts. Her perspective on maintaining a resourceful and sustainable approach was valuable. Alongside this, her perspective on public space changed within the immersion, and her observations between Ōtautahi and the Northern Rivers have underscored the significance of community consultation and engagement in defining public spaces.

# Erica Gully

## PRE-EXCHANGE SURVEY

Erica expressed high satisfaction with the support provided by the program organisers and partnering organisations. While she felt well-prepared and supported, she acknowledged some uncertainty about her own level of preparation. Erica's artistic goals were evident, and she displayed excitement about building upon her experiences and knowledge. Her anticipation of engaging with the local community and exploring cultural exchange was notable, resulting in significant community engagement in her practice.

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## MID-EXCHANGE SURVEY

During the mid-exchange evaluation, Erica's assessment indicated that she was on track to achieve her artistic goals, although there was room for further development. She rated the program's contribution to cross-cultural exchange and learning as highly effective, highlighting the positive impact of her interactions with arts organisations and practitioners. Erica felt well-supported by the host coordinators and expressed gratitude for the generosity and knowledge sharing of her interactions. However, she also identified a need for more structured check-ins, suggesting the importance of well-being check-ins, goals assessment, and supported timelines. The meaningful interactions were among the most enjoyable aspects of her exchange, focusing on shared stories and experiences. These interactions held personal and professional value, reinforcing the importance of cross-cultural exchange.

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## FINAL INTERVIEW

Erica's final interview revealed the profound impact of her exchange experience. She acknowledged the transformative power of stepping out of her comfort zone and immersing herself in an unknown environment. Erica's enrichment from conversations and shared experiences affirmed her commitment to advocating for creative industries and community recovery upon her return. Her excitement about the possibilities and expansion of public-space utilisation highlighted the impact of the exchange. Erica's experience within Ōtautahi inspired her to view public spaces as opportunities for positive engagement and unification. Her reflections emphasised the need to challenge limitations and activate public spaces in the Northern Rivers.

“I’m looking forward to taking the learnings from this experience on a personal level, not falling back into old habits and ways of being that weren’t productive. I’m excited by the possibilities.”

Erica Gully

“Engaging with people firsthand is a hope, and is the most rewarding and humbling experience.”

Antoinette O’Brien

“Cities are living dynamic places, and they have to continue to evolve to meet the needs of their communities. I don’t think there is ever a “finish” point, even though bureaucratically, we might like to think that there is. There’s always work to be done in those spaces.”

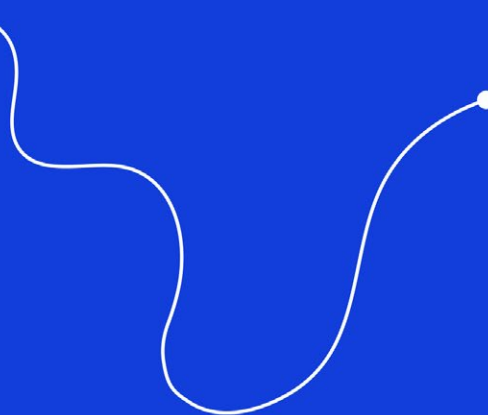
Stephanie Symns

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Expansive



Encounters

**ARTS  
NORTHERN  
RIVERS**