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## “Building a sense of community”

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**Abstract:** Kelvin Grove Urban Village (KGUV) is an innovative flagship project for its stakeholders, the Department of Housing and Queensland University of Technology. Their combined vision and philosophical approach has fostered innovative research in economic, environmental and, in the case of this paper, social sustainability.

As urban planners grapple with effective methods to stimulate social sustainability in the ‘art of city making’ through urban renewal or development projects, more are recognising that history and creativity can make great partners (Landry, 2007).

**Keywords:** public history; community engagement; digital storytelling; networked communities; urban communities; urban historian; urban renewal; new media; creative expression.

**Introduction:**

The *Sharing Stories: a social history of the KGUV*<sup>i</sup> captured the history of the ‘place’, through a multi-layered public history project. As commercial, retail, and residential buildings open, *Sharing Stories: a social patchwork* project builds on the established framework by aspiring to enrich the lives of the ‘people’ who are now coming to live, work, and play at the KGUV using social interaction and by opening up networks to include other communities. This includes devising activities that are inclusive of communities, both locally and beyond. Most activities are designed to connect in multiple ways – in ‘real life’ (through workshops and public exhibitions), as well as giving the community the opportunity to participate or access ‘online’. This paper will briefly outline the outcomes of *Sharing Stories: a social history of the KGUV* before expanding on the progress of the *Sharing Stories: a social patchwork* project.

The *Sharing Stories* project exemplifies social sustainability and sought to address two main research agendas. The first examined meaningful ways for urban residents to generate community memory, defining ‘community memory’ in line with Kubicek & Wagner<sup>ii</sup> as the collective representation of past events and experiences that leave traces in the appearance of the built environment<sup>iii</sup> and contribute to a shared socio-cultural understanding of residents in a given locale. Secondly, to examine vernacular forms of creative expression, which scholars such as Burgess<sup>iv</sup> see as a means to encourage everyday citizens to participate in the community life of their neighbourhood.

One might not immediately imagine a public history of an inner city redevelopment to be a rich research opportunity about storytelling. However, an understanding of Kelvin Grove’s history offers insight into how this unique project evolved. The *Sharing Stories* research project indicates that an apparently inconsequential piece of landscape can become a rich learning resource as a public history, if designed appropriately. A public history research project can be an important vehicle through which to stimulate socially sustainable community engagement, while historically documenting the vicinity. Education prospects can be embedded into planned activities and outcomes to provide applied participatory learning opportunities for a broad cross-section of the community. This paper will consider this argument, providing examples of how school

children, tertiary students, adults, and elderly citizens of the community, were enticed to explore and learn using storytelling and history as an engaging combination that proved of interest to everyone.

**Historical Background:**

The 16 hectares of Kelvin Grove Urban Village had a chequered past. A billabong existed on the land adjoining the Creative Industries Precinct that is now known as McCaskie Park and was used as a campsite on a track that lead to other significant dreaming places including Mount Coot-tha. Kelvin Grove was part of an area known as ‘York’s Hollow’ as well as ‘Three-Mile Scrub’ by Europeans, but the local Turrbal people called the area ‘barrambin’, meaning windy place. It was a rich source for hunting, fishing, corroborees, organised battles with nearby groups, and for other ceremonial occasions<sup>v</sup>

Brisbane’s European population had reached 7000 by the 1850s and white settlement had significantly impacted on all aspects of traditional Indigenous life. The few Turrbal people who had survived were calling Brisbane ‘umpie korumba’ or the place of many buildings. White settlers were called ‘muthar’, meaning murderer or spider<sup>vi</sup>. With the town settlement expanding, the white settlers worried about the increasing number of displaced Aborigines arriving in Brisbane and banned all Indigenous people from entering the inner settlement after 4.30pm each day and all day Sunday. In the Kelvin Grove area that meant the local people who remained were forced after dark to stay on the northern side of the Enoggera Bridge, near what is now Bancroft Park (Hacker, Hallam & Spinaze, 1995).

Even though few people have recently lived on the site that is the Kelvin Grove Urban Village, many people associate strongly with the location because of the institutions that stood there for decades: the local primary school is over 130 years old; the high school built in 1961 was one of the first in the area; the middle school, teachers’ and kindergarten colleges first occupied what is now QUT; and the military barracks became a gathering point during two world wars and was where thousands of Queenslanders served in the National Service or, decades later, the Reserve Forces.

Not all the history was particularly glamorous. Various areas of the barracks area had been a ‘night soil’ dump, a manure dump, a rubbish dump and, during the levelling phase of World War Two, a location to dump power station ash. The barracks, left deserted during the 1990s before the site was sold, had become home to an illegal drug lab factory and the local park was home to a tent resident for over 10 years<sup>vii</sup>.

In 1997, the Federal Government consolidated Australian Defence Force land and sold decommissioned sites nationally. Gona Barracks at Kelvin Grove fell into this category. After serving the military for nearly a century the land was sold to the newly elected Queensland State Government in 1998. The Department of Housing’s (formerly called the Housing Commission) core objectives were to promote social justice and assimilation wherever possible, and wanted any new social housing to be integrated into increasingly affluent and gentrified inner city neighbourhoods.

**Urban and social renewal:**

Professional urban planners were responding to population growth pressures and advising state and local government of the need to promote urban renewal by building more compact cities and encouraged higher densities around serviced village centres. The Queensland University of Technology, which owned adjoining land to the Kelvin Grove campus, was also keen on an integrated expansion of the area, and so a partnership between the two parties was forged.

Environmental, social, and economic sustainability—the triple bottom line—would become the catchcry of the Queensland Government, Brisbane City Council, professional urban planners and, indeed, the Kelvin Grove Urban Village. The simultaneous transformation of university, housing, and regional planning made it possible to explore the idea of a radical social and economic relationship between government, university, and the community.

In 1998, cultural and creative changes were afoot globally and both the Department of Housing and QUT were interested in the conceptual influences of Charles Landry<sup>viii</sup> and Comedia<sup>ix</sup> in terms of creating an ‘urban village’.

In 2003, with the infrastructure and QUT's Creative Industries complete and extensive building underway throughout the site, the KGUV project team turned their attention to social sustainability. The partners realised a sense of community could not be manufactured, but rather a creative nurturing approach was required, allowing new residents to build on the rich history of the area and feel a sense of ownership with their new environment.

As there was such a cross-section of people associated with Kelvin Grove and an abundance of possibilities for storytelling, the idea to research and chronicle the varied anecdotal histories of the vicinity, while also collecting stories of the development itself, was proposed.

From early 2004, the wider community began engaging in sharing stories of Kelvin Grove's physical past (1825-2005) through photographs, public artwork, a collated institutional history, a published book<sup>x</sup> oral history collections, digital stories, and a 'living archive' website, as part of the *Sharing Stories* history project ([www.kgurbanvillage.com.au/sharing](http://www.kgurbanvillage.com.au/sharing)). This research focused on sourcing documents and finding people who remembered stories about Kelvin Grove from 1825, as an early settlement, through to the 1990s, as a military barracks and various educational institutions, finishing in 2005, with stories from the urban planners and developers about their journey in building the infrastructure of the KGUV from vision to reality.

The community was allowed to claim their urban landscape through public history<sup>xi</sup>. Activities were designed to connect in multiple ways – in 'real life' (through workshops and public exhibitions) as well as by giving the community the opportunity to participate in or access material 'online'. The aim was to involve a cross-section of the public. Students, teachers, artists, experts, and the wider community all had the opportunity to take an active participatory role. This developed opportunities to build a sense of place, identity, and history that resonated with individuals within the Kelvin Grove community. The propagation of opportunities for community engagement, using the platform of a public history, however, extended well beyond the boundaries of the initial brief. There was a snow-ball effect as 'the word spread' and new activities sprang up under the *Sharing Stories* banner, creating opportunities for: Creative Industries undergraduate and postgraduate students from media/communication,

performance studies, visual art, communication/design, journalism, and creative writing schools. For example, postgraduate students could design exercises that might inform their PhD fieldwork research; others were able to showcase their work using the theme of ‘place’ through public art.

It was not solely QUT students who benefited from *Sharing Stories*. P-12 students at the local Kelvin Grove State College engaged in various activities that were tailored with their teachers to suit visual art, history, oral history, urban design, geography, and English curriculums.

Existing community groups were also consulted and invited to participate if they wished, including the Turrbal Association, Friends of Kelvin Grove State College history group, Artillery history group, 9th Battalion Museum, two local retirement villages, QUT Alumni, and the Oral History Association of Australia (Qld). In 2006, new local residents were also invited to be involved.

Outcomes of the project have been prolific, both for the individuals who have participated and the general community. For instance, the research also produced: full transcriptions oral history collection and accompanying MP3 recordings; two other published books (military and historical); a military history brochure<sup>xii</sup>; historically-influenced public art and park signage; an e-newsletter; historical walking tours; a photographic collection of over 2000 images of the area; and numerous visual art exhibitions have been held. A discovered manuscript of writings and photographs from 1880-1940 in North Queensland was published and donated to University of Queensland Fryer Library<sup>xiii</sup> and another photographic collection was donated to the Queensland State John Oxley Library as a result of the research.

As part of the *Sharing Stories* public history the KGUV partners also sponsored a day at Kelvin Grove for the Queensland Writers Festival in 2006. This included: sponsoring three master classes for gifted and talented teenagers from around Queensland in youth writing and illustrating; offering a free workshop in public speaking and a life writing master class for creative writing students from all Queensland universities; a crime writing panel forum open free to the public; and hosting the opening address. This included access to writers and artists such as Sophie

Masson, Michael Gerard Bauer, Jonathon Bentley, Skye Rogers, Kate Holden, Sue Abbey, Cathy Cole, Shane Maloney, Leigh Redhead, Peter Temple, James Valentine, Lionel Shriver, and James Morrison.

Other opportunities and relationships were forged to allow community and student members alike to participate in the *Sharing Stories* project by: participating in digital storytelling workshops; working with local primary school children engaged in youth and children's writing; or by attending guest lectures in a creative nonfiction/life-writing class. Students could work with members of the community and the *Sharing Stories* project team completing: photographic and historical research; editing; proofreading; publishing layout; writing for different audiences, including invitations, exhibition material, community publications, reports, script writing, web writing, interviewing, and curatorial work for the numerous exhibitions held. For instance, communication/design and visual art students helped to build the initial website, while the revamp 12 months later was completed by students from creative writing. Both journalism and creative writing students researched and wrote short nonfiction stories as content for the website.

Postgraduate research at the KGUV in the use of DST to remember historical stories in public history was innovative. The workshops conducted by Burgess and myself, in changing the traditionally accepted DST format, to one that is more inclusive of the absent voices of community, proved rewarding for both researchers and participants. Community goodwill is arguably immeasurable academically, but dozens of emails, phone calls, and letters of appreciation were also received.

Other associated issues and findings that were raised and investigated in the course of the research were: the value an 'urban historian' can add to any urban planning or redevelopment team; multi-layered public history research projects do provide important opportunities in interdisciplinary tertiary, as well as within schools, community groups, and for the public in general for teaching and learning.

### **Continuing to make history:**

In 2007, the research grew and continued to demonstrate how new media could engage communities and stimulate social sustainability. A team of researchers from the



Institute of Creative Industries (iCi) has developed a number of narrative-based new media tools for community engagement that were trialed in the Kelvin Grove Urban Village for use in communities beyond in 2008, as part of the long-term goal of transferring these innovative approaches to a broader range of ‘real world’ communities. These were a component of the *Sharing Stories: social patchwork* team. An exemplar of this suite of approaches will be trialed at the FKP Albion Flour Mill redevelopment in Brisbane and as part of a Australia Research Council Linkage Grant awarded in October 2007, where Noosa City Council, Noosa State High School, and the Hornery Institute are our external partners.

Our research is so far suggesting that fostering human talent and digital creativity outside formal school or workplace environments will favourably nurture societal and cultural values, promoting not only an innovation culture and economy, but an inclusive society<sup>xiv</sup>.

One of the newly-developed web 2.0 applications is called ‘history lines’ and it enables the sharing of community narratives to be linked to GPS-defined locations via a web and mobile interface. The overarching methodology uses narrative to link practices in socio-cultural public history, community development/engagement, and urban planning.

The KGUV stakeholders’ original intention was to build a sense of place, identity, and history that would resonate with past, present, and future individuals living within the Kelvin Grove community. The outcomes produced seemed to escalate as the project progressed and successfully drew the attention of urban planners about the value that can be gained in sponsoring social sustainability in urban renewal projects. Arguably, the lessons learned at Kelvin Grove in the *Sharing Stories* project and the associated research may be encouragingly applied in other willing communities.

As urban planners grapple with effective methods to stimulate social sustainability in the ‘art of city making’, through urban renewal or development projects, more are recognising that history and creativity can make great partners<sup>xv</sup>. To date, our work has brought together three research traditions—urban studies, public history, and new media—in an attempt to synchronise the various prospects and challenges arising

within each discipline. The original research aspiration sought to bridge the use of new media and public history using storytelling, in an urban renewal development. The role of content creation and digital creativity in the development of healthy and sustainable neighbourhoods still requires further study, but in supporting the *Sharing Stories* projects, developers and urban planners recognise the key role facilitators/producers of public history and new media can play in realising this potential, by partnering with them—thus proving advantageous for all.

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**Illustrations:**

1. The Kelvin Grove Urban Village in relation to Brisbane's CBD, 2001, photo courtesy of the Queensland Department of Housing.
2. National servicemen on parade at Kelvin Grove Barracks, 1951, photo courtesy of Nigel Stevens
3. 'Faces of Kelvin Grove', the Kelvin Grove State College (KGSC) grade P-11 art exhibition, 2006, photo courtesy of KGSC.

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