



## COVER SHEET

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**Klaebe, Helen and Foth, Marcus (2006) Capturing Community Memory with Oral History and New Media: The Sharing Stories Project. *In Proceedings 3rd International Conference of the Community Informatics Research Network (CIRN)*, Prato, Italy.**

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# Capturing Community Memory with Oral History and New Media: The Sharing Stories Project

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## ***Abstract***

The Kelvin Grove Urban Village (KGUV) is a diverse inner-city master-planned community in Brisbane, Australia, established through a strong partnership between the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and the Queensland Government's Department of Housing ([www.kgurbanvillage.com.au](http://www.kgurbanvillage.com.au)). The 16 hectare KGUV is unique, because the land's past use includes a rich and varied mix of indigenous, military and educational history, but very little residential history. This paper reports on work in progress, which brings together urban studies, public history and new media in an attempt to synchronise the various opportunities and challenges arising within each discipline. Phase one (2004 – 2006) focussed on remembering the physical location of the KGUV. Phase two (2007 – 2009) examines the people and community, as they begin to move in to this newly completed development. Both phases engage community by creating community memory through public history, life writing and digital storytelling. The first phase researched the use of multi art forms in a public history project, as a vehicle to chronicle the history of the physical location of the KGUV, and to examine the changing role of contemporary public historian. The aim of this paper is to outline the research design for the next phase of this public history research project, which will support digital creativity and media literacy with a view to help new residents find a voice and participate in the knowledge economy. It also seeks to improve a sense of well-being and belonging, foster human talent and socio-cultural values favourable to creativity and innovation. The project will do this by encouraging people to gain a better appreciation of their capacity to bring about change within their local community. It also hopes to re-invigorate a more contemporary interpretation of community values in a networked society and enhance the capacity to interpret and engage with our urban environment by raising awareness of the socio-cultural background and heritage of new community members.

## Introduction

A sense of community cannot be manufactured. Rather, the Kelvin Grove Urban Village (KGUV) needs to be creatively nurtured, allowing residents to build on the rich history of the area and feel a sense of ownership with their new environment. Even though few people have lived on the site that is the KGUV, many people associate strongly with the location. Since early 2004, the wider community has engaged in sharing stories of Kelvin Grove's physical past (1825-2005) through photographs, public artwork, a collated institutional history, a published book, 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 focussed on people remembering stories about Kelvin Grove from 1825, as an early settlement, through to the 1990s as the location of a military barracks and various educational institutions and finishing in 2005, with the stories from urban planners and developers and their journey of building the infrastructure of the KGUV from vision to reality. This project to date has brought together three research traditions – urban studies, public history, new media – in an attempt to synchronise the various opportunities and challenges arising within each discipline. One of the key challenges of urban studies is to respond to the problem of urban densification and inner-city renewal. 'New Urbanism' (De Villiers, 1997) is one of these responses and although scholars such as Castells (2004) and Mitchell (2005) have started to point to the shifting quality of social communication using new and mobile media and the opportunities for urban design, as yet, this cross-disciplinary debate lacks a grounded theory. Such theory would incorporate the impact the Internet and new media technology on everyday life in an urban context. Horrigan (2001) describes the great potential of the Internet and new media for government service delivery and community building in urban developments. However, the role of content creation and digital creativity in the development of healthy and sustainable neighbourhoods requires further study. The project recognises the key role public historians can play in realising this potential.

This project will address two aspects of this research agenda. First, it examines meaningful ways for urban residents to generate community memory. We define 'community memory' in line with Kubicek & Wagner (2002) as the collective representation of past events and experiences that leave traces in the appearance of the built environment (cf. Hayden, 1995) and contribute to a shared socio-cultural understanding of residents in a given locale.

Secondly, the project looks at vernacular forms of creative expression which scholars such as

Burgess (2006) see as a means to encourage everyday citizens to participate in the community life of their neighbourhood. The specific aims of the study are to use new media applications:

1. To develop an innovative new media methodology that will extend the current portfolio of methods used by public historians and cultural community developers so that representations of and contributions to community memory can be made visible;
2. To broaden and reinvigorate the traditional role of the public historian and life writer working with communities via the facilitation, curation and mediation of new media and digital content that fosters creative expression in a residential urban development;
3. To explore ways an urban community can be created and sustained in a new location through socio-cultural activities and motivations for participation, and incorporate them into an accessible best practice urban cultural community development model;
4. To identify new ways of understanding how the development of a ‘creative community’ might impact on the health of the community, in particular, by facilitating the collection and sharing of people’s oral histories and life writing, with a view to enhancing their individual sense of selfhood and connectedness to community life;
5. To understand the role of locally produced and locally relevant content (personal and community images and narratives) in the establishment of meaningful social networks.

This research seeks to bridge aspirations for new media (in public history/life writing) with work around new urbanism. It provides a thorough theoretical and empirical investigation into the interaction between the social and cultural elements of a suburb and the potential health benefits that arise from engaging the community in creative activities. As all residents are new to the urban village, phase two can investigate issues of socio-cultural sustainability in the experience of residents settling into a new environment and bringing their histories with them to be made anew. We break down the concept of urban sustainability into the ‘triple bottom line’ (Gleeson *et al.*, 2004, p. 353) of environmental, economic and social sustainability, and this project focuses on the social component. Drawing on the findings of Foth (2004) in this context, it engages a tripartite approach comprising community capacity building strategies (the *people* dimension), a theory of neighbourhood identity based on ‘networked individualism’ (Wellman, 2001) (the *place* dimension), and design of online community networks (the *technology* dimension).

The KGUV is distinctly planned and designed to depart from homogeneous planning principles by reflecting a desire to achieve a higher level of integration of population diversity (ie. ‘mainstream’ accommodation and affordable housing), while blending with residential, commercial, educational, cultural and employment facilities and activities (cf. Gleeson, 2004; Healy & Birrell, 2004). The assembling of this site from existing and new entities provides a unique opportunity that builds on the previous public history project, which remembered ‘the place that was’ (Klaebe, 2006a). This new case study explores innovative ways of fostering a sense of community and belonging with people who are newly collocated to live, work, study and play there. We are presented with a research opportunity rarely available, as residents only began living in the KGUV from mid 2006. The first phase of the project coincided with the infrastructure and construction stage and phase two gives the project great immediacy, as it enables us to capture community creation in the making. The KGUV design was influenced by Landry’s (2000) conceptualisation of ‘urban village’, ie. a development of mixed low income and upmarket housing, retail and a university that share the site and fit in with an existing neighbourhood. This type of urban and community design requires principles which are specifically developed to create places that support population diversity and social mix (Talen, 2006). In this context, Landry (2001) highlights the potential of ‘creative community’ and the possibility of engaging a development such as the KGUV and its residents through storytelling.

The success of digital storytelling (DST) workshops in phase one (Klaebe, 2006b), has determined its use again in phase two, this time as a method of transforming people from occupants of a house to members of a neighbourhood, utilising socio-cultural animation and methods as described by Lambert (2002) as well as the present authors (Foth, 2006b; Klaebe, 2006b; Klaebe & Foth, 2006). Matei & Ball-Rokeach (2003) describe the risk of differential integration of new media in community life, which may also lead to the disengagement of even the most educated and technologically savvy residents from their neighbourhoods. They found that, ‘*the Internet adds only to those people who already have sufficient connections to communicative resources*’ (2003, p. 655). This reinforces the point of departure of this project: connectivity alone does not ensure community. By offering real stimuli and incentives to strengthen the social fabric of the KGUV, the project will integrate a communication model to encourage residents to share their stories so as to better understand themselves and their neighbours, while at the same time helping them feel engaged with the area’s past, present and future.

# **Research Rationale and Objectives**

## ***Public history and new media***

There are few coherent resources available to public/oral historians, community development or public health professionals and general community groups that allow them to self-drive/-manage new media storytelling activities that will engage their respective communities.

General ‘how to’ books are quickly outdated. There are professional associations and organisations, but no collaborative communities of practice or online case studies to model.

There is an urgent need to expand the current portfolio of methods used in this field to include new media trends, tools and opportunities, and communicate the practice and experience of these new methods widely (Klaebe, 2006b). Furthermore, there is a need to translate recent academic findings into applied tools for practitioners.

This project is developing a cross-disciplinary methodology in an online resource toolkit. New media has the potential to reconfigure traditional relationships between old/new; public/personal; and collective/individual. Research is emerging that seeks to understand how vernacular forms of creative expression, using new media tools, can be used in the creation of community by the people themselves (Davies, 2004; Foth, 2006a). By making new media techniques accessible and providing guidance and training resources, communities can conduct their own workshops in digital storytelling, oral history and life writing in a self directed manner with peer support. This project will develop a prototype of an online resource toolkit that provides a national platform for a community of practice of public historians, life writers and cultural community development practitioners to share material, offer peer support and connect with government and communities around digital storytelling and amateur creative expression using new media technology to improve local community connections.

## ***Public history in the multimedia age***

The future professional identity of public historians is uncertain. Public historians and professionals such as librarians and archivists are facing the challenge to accurately capture and chronicle public history, which is increasingly represented through historical artefacts that stem from digital technology and vernacular forms of creative expression. The UK Government recognises that the Arts are more central to the national identity if they are produced and consumed by the broader population rather than by a few elite artists (Creative

Industries Task Force, 2001). Burgess (2006) sees great potential for amateur creativity and argues that these works offer a chance to better understand ourselves and our communities and how each sit within a broader landscape. However, oral history projects in these contexts rarely venture beyond recording interviews. While public history uses oral histories as part of a wider practice, very few public historians engage with the vernacular as well as with a diverse range of methods. Moreover, little research has examined the relationship between public history and storytelling through a variety of platforms, such as community life writing workshops, new media/DST and the display of collections using new media tools.

While we and our colleagues, e.g. Neilsen (2005) and Klæbe (2004; 2006b), have begun to examine the relationship of storytelling and oral history using DST and creative historical writing, very little research is available on public history projects using DST as an alternative way to engage the community. The work of Frisch (2000) calls for a thorough engagement with new media tools to overhaul the professional identity and expand the core body of knowledge of public historians to face up to the challenge of capturing and sharing ‘history in a multimedia age’ (Morris-Suzuki, 2005), ie. new media literacy and practices for the capturing of contemporary and new history. We seek to inform the creation of a methodological tool kit for the professional development of public historians, librarians, archivists and educators which offers opportunities to reinvigorate and improve the quality of contributions these professionals make to the well-being of communities. We will help to inform and tailor future public history projects and the involvement of creative industries in this field in the coming decade by continuing to document the experience derived from researching the KGUV site within a cross-disciplinary framework.

### ***Urban renewal and inner-city densification***

Australia is one of the most urbanised countries in the world in terms of the high proportion of urban dwellers among its total population. Approximately two-thirds of the total population reside in major cities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004). Current projections for South East Queensland (SEQ) are 3.71 million residents by 2026, an increase of around 1.05 million people, or almost 50,000 each year on average (Queensland Government, 2005, p. 5). The Queensland Government is aware that the continuation of the low density urban sprawl in SEQ is not sustainable. These trends (similar in other areas elsewhere in Australia and the world) have global economic relevance and reflect the changing role of cities internationally. Compact city policies are being developed and implemented in all Australian

capitals to deal with population pressures and urban expansion. Brisbane is one of the most pressured, given its long history of low-density urban sprawl and now its status as the second highest growth region in the world. Randolph (2004, p. 483) argues that,

*The language of community has come back with vengeance in policy areas that ignored it for many years. Cities are becoming, perhaps more than ever before, collections of distinctive communities and neighbourhoods, all the more differentiated as the cities grow in size and complexity. As the city expands, people remain focused on their small part of it.*

Mixed-use residential developments such as the KGUV are ‘a small part of it’. Regarded as a new way to make urban densification socially sustainable, the KGUV provides immediate surroundings in which location-based interactions with other residents can occur and communicative ecologies and social networks can emerge. The strategies proposed in these policies open up new research questions around issues of living together creatively and population diversity, which call for new urban community development models.

Gleeson (2004) gives examples of the prevailing attitude of developers who confuse ‘planning for community’ with ‘master-planning community’ and the associated negative impact on community development efforts. The KGUV development encouragingly recognises that “community development involves human horticulture, rather than social engineering” (Gilchrist, 2000, p. 269). However, a theoretically and empirically grounded understanding is required of how urban neighbourhoods can be assisted to grow in healthy ways by the use of innovative cultural community development approaches and the role of new public history methods to assist in this effort.

### ***Linking public health and storytelling***

The question of whether oral narratives and life writing have therapeutic benefits to the individual and the community has long been pondered and its potential suggested (Eakin, 1999; Freadman, 2001; Freeman, 1993; McAdams, 2001; Olney, 1998). There is an increasing body of literature in the field of oral history, public history and life writing that discusses the relationship between the interviewer and the participant. Some of these studies engage with trauma and testimony, exploring the personal and collective therapeutic benefits derived from witnessing and recounting. However, there remains a lack of rigorous evidence that establishes the potential benefit of creative expression and oral narratives on the health of

individuals and the community. Part of the burden on Australia's health system stems from treating the symptoms of diseases, which in some cases have far more intangible and unspecific causes, such as, e.g., alienation and loneliness.

We seek to establish first measures that hope to illustrate a causal link between creative activities such as engagement in oral history and narratives on the one hand and community and individual health benefits on the other. Zunzunegui *et al.* (2003; 2004) and Iwasaki *et al.* (2002) have shown the positive impact social interaction can have on individual and community health. Our project will build on these examples with a view to establish ways to measure the impact creative activities, such as storytelling, can have on public health.

### ***Connectivity does not ensure community***

The technical infrastructure potential in the KGUV (and in other places) will not reach its full capacity for the benefit of the community, unless users are able to engage with meaningful applications and relevant content. This corresponds with the stark contrast between the rapid development and uptake of 2.5 and 3G mobile technology on the one hand and a lack of socio-culturally meaningful local content solutions and applications on the other. New generation mobile phones can store 3,000 songs, 40 minutes of video, receive radio or television broadcasts and have mobile email and Internet access. The growing social, cultural and economic impact of locative media solutions (Davies, 2004) will take on greater significance in the socio-cultural part of everyday life as the major telecommunications carriers commit to 3G technology and look for appropriate social and local services and content over the next three years.

Many new urban developments such as KGUV are systematically planned and rapidly built and marketed, creating instant 'communities' in relatively dense concentrations. Despite the fact that the KGUV is following new urban planning and design principles that foster the integration of diverse entrants, the associated strategies are mostly limited to the development of the built environment. As a consequence, the Department of Housing is turning to the social sciences and humanities for answers to achieve a socially sustainable 'urban village' (Landry, 2000, 2001). Our recent research findings (Foth, 2006a; Klæbe, 2006a) will inform the development of a gateway for locally created content to a web-based community portal in order to provide a platform for academic and industry debate; animate community engagement; and promote well-being in an urban community through digital creativity. This web-based module accommodates applications for the publishing of creative and local

content (photo and video galleries, digital storytelling etc.) – either in a broadcast-style collective one-to-many or many-to-many mode, or in a networked peer-to-peer mode of communication. This is paramount to avoid a ‘if you build it, they will come’ approach towards technology provision. It links up to other old and new media channels used in the communicative ecology of the KGUV, such as public displays, mobile phones, and community television. It also provides a gateway into a network of local content, while making social connectivity visible and promoting community efficacy (Kavanaugh *et al.*, 2005).

## **Research Design**

### ***Conceptual framework***

We have developed a research methodology (Hearn & Foth, 2005; Tacchi *et al.*, 2003) which combines ethnography with action research. The research design employs ethnography for its ability to place people within a wider and holistic context – in this case, the interactions of urban residents with their wider communicative ecologies. Respecting the objects of study as agents in the process, study participants engage in creative activities and interventions based on new perceptions of situations achieved through ethnography. We use ethnography to guide the research process and action research to reflect and link the findings back into the project’s ongoing development.

KGUV follows a planning and design strategy which reflects a desire to achieve a higher level of integration between residential, commercial, educational and cultural activities. New media and digital creativity are proposed to play a key role in aspects of this integration. Thus the site provides an opportunity to investigate the relationships involved in the uses of new media and digital creativity with respect to the way they can enable historical consciousness and participation in the socio-cultural life of the KGUV. This theory deliberately encapsulates these relationships that are the focus of this study.

### ***Research cohorts and timeline***

Phase two is divided into three action research cycles. It engages with three distinct cohorts of research participants. Each cohort is made up of between 15 to 20 participants, balanced for gender equality, an approximate total of 50 core participants each cycle, who we encourage to reach out and engage with the wider KGUV community. Cohort A consists of

younger residents from the student accommodation buildings; cohort B is made up of a broader mix of KGUV residents from both ‘mainstream’ accommodation and affordable housing; and cohort C comprises senior residents of the local retirement home. The composition of these cohorts allows us to assess the potential impact of age on the relation between digital creativity and health and community development outcomes. It also enables us to better adjust the delivery of the creative and reflective workshops for the needs of different socio-demographic groups according to varying degrees of media literacy, which was a lesson learned in phase one (Klaebe, 2006a). We will try to keep the composition of each cohort consistent throughout the lifetime of the project. However, to allow for possible fluctuation of participants, cohorts can be easily re-grouped at the end of each cycle.

The main part of the study is divided into three action research cycles involving activities and interventions to produce, reflect on and exhibit creative content which is based on the themes: ‘past’, ‘present’ and ‘future’. Each cycle contributes an essential part to the configuration of community memory in the KGUV and involves each cohort to participate as a group in three creative workshops:

- **Cycle 1: ‘Past’.** Since all new residents of the KGUV come from somewhere else, the first cycle asks participants to creatively process and translate their socio-cultural heritage and residential history which they bring with them to the KGUV. This theme grounds the emerging community memory of the KGUV in an intricate web of the interconnected life paths of individual residents, which vary in length and geographical scope. The communal examination of historical consciousness in the KGUV, through residents’ individual contributions, will foster a better understanding of our region and its cultural diversity. The creative workshops involve life writing and oral history exercises (Neilsen, 2005; Olney, 1998) which will be displayed as a text/audio/visual collage that collectively trace and map the inter-regional migration of KGUV residents.
- **Cycle 2: ‘Present’.** In the second cycle participants are asked to represent and visualise the present through snapshots of their everyday life. This cycle looks at ways ordinary recordings of the vernacular can make extraordinary contributions to community memory and the documentation of a present public history. The main creative methods are personal narration, photography and digital storytelling (Burgess, 2006; Lambert, 2002). A week-long creative workshop will allow each participant to produce a two-minute

digital story. A DVD of the three workshops will be archived to enable future historians to gain a snapshot of everyday life in the urban village.

- **Cycle 3: 'Future'**. The third cycle is based around the theme of 'future' and engages participants in a creative articulation of their individual and community aspirations. The results of this cycle provide new means to elicit tacit knowledge about self-efficacy and community efficacy of the KGUV residents and this will be analysed with a view to inform urban community development deficiencies requiring new initiatives. Building on the *Urban Tapestries* project (Silverstone & Sujon, 2005) participants engage in a creative exercise to augment and annotate the public environment they inhabit through stories, experiences, anecdotes and observations. Public touchscreen displays, the KGUV community portal, as well as personal communication devices such as mobile phone and PDAs will be used to embed stories of the KGUV in the places that inspire them. Others can read these stories and add their own.

At the end of each cycle, cohorts will evaluate their experience through follow up questionnaires (to finalise the quantitative baseline data collection) and semi-structured interviews. Team facilitators will come together for a reflective workshop to discuss their experience, progress and to plan for the next cycle. The transcripts of these workshops, the creative content produced in each cycle, combined with participant and the research team member's observations are the main source of research data we will collect and interpret to address the five aims of our study.

## **Conclusions and Outlook**

Social isolation and 'non-connectedness' have high social and economic costs (DCITA, 2005). Understanding the issues and challenges as well as opportunities and strengths in stimulating local creative communities to produce transferable knowledge that can help people participate in the socio-cultural and socio-economic life in their locale is important. This project offers residents not only a chance to meet other residents but also to explore ways to express themselves creatively through the spoken or written word as well as visually. It fosters digital creativity and media literacy with a view to help people find a voice and participate in the knowledge economy. This assists in promoting and maintaining good health by improving social inclusion, urban sustainability and an enhanced sense of belonging to community and society.

This research also delivers a comprehensive understanding of how to develop a ‘creative community’ (Landry, 2001). With the rapid uptake of digital technology by amateur consumers, an abundance of technical resources can lead to highly creative concepts and innovative ideas. However, if we are to maximise our ability to capitalise on these digital lifestyle products, we need to study and understand the link that leads to creative applications of these tools for the purpose of participation, education and innovation. We will continue to examine this link with a view to foster human talent outside a formal school or workplace environment and nurture societal and cultural values favourable to creativity and innovation, as we move into phase two.

Finally, the project encourages people to gain a better appreciation of their capacity to bring about change within their local community by networking people and re-invigorating a more contemporary interpretation of community values in the network society. Watters observes that “*social capital comes from much more fluid and informal (yet potentially quite close and intricate) connections between people [...] social capital could as easily accrue among a tight group of friends yet still have an effect on the community at large.*” (Watters, 2003, p. 116). In this regard, phase two looks to enhance our capacity to interpret and engage with our urban and regional environment through a greater understanding of the socio-cultural background and heritage of local community members. This increases our capacity to interpret ourselves and to establish a public sphere in an ‘urban village’ with the emergence of digital citizenship through user-producer activities of creative expression.

## **Acknowledgments**

This research is supported under the Australian Research Council’s Discovery funding scheme (DP0663854). Dr Marcus Foth is the recipient of an Australian Postdoctoral Fellowship. Further financial and in-kind support has been received from the Queensland Government’s Department of Housing. The authors would like to thank Philip Neilsen, Paula Hamilton, Brian Oldenburg, Kate Meyrick, Greg Hearn, Stuart Cunningham, Bob Breakspere and the anonymous reviewers for valuable comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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