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# A real art to Queenstown revival

## The West Coast community of Queenstown is embracing its cultural side, writes Travis Tiddy

BEST known for its infamous denuded landscape, Queenstown is experiencing a quiet rejuvenation, driven largely by the not-for-profit sector.

The arts and social enterprises are creating a resurgence of new business opportunities and re-engagement of the community.

New models are being sought to further attract civic pride, urban rejuvenation and business investment.

Exposing a regional audience to contemporary arts practices is invaluable and creates ripple effects within the community.

The cultural upturn was seeded in 2006 when well-known Tasmanian artist Raymond Arnold and his partner Helena Demczuk brought their vision, energy and reputation to Queenstown.

Arnold set up Landscape Art Research Queenstown (LARQ), creating a facility for international residencies and associated exhibitions, workshops, advice and mentorship.

With a thriving program of

residencies by artists from around the world, LARQ is a beacon for cultural excellence.

In an environment that could be considered an artistic frontier, LARQ is linking regional western Tasmania with the rest of the world.

This development left an indelible imprint upon non-profit community group Project Queenstown, which in 2009 consequently undertook development of the Queenstown Heritage and Arts Festival.

The volunteer-run event delivered more than 30 arts and cultural activities in a single weekend.

The festival attracted more than \$50,000 in sponsorship and support, including a vital contribution by the Australia Business Arts Foundation (AbaF) Premier's Arts Partnership Fund.

Local businesses and community groups embraced the event and worked together to co-create Queenstown's inaugural cultural festival.

It was lauded as a critical success, creating an important social outlet for the town and boosting many

retail and hospitality businesses.

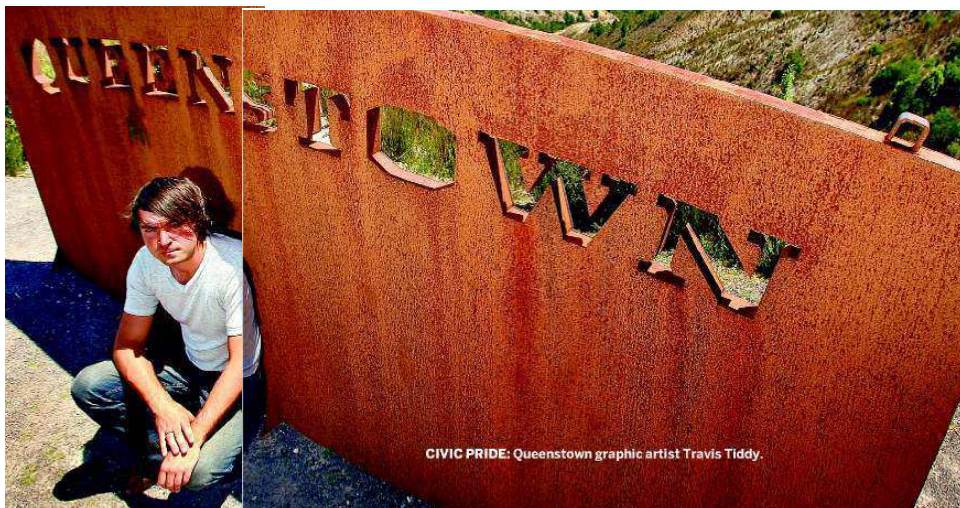
It contributed to a sense of pride within the community, defying the cliched label of Queenstown as a one-trick community reliant upon an ever-greener "moonscape" for identity.

It also proved to locals and attendees from wider Tasmania that the town can create a best-quality festival comparable with any other regional event in Tasmania.

Currently in development is the October 2012 Queenstown Heritage and Arts Festival, a major event that will commemorate 100 years since Australia's worst underground mining disaster.

The National Trust is investing time and money into future visitor interaction with the nationally significant Mt Lyell Office.

After the success of the festival, civic leaders at Queenstown became aware of an astounding project that was finding short- and medium-term uses for vacant and disused commercial buildings in Newcastle's Hunter St Mall.



CIVIC PRIDE: Queenstown graphic artist Travis Tiddy.



At its core, Renew Newcastle brokers 30-day leases between artists and landlords. This gives artists a valuable opportunity to try their practice in a commercial environment, and landlords a potential tenant and upkeep for their property.

Foot traffic was increased, which in turn created new economic activity, dramatically altering the status and prosperity of the Hunter St Mall.

This year Newcastle was named one of the top 10 destinations in the world by *Lonely Planet*. Could this work in Queenstown?

The Queenstown community saw obvious potential for a similar system to capitalise on the developing arts scene and rejuvenate the increasingly vacant main street. In March, Australian Greens senator Christine Milne facilitated a public forum in Queenstown with the creator of Renew Newcastle, Marcus Westbury, who detailed the

inception, development, failings and successes of Renew Newcastle.

Seventy locals attended the meeting. There was a tangible vibe of optimism in the room that led to the decision to formalise a Renew Queenstown project, with the West Coast Council looking at ways to broaden the benefits to the entire West Coast.

Renew Queenstown hasn't yet been established. Yet five months later most of the empty shops are filled with tenants. The community forum, new main street paths and parking and developments such as the Linc Centre have prompted locals to "have a crack" and take their destiny into their own hands.

Town leaders are researching new social enterprise and skills development models.

And the Queenstown Geopark Project is looking at ways in which geological-based tourism infrastructure, field studies and interpretation can be developed to benefit the region.

While not yet formally established, the Renew Queenstown model will cross-pollinate with these projects.

Marcus Westbury, upon the invitation of AbaF, will return to Tasmania this week to deliver an open presentation on Renew Newcastle to interested community planners, artists, property developers and local councils.

International research and experience shows there will be a shift in visitor travel patterns towards places that are unique, progressive and engaging.

The Queenstown community has realised it is no longer just a mining town. Arts and culture have prompted new business opportunities and the impulse for change is coming from the community.

● **Travis Tiddy is a graphic artist and president of community group Project Queenstown.**