



CAWRI

Creativity and Wellbeing Hallmark Research Initiative

Finding Refuge: art, emergency and “imagining the unimaginable” in the resilient city

Final report

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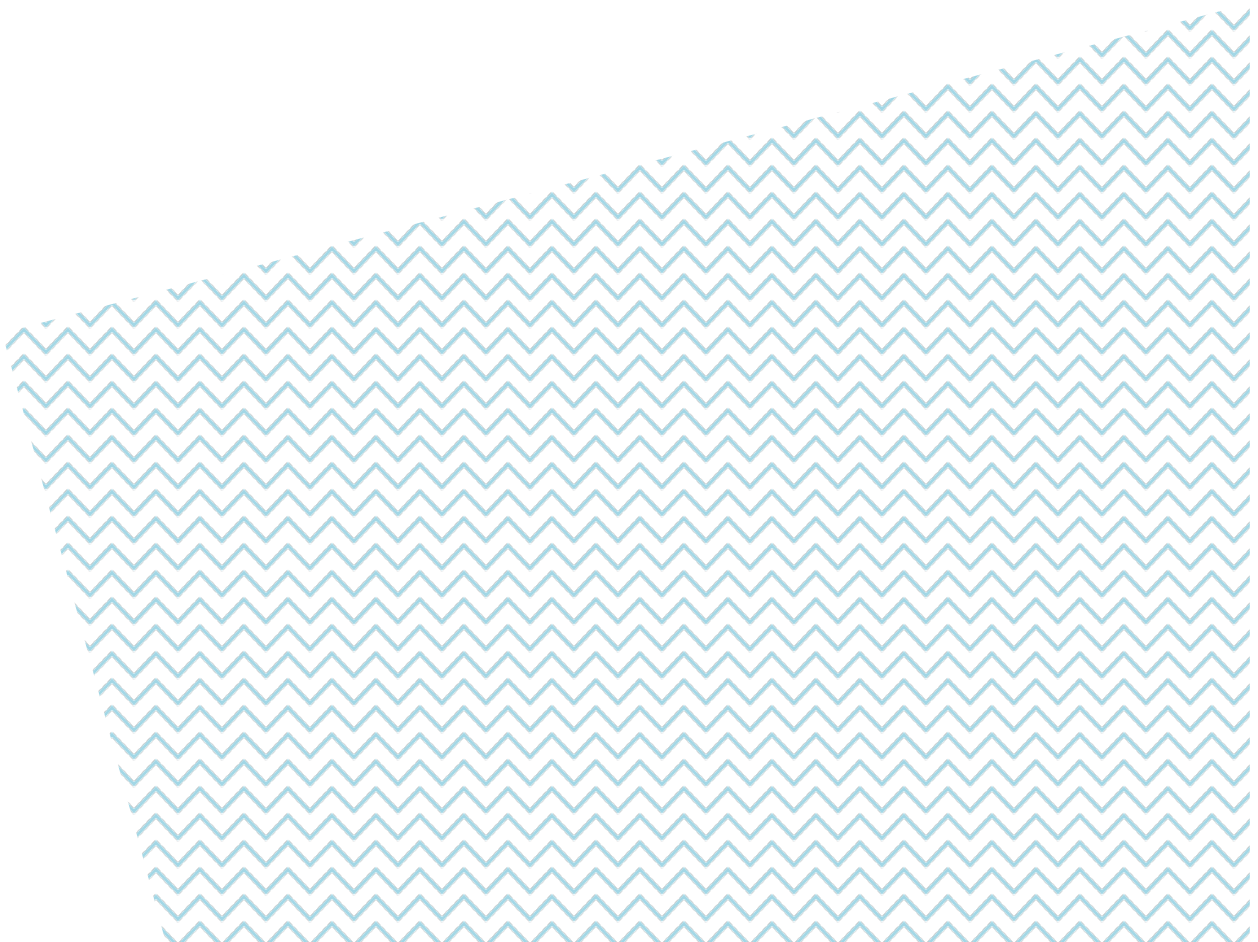


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Project summary

For Ambulance Victoria’s Paul Holman, improving community disaster preparedness involves creativity: communities must “imagine the unimaginable” to share responsibility for acting and responding (Fraser et al 2019). While art has long raised awareness of environmental issues, this project explored how art might intervene directly in the climate crisis. Bringing together a multi-disciplinary team from the humanities, engineering and urban studies, it focused on *Refuge* (2016-2021), a pioneering 6-year program hosted by City of Melbourne’s Arts House which put art at the centre of preparing for climate-related disaster.

This project commenced in June 2021 and is now completed; however, our investigations and analysis of the archival material continues.

Research team

Nikos Papastergiadis	Faculty of Arts (coordinating investigator)
Danielle Wyatt	Faculty of Arts
Jasmin Pfefferkorn	Faculty of Arts
Sarah Bell	Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning
Brendan Geeson	Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning

Partners

Emily Sexton	Artistic Director, Artshouse , City of Melbourne
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Acknowledgements

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Background

Research context

Australia's Black Summer, the Californian fires of 2020 and the ongoing Covid pandemic are forewarnings of a period of accelerating and intensifying disasters driven by climate change and human encroachment on the natural world. Experts in emergency services recognise that as disasters become recurrent, and as communities become more culturally complex, conventional top-down command and control methods of disaster management will need to shift to more horizontal and inclusive approaches. Diverse communities bring their own knowledge, which must form part of building resilience as a shared endeavour.

Art has long raised awareness of environmental issues (Demos 2016; Davis and Turpin 2015). This project however explored how art might intervene directly and proactively in the climate crisis by analysing data generated by *Refuge* (2016-2021), a pioneering 6-year program hosted by City of Melbourne's Arts House. *Refuge* put art at the centre of preparing for climate-related disaster by partnering artists with experts from Australian Red Cross, State Emergency Services (SES), Emergency Management Victoria (EMV), University of Melbourne, and local community organisations.

Discourses of resilient urbanism are predominantly framed around mitigation, adaptation and recovery, with an emphasis on 'hard' infrastructures and service-oriented responses (Prasad 2009; Rodin 2014; Burayidi 2019). In *Refuge* however, creative practices shaped the social conditions for resilience by supporting collaborative knowledge building and participatory action from the ground up. *Refuge* used socially engaged art to simulate how scenarios of heatwaves, flooding, mass population displacement and a pandemic could impact upon the wellbeing of urban communities in a changing climate. More than 30 artists were involved with the project over its 6-year duration. Many formed enduring collaborations with emergency services experts, other artists, First Nations elders and local communities, which have persisted after the project has ended.

As a unique phenomenon both within resilience policy and practice, and within Australian arts practice (Pledger 2021), *Refuge* offers a rich site of exploration for the relationship between creativity and social wellbeing in the face of climate breakdown.

Project aims

Refuge produced extensive documentation and data that commanded close inspection. How does art move from representing the climate crisis to contributing directly to shaping the communicative techniques and institutional practices that emergency services experts argue are vital for responding to climate emergencies? How do we capture the utility of creative practices in the institutionalised space of urban resilience without reducing them to a fixed template or eliding the very qualities that make them 'art'?

This project aimed to address these questions by:

- Creating an archive of *Refuge* (2015-2021) including: interviews with participating artists, emergency services personnel, Indigenous elders and other stakeholders; images and videos taken by City of Melbourne's Arts House, artists and researchers; notes from meetings, Lab workshops, and post-event reflection days; annual evaluation reports; media and public reporting on *Refuge*; academic and scholarly articles.

- Drawing from the mixed materials of the archive to develop a conceptual framework to interpret the Refuge program in the context of contemporary environmental arts practice and discourses of resilient urbanism.

Methodology

We produced an indexed archive as a basis for analysis and interpretation. Using a grounded theory approach, we identified key analytical themes through collaboration between the project team and key stakeholders. Through this iterative approach we developed a conceptual framework that draws from socially engaged art (Bourriaud 2002), performance studies (Eckersall and Paterson 2011; Schechner 1993) and the visual arts (Hächler 2015) to understand how *Refuge* worked between representations or simulations of disaster and the real.

Key findings

Art has commonly been conscripted into resilience policy and practice post-disaster as a form of recovery and repair. By contrast, *Refuge* adopted an arts-led approach to prepare communities for coming disasters. Art was not an addendum to urban resilience practice but rather, functioned as a knowledge broker to expand how urban resilience might be understood and implemented. Creative methods became the ‘glue’ (Pledger 2021b) between diverse communities and practitioners to build resilience together as a community.

Our project aimed to gain some insight into what was distinctive about these arts-led approaches and to develop a conceptual framework to situate *Refuge* within contemporary arts practice.

Understanding arts-led approaches to disaster preparedness

The *Refuge* data revealed artists’ capacity to negotiate conditions of **openness and uncertainty**. They brought an improvisatory approach to disaster response, inviting participants into the process by encouraging experimentation and a sharing of ideas. This was reinforced by *Refuge*’s curatorial openness which helped to build trust and social connection between different communities of practice. These curatorial and creative methods marked a striking contrast to the schematic models and methods of conventional disaster management practice, offering an alternative to the ‘template’ approach decried by Steve Cameron from Emergency Management Victoria (MacDowall and Fraser 2018). As *Refuge* artist Shang Lun suggested, responding to the climate crisis will require a kind of learning through doing and a capacity for navigating through uncertainty:

And that’s what it feels like to be acting in the face of climate change, to be making art on stolen land. To do any of these things feels like navigation, much more than it feels like configuration, right? we don’t know the full system, we don’t know the possible outcomes in their entirety. And we don’t know until we try. (Shang Lun cited in Pledger 2021)

Understanding the distinctiveness of the **artistic process** in general, and the unfolding of *Refuge*’s processes in particular, became a particular focus of the research. As a 6-year project, *Refuge* expanded the temporality of creative gestation, performance and reflection beyond the confined timeframes of most institution-based arts projects. This expanded temporality of practice set the foundations for a curatorial strategy that enabled relationships, ideas, and feelings to develop in their own time without a pre-determined endpoint. Many of *Refuge*’s artistic contributors noted

the value of this expanded timeframe to developing their own practice and to the significance of the work as a whole.

For our work as researchers, attending to *Refuge's* artistic process drew our attention to things that we normally consider to be peripheral to the 'main event' of creative practice. Rather than focusing on the performance, exhibition or art object, we drew upon the 'ambient exchanges' still perceptible in the *Refuge* archive: the dynamics of conversations, how ideas were transmitted and repeated, the circulation of stories and images, and the feelings that arose between and within people – these mobile and ephemeral currents became crucial sites of meaning for our interpretive work.

Situating Refuge within contemporary arts practice

Refuge can be situated within a longer lineage of socially engaged art (Bourriaud 2002), activist art (Sholette 2017), and environmental art (Demos 2016) but also exceeds and extends these lineages in significant ways. We have adopted the conceptual lens of 'dramaturgy' from performance and theatre studies (Schechner 1993; Eckersall and Paterson 2011) and 'social scenography' (Hächler 2015) from museum studies to capture *Refuge's* dynamic situatedness between the representational and the real. This conceptual framing is essential for understanding how a burgeoning movement of environmental art is seeking to move beyond raising awareness of the crisis, and beyond institutional critique, to play a vital role in shaping ways of living in and responding to a world in climate breakdown.

Project outcomes

Related grants:

Climate Research Accelerator Grant funded by Melbourne Climate Futures, submitted in August 2021 for the amount of \$50,000. Investigators: Dr Suzie Fraser, Prof Timothy Reeves, Dr Danielle Wyatt. Outcome successful.

Head of School Investment Fund, School of Culture and Communication, submitted in October 2021 for the amount of \$5,000. Investigator: Dr Danielle Wyatt. Outcome successful.

Publications

Pledger, D. and Papastergiadis, N. (2021). *In the time of refuge: A collection of writings on art, disaster and communities*. Arts House.

Book chapter and Journal article currently in progress

Presentations:

Danielle Wyatt and Jasmin Pfefferkorn, 'Finding Refuge in Small Data: Creative Process as Climate Crisis Intervention'. Academic paper presented to the symposium Small Data is Beautiful: Analytics, Art and Narrative, 18 – 19 February 2022, University of Melbourne.

Blog posts

Creativity and Bushfire Recovery Resources, *CAWRI*, 2020

<https://www.cawri.com.au/posts/creativity-and-bushfire-recovery>

Danielle Wyatt and Jasmin Pfefferkorn, 2021. 'Creative Process as Disaster Preparedness,' *CAWRI*,

<https://www.cawri.com.au/posts/creative-process-as-disaster-preparedness>

Discussion, implications and future directions

We began this project with the assumption that building an archive of the *Refuge* project would provide us with an interpretive resource from which we could derive clear and translatable insights. We imagined that we could distil these insights into a practical resource for resilience practitioners that would translate creative arts practice into a toolkit for applied practitioners in emergency management and urban resilience policy and programs.

We soon discovered however that the rich complexity of our *Refuge* data demanded a reconfiguration of expectations. The different voices of the archive – artists, emergency services practitioners, researchers, First Nations leaders, representatives from different community groups and local organisations – and its eclectic materials – transcripts, observation notes, images, video, narrative essays and personal reflections – resisted any simple or instrumental interpretation. More importantly, key participants in *Refuge* explicitly warned against reductive approaches to knowledge building, arguing that this would undermine the intent of *Refuge* itself. In the words of Steve Cameron from Emergency Management Victoria:

Please do not create a template of how we did it last year (as this creates) structures and templates that won't work (in new situations): there are too many variables and challenges in any disaster [...] Our whole thinking process and ability to be safer, more resilient, as people and as a community is about understanding and adapting and learning and taking on the situation according to what we know, and the collective skills, experience and potential that we all bring. (Steve Cameron cited in MacDowall and Fraser 2018).

The implications of these insights are that art's value to urban resilience practice lies *within* its own distinctive terms and attributes, rather than as an ornamental addition that needs to be adapted to fit existing industry models and processes. *Refuge* demonstrated that it was the elements specific to creative practice – indeterminacy, improvisation, imagination and open-endedness – that held the most value for emergency services experts seeking to engage communities in their own disaster preparedness. Finding an accessible language to communicate these qualities beyond the art world is a future challenge for this project, one that can only be accomplished through further funding to resource the development of a strong interdisciplinary team and long-term industry partnerships.

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More information

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For more information about CAWRI, visit <https://research.unimelb.edu.au/creativityandwellbeing>