Disused lots get sunflowered

Rosalea Monacella, RMIT University, July 2016

The intention of the #Get Sunflowered project was to explore how we might activate the local community to transform redundant and vacant sites within the urban fabric of Moe, Morwell and Traralgon, to celebrate and transform our cities through the temporal event of growing beautiful sunflowers.

A number of towns in regional Victoria are in decline, and the effect of this is felt across the economic, social and ecology wellbeing of place in an uncertain future. A visible side effect within the towns has been the abandonment of central sites within the urban fabric, and the added problem of these places becoming overgrown, unhealthy and ugly collections of waste. We saw these sites as an opportunity to work with and mobilise the disconnected community to come together, clean up the sites, work together to plant the sunflowers, and celebrate together the beautiful outcome.

The sunflowers were stunning. The young rich green plants created dense lush green blankets that quickly transformed the redundant spaces, and the surrounding area, to simultaneously dazzle and put a smile on the face of all that pass by. The golden fields of sunflowers though are just the happy by-product of what the project is really about, which is helping people understand that they can be active agents in transforming their own city. It is about community building, and the sharing of knowledge, skills, resources, and ideas. It is about actively bringing about change through what is done directly by the community, and how this might inform how others (council, local government, state government, industry, investors, new community members, etc) might contribute to, participate in and shape the built and social fabric that are our cities. It recognises that this is not a fixed state of being, but one that is continually changing, and that they can be a part of change.

The project was instigated by the OUTR Research Laboratory at RMIT University. In 2014 artist Ben Morieson transformed an abandoned industrial site in inner Melbourne into a field of sunflowers to great effect. We recognised the potential for this act to be developed in a manner that not only would physically transform a space, but would be an agent for important community building. As such Ben was invited to collaborate with OUTR on the ambitious Latrobe project.

The project was developed to become a series of events that included cleaning the sites, preparing the ground, a planting day, a series of maintenance days (weeding+culling), watering, the celebration of harvesting the cut flowers, and finally cleaning up the sites again.
Each town had a special celebration as a part of the sunflower harvest. The parties at Traralgon and Morwell had local bands, food vendors, and other performers, and saw approximately 1,000 locals, and visitors from as far away as Melbourne, celebrate place, and go home with armfuls of sunflowers for free.

The huge sunflower Spiral in Moe played the host to a children’s Easter egg hunt on Easter Saturday. Approximately 500 children and their families searched the 2.4km length of spiral path for Easter eggs, followed with everyone taking home cut flowers.

**Initial public response and participation reserved, but…**

Initially the response and participation by the public in the early stages of cleaning and planting was reserved, however as we progressed from one site to another we saw momentum build. The last site to be planted attracted a diverse range of approximately 50 people who toiled through the day to clean and plant.

As all five sites were privately owned, the initial period of discussion and agreement to utilise the properties was tricky. Through this process we lost one site (six sites were originally planned) as it proved to be too difficult a negotiation between land owner, managing agent, and the renting farmer. The five successful site owners have expressed not only their joy with the project outcome, but have all expressed their willingness to use these sites (and more) in the next iteration of the project.

Local community members volunteered to become ambassadors for each site and, through their frequent watering of the sunflowers, engaged with the growing number of visitors to communicate the intention of the project. In this sense the sites become not only the responsibility of the local community, but became owned by them.

When the project was initially presented to the community we sometimes received a negative criticism that the fields of flowers would simply fail as they would be vandalised and destroyed. It was with great satisfaction that the sense of pride and ownership that this project manifest resulted in the only a handful of flowers being damaged, and as such a great testament to the work and community.

#Get Sunflowered was a collaborative community project supported by Latrobe City Council and a range of private industries. In this manner, the project was as much concerned with the making of the project as it was the stunning outcome of the blooming sunflowers. It was about bringing people together so as to connect a somewhat disenfranchised and disconnected community, and bring about positive change.

**Contributions and sponsorship**
The success of this project relied on contribution and sponsorship. The support from local community, council, and industry was inspiring, and included the following: Gary Lee Sprinklers; Gibsons Groundspread; Nuseed; Outdoor Cameras Australia; Copsley Ornamentals; Diggers; Cando Hire; Traralgon Neighbourhood House; Gippsland Water; Suleman Group; Latrobe City Council; OUTR Research Lab; RMIT University; Regional Development Victoria; and Coles Moe. Partnerships included everything from equipment to expert advice, from water to fertiliser, and from seed to irrigation equipment, and from ploughing to shear muscle work...just to name a few!

Latrobe City Council backed the project from the beginning with their support, and elected to transform their own small entry garden at the council house into a patch of sunflowers in a show of solidarity. This support continued when it became apparent that a small group in the region attempted to use the project for their own political gain, at which point local Councillors came forward to express their support for the work and reiterate the important contribution it was making in the community.

All those that collaborated in the recent project have expressed their wish to be a part of future iterations of the #Get Sunflowered project. Furthermore, other townships in the area, and a range of local groups have also contacted us wishing to partner on future projects.

The project was initially developed, and communicated to the community through local community group meetings. These groups ranged from town scale committees (eg Make Moe Glow), various committees within each town (eg Morwell Traders Group), to local clubs and societies (eg Morwell Historic Society). This established and built a groundswell of interest and support. A range of posters describing the project and specific events were displayed in most shopfronts in the towns, and each site was posted with a signboard. The online communication of the project was achieved primarily through the Reactivate Latrobe Valley Facebook site generating in excess of 100,000 posts from the community, most often expressing their heartfelt joy of the project, operating as a tool to invite people to be part of the range of events, and communicate the range of moments of the project growing and changing over time. www.facebook.com/ReactivateLatrobeValley

RMIT University marketing team made a short film on the project that took the front page of the University for a number of weeks. http://tinyurl.com/hyrkkwe Fairfax News also ran a national report on the project in newspapers across the country, and online. The effect of this was stunning as it painted a good picture to the nation of the Latrobe Valley region which, in recent times, had been the focus of coal mine fires and stories about questionable industry, and so began to contribute to the re-identification of place. As great as this was, the impact of the local community was profound as they felt pride at the positive projection of their hometown.

http://tinyurl.com/gnud8pg

The effect of this recently completed project is not only that people are wanting to be a part of the next iteration of the #Get Sunflowered project, but they are exploring other ways in which they might clean up and invigorate their towns. Local individuals and groups are now thinking about how they might actively be a part of social, economic, and environmental change and, importantly, how they might instigate and be a part of positive change.

A ‘bottom up’ project

It is also important to understand that as a ‘bottom up’ project how works such as this not only connect the fragmented community, but also go a long way to building functional relationships between community, industry and local government which is an often contentious field. It has provided examples for industry and local government for how they might act and contribute beyond the prescribed conventions, and help the public understand how they might assist industry and government to work with them. In this sense it also sets the groundwork for how a ‘bottom up’ project might inform new policy and engagement form typically ‘top down’ bodies.
At a social level, the project has brought together people, and has begun to connect a fragmented community. It has also helped people understand that they themselves can be active agents for change, and therefore not simply at the mercy of happenings outside of their control. The stunning nature of the project has also gone a long way to establishing another ‘image’ of the Latrobe Valley and, at the very least, a positive dimension to turn to. This is manifest at both an internal scale for those living in the Valley, and an important sense of how they may be perceived from the rest of the nation.

From an environmental and ecological perspective, the project has contributed to cleaning up a number of sites central to the townships. The sunflowers themselves not only played host to a phenomenal number of bees and ladybirds, but have been chipped and ploughed back into the ground to add to the vitality of the soil condition.

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