

# Richmond Housing Estate

**The Arts and Culture Program at the North Richmond Community Health Centre began in the late 1980's. The Health Centre is on-site at the Richmond housing estate, the largest of all the Victorian high rises with five tower blocks of just over a thousand units, with two hundred and fifteen walk-up adjacent flats. The estimated population is six thousand people from diverse ethnic and cultural origins. The majority are of Vietnamese background. The next largest group is Hakka-speaking East Timorese. Many residents arrived in Australia as refugees and asylum seekers.**

In the practice of Western medicine we have actually lost an extraordinarily vital connection between arts and culture and health. In other cultures, including ancient cultures, there's always been a vital link between good health and cultural expression both at the individual and social level.

One ancient example to which I often point was the famous theatre of Epidavros in the Greek Peloponnesus, where I come from. People assume it was like a modern theatre, or a stone version of it. But actually it was a religious centre sacred to Asclepius, the Greek god of healing. Thousands of years ago people regularly visited the consulting rooms behind the theatre. Health advisers looked after both the physical and spiritual health of people. It's only very recently that we in the Western world have come to have such a particularly narrow physical model of health. In many other cultures the physical, spiritual and emotional states are regarded as unitary, not divided. Now if we think about that type of model, arts and culture makes perfect sense at the individual, family and community level. Why? Because if we can participate in cultural activity and give cultural expression, it validates us as individuals. We can contribute to family life and community.

**Demos Krouskos**, Chief Executive Officer, North Richmond Community Health Centre, *interview*

**High rise inner-city public housing estates can at times be separated from the outside world by perceived issues of status, stigma, ethnicity and culture. But the North Richmond Community Health Centre attracts as many clients from the surrounding suburbs as it does from the Richmond housing estate. Its approach to medical practice is welcoming and participatory: a model studied by delegations from several Asian countries as well as the World Health Organisation. It dispenses with the customary top-down relationship between doctors and clients. Furthermore, its Arts and Culture Program is placed on an equal footing with medical and welfare services.**

During the late 1980's, the Arts and Culture Program worked with community groups on ceramics, poster-making, theatre plays, landscaped gardens and other projects, all reflecting the multicultural nature of the estate's population. The momentum created by these projects, the support of the senior management of the health centre and the vision of leading artists, such as Julie Shiels and Siu Chan, led to a program combining long term strategic planning with an ability to respond to initiatives from the community.

**The Program now includes major annual festivals attracting up to 6000 people as well as large and small projects with up to 600 participants per year. It increases opportunities for communities to control, develop and promote their own cultural practice and identity. This happens through long term strategies, mentoring, skills development, cultural development projects and as part of political campaigns especially around refugee and asylum seeker issues.**

**Our role changes frequently between supporter, advocate, collaborator, initiator, partner, advisor, mentor, trainer, fundraiser and project manager in response to the currents within these communities. Like the communities we serve – who live right across Melbourne – the Program is not limited to this particular geographical area. We have a focus on the Richmond estate but often move beyond it.**

**Rosalie Hastwell,**  
Manager, Arts and Culture Program, *interview*

One of the Arts and Culture Program's most consistent engagements has been with the East Timorese. Their island, just to the north of Australia, was invaded by Indonesia in 1975. The East Timorese who escaped into exile consistently celebrated the culture of their foreign-occupied island as a means of assisting the struggle for freedom at home. But in 2002 East Timor became an independent republic. Many East Timorese chose to remain in Australia as they had spent up to twenty-five years in the country and had become East Timorese-Australians. However, they found themselves faced by a new question. Could their cultural activities become not a means of protest but a way of retaining their community identity and social cohesion?

In 2003 a group of East Timorese, all aged in their twenties, established the *Melbourne East Timorese Activity Centre*. Individual members of the Activity Centre had previously collaborated and trained with the Arts and Culture Program, as well as with the Belgium Avenue Neighbourhood House next door to the Richmond estate. An association between the three organisations was soon formed, with the Program supplying further training and support: for example, the Activity Centre is housed in a former factory space leased by the North Richmond Community Health Centre.

Play rehearsals



The Timorese community has been involved with the North Richmond Community Health Centre from the 1980's. It has been about working together to help the community establish itself. There was a need for the Timorese to think on their own, that was where the Arts and Culture Program first got involved with plays and cultural festivals: and with having people trained in a creative way and also working in the Arts and Culture office, coming up with ideas and learning how to make things happen.

That relationship is still strong because of what has happened with the establishment of the Melbourne East Timorese Activity Centre. It's run by a number of us who are passionate about our community and our culture. In the last year we've arranged and managed activities, projects and classes in Timorese culture.

For example, for **Independence Day** we worked with the Primary School here where the kids produced paintings and it was exhibited for a week. We hope to do that again, to get more schools and more people involved. The Activity Centre is focussed on the future. It is about the support, revitalisation and celebration of the East Timorese community after so much upheaval, dislocation and uncertainty.

**Bernardo da Costa Duarte,** Timorese artist and founding member of Melbourne East Timorese Activity Centre.

Shots of resounding fireworks kicked off the celebrations which lasted for three hours. The participants, mostly elderly, leisurely appreciated the splendid traditional and modern songs and dances familiar to them, while they ate Vietnamese delicacies and sizzling Australian BBQ at the table under the shade of festive umbrellas. The entertainment, some performed by professionals, some by amateurs of the neighbouring estate, were rich, colourful and met with bursts of warm applause from the audience. After the vigorous lion dance which aroused a fit of soaring applause, the audience were led to go for a stroll in the community gardens close by, which were already in holiday array on that day. Colorful flags were seen hanging along the long corridor and amidst vegetation of lovely village green. In the middle of the garden, there stood a new pavilion decorated with tasseled red lanterns and pretty green umbrellas which appealed to the eye in absolute beauty.

We were happy to learn that all the red lanterns were made by coupling the available gift envelopes, based on the original idea of an elderly resident in this community. What a bright idea! We knew Liss Gabb and the team of many others were all involved with great enthusiasm in organising and designing the whole lot, or in specific detailed work for the celebrations. In a multicultural society, here in Australia, people are all aware. As we enjoy our life in the community, so will we treasure our life in the community and build it with our own hands.

Excerpt from *Help Build Our Life with Our Own Hands—A Glimpse of Lunar New Year 2004* by **Jim Huang** and **Linda Yu**, residents, Richmond housing estate.



The annual **Tet Celebration** on the Richmond estate is a large scale Program activity. The festival, hailing the New Year when it begins according to the lunar calendar, is celebrated across Asia in places where Chinese communities have settled. It is also of great significance to older people. In 2004, the Richmond celebrations were cross-cultural and open to all: with a special emphasis on attracting older residents from estates all across the city.

The Program's largest-scale engagement with Chinese and Vietnamese communities has been with the annual **Moon Lantern Festival**. Taking place every September, the festival attracts people from all cultural backgrounds. It contains contemporary and culturally diverse elements but remains based on the traditional Chinese and Vietnamese celebrations.

*Tet Celebration*, in the vegetable gardens, Richmond estate



**In the Northern hemisphere, the Moon Festival or Mid Harvest Festival is... on the night of the full moon, the children and their friends parade around the village with candle-lit colorful lanterns. The lanterns are also used to decorate houses. Lanterns are usually a simple star or circle, but also made in the shape of animals, birds, boats and fish. The frames are made of bamboo or wire and adorned with different colored transparent paper .**

**The festival is associated with harvest time. It is a time of gaiety and rejoicing. During the evening of the Moon Festival family members gather to enjoy a reunion dinner. Together with moon cakes, fruits and vegetables are displayed as a symbol of family reunion. Candles and incense are presented to offer to the gods and children take part in a procession swinging their candle lit lanterns. The procession with dragon dances are accompanied by drums, cymbals and fire crackers.**

Community Events Group Web Site:  
<http://www.yarranet.net.au/banh/moon.htm>

*The Moon Lantern Festival* on the Richmond estate includes three ritual components. First, the afternoon Harvest Feast of food and activities which might range from choral singing to origami, from face painting to karaoke, from hip-hop to Pacific Island dances and from drumming to short bursts of Chinese opera. Second, the evening Moon Lantern Parade, led by lion dancers around the perimeter of the estate with many other residents gazing down from their windows. Third, a night-time finale of community theatre which is especially commissioned each year. Current issues facing the communities, such as the issue of residency for refugees, are artistically explored. The experience can be one of laughter, fun, celebration and deep emotion. The sense of a shared experience is very strong, reaching across cultural differences to common purpose, resolution and celebration.

A Cultural Reference Group, consisting of residents plus community workers and artists, ensures the festival stays true to the vision of the communities with which it works. The development of the Cultural Reference Group has been an effective way of exploring cross cultural differences, engaging community members in dialogue with other cultural traditions both inside and outside the estate.

The festival has nourished strategic and sensitive relationships between residents, community groups, professional and emerging artists and community workers. The result is a unique program of activities culminating in a festival which respects past tradition but which reaches out to its many diverse celebrants as a living – and therefore changing – tradition.

*Communities are fluid. No-one wants to belong to only one community. People and communities on the estate always intersect in fascinating ways. The Moon Lantern Festival not only breaks down the barriers between the perception of the estate as a stand-alone site but also invites and encourages a creative discourse between different tenants and the world outside.*

Rosalie Hastwell, Manager, Arts and Culture Program, *interview*

**I can't afford to live anywhere else, but I have felt more of a sense of community here than I did when I lived in the country. I don't see myself as an arty person and I wouldn't have had the opportunity to experience art-making if it wasn't for the Program. I absolutely love it and it has gotten me more involved with the community... I have been involved with the Moon Lantern Festival for three years, but last year I walked the parade for the first time and it was just awe-inspiring. Walking around the estate and seeing all the beautiful art filled me with an enormous sense of pride.**

Lyn Dixon, Chairperson of the North Richmond Tenants Association, *interview*

**The Festival has never ceased to increasingly involve more and more residents from the estate. They don't just participate in meetings, they get involved in many practical ways. That's one of the main reasons the Office of Housing has helped to fund it, we being the official landlord. Staff here enjoy it, they make lanterns themselves. It's a great catalyst, a means for us to break down perceived barriers between the residents and us, to connect and increase the sense of a shared community .**

Hoang Nguyen, Manager, Housing Services, Richmond, *interview*

Richmond Estate at night during Moon Lantern Festival





**The festival has grown and evolved. It's become vitally important with its invitation to outsiders to come onto the estate, to see that life here is safe, to counteract all the stereotypes of incessant violence and danger promulgated by newspapers. But in essence the festival has remained as it was at the beginning, on the day Julie Shiels and I handed out lolly bags and cakes and we all went walking with the Vietnamese and the Chinese around the estate. That was the day when I first began to understand the power, joy and universality of the communal experience. Now there might be rap-dancers and gymnasts, choirs and rock opera, slides and wonderful installations. And I'd like to see it involve more teenagers as the offspring**

**not just of new migrants but as young people in their own right. And I'd like to see it one day completely run by the community . Yet I know that it will remain as it's always been. At heart what you see is a community performing not just for others but with great pride for itself.**

**Demos Krousos, Chief Executive Officer,  
North Richmond Community Health Centre, *interview***



ABOVE: Richmond estate during the *Moon Lantern Festival*

Children performing with a dragon during the *Moon Lantern Festival*