These walls could talk
Visual Matrix to extend engagement with older people
These walls could talk

**Project Partners**

**Organisations**
- TWT Property Group
- Bridging Hope Charity Foundation (BHCF)
- Ageing Futures Institute (AFI), University of New South Wales (UNSW)
- fEEL (Felt Experience and Empathy Lab), UNSW
- University Central Lancashire, UK

**Events**
- The Big Anxiety (TBA)
- The Ageing Program at TBA

**Councils**
- City of Ryde
- North Sydney Council
- Willoughby Council
- Lane Cove Council

**College**
- Bradfield Senior College, the School for Creative Industries

**Aged care facilities and community centres**
- Baptist Care
- Catholic Care
- Waverton Hub
- Christian Community Aid
- Dougherty Centre
- Holdsworth
- Hunters Hill Day Centre
- North Ryde Community Aid & Information Centre

**Community Services**
- Sydney Community Services
- Lane Cove and Northside community Services
- Hunters Hill Ryde Community Services

**Galleries**
- Bradfield Senior College Gallery
- Artspace, The Concourse, Chatswood
- Gallery Lane Cove

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Summary of findings

The data collected as part of the engagement program with older members of the public in North Sydney will be published in more detail in industry and academic journals. This report provides an overview of the project and some top-level findings.

Engaging with older members of the public:

- To engage with a wide range of older people to understand their needs and wants requires a paced engagement that allows for all parties to build trust.
- Identifying key people in the community and gaining their support is important for reaching out to people with access needs, who may be considered vulnerable, and are potentially isolated.
- Setting up projects that engage with older people need to take into account not only health, safety, and comfort, but also basic logistics to ensure that people arrive in a state where they are open to possibilities and new experiences.
- The project needs to be flexible and adaptable to take into account the varying needs of the participants and to ensure inclusivity.

The challenges of art

- It was apparent that the artworks viewed for the project were challenging for the older members of the public in terms of their content, the artists’ ages. However, this contributed to the success of the project and generated meaningful conversation and connections.

The challenges of the site

- For most participants the site was unexpected and physically challenging. However, people with access needs enjoyed the opportunity to ‘get out’, to go somewhere different, they were curious about how the laneway was being used and some suggested they wanted to come back next year.

Findings from engaging

- People, including those living with dementia and with access needs, were keen to meaningfully engage and connect with others.
- The project generated many opportunities for social engagement and connection.
- Many participants enjoyed the ‘adventure’ of being in the laneway and looking at ‘something different’.
- The engagement raised many discussions about the past present and future, what people want, and about their feelings.
- It was apparent that at times there was self-regulation and group censoring on some topics. For example, the translators’ roles were crucially important in supporting interaction and engagement, but verbal questions and responses were not always relayed accurately, if at all.
- The care staff, carers in attendance could greatly influence the mood and level of engagement.
Introduction

More people than ever before will live into old age and advanced old age (85+). With a higher percentage of the population considered old, societies are beginning to recognise that this presents both challenges and opportunities. Older people are negotiating everyday environments, social spaces and ways of operating many of which were formulated with populations with fewer older people.

Communities, organisations, local authorities and governments, are trying to understand what the needs of older people are and how does society need to change to support the needs of current and future generations of older people.

The aim of this project was to go deep into the community to hear from older people. From the people whose voices are least heard and to find out from them their wants, needs, views and opinions.

The project used innovative arts-based approaches, such as the Visual Matrix (VM) (Froggett, Manley, & Roy, 2015), to explore the wants and needs of older members of the local community. A network of people and organisations was established to complete the project and for further ongoing research. Researchers at the Ageing Futures Institute (AFI) and felt Experience and Empathy Lab (fEEL) at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) partnered with TWT Property Group (TWT) and The Bridging Hope Charity Foundation (BHCF) local councils, galleries and organisations on the North Shore of Sydney. The project was part of the Big Anxiety, a mental health related arts festival, a Sydney-wide event, taking place in Sydney in 2019.

The project was inclusive engaging with older people with a range of cognitive and physical access needs, with people who were familiar with art and those who were not, and with intergenerational groups. It highlighted a range of anxieties, concerns and joys of older people and how communities can be adapted to support the needs of an ageing population.

The ageing population

More people will live beyond 100 years of age, and a greater proportion of the population will be over 65 years of age. The ageing population is one of the most significant social transformations impacting all aspects of society (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2015). It is not only the number of older people that will impact.
It is also that the expectations of older people are changing rapidly.

Social commentators observe that older people are not a homogenous group whose wants and needs are inevitably tied to their chronological age (Applewhite, 2019). The lives, attitudes, expectations, wants and needs of the so-called baby boomers are very different to the generation of traditionalists who came before them (Generational differences chart, n.d). By 2030 all baby boomers will have reached at least ‘young’ old age. So, how can we begin to understand the needs of that generation, and the generations of older people to follow, and how can we ensure that the voices of those needing aged and health care are heard?

Understanding needs
As a society we are increasingly focussing on person-centred, user-centred, customer-focused approaches, with user-driven surveys, interviews and feedback becoming part of our everyday interaction with individuals, organisations, and authorities. These data collection methods so often focus on what the organisations want to know rather than what those who are surveyed want to say (Macnamara, 2016). In addition, when organisations, authorities and individuals call for feedback, so often it is the usual suspects who respond and come forward with their opinion. Approaches are needed which ensure that those marginalised in society have the opportunity to communicate and for their voices to be heard. Furthermore, research shows that many people need time and space to process, assess, and reassess their own responses and to compare and re-evaluate them in response to other people (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2013).

Arts-based engagements
Increasingly art and design-based research approaches are used to engage with marginalised communities to understand their wants and needs. They take the form of arts engagement, participatory design, visual research, and deliberative co-design. These methods aim to go beyond the surface and find out how people feel, to reveal their concerns, and understand their lived experience. They resist the prepared question and answer format of questionnaires, surveys, structured interviews and focus groups and aim to bring forth responses that are not ‘practiced’ or ‘rehearsed’ and reveal responses and viewpoints that even participants responding are not aware they have.
These walls could talk

The These Walls Could Talk (TWCT) project engaged with a wide range of people on the North Shore of Sydney. It used a public art installation as stimuli to prompt conversations about what older people feel, think and want in a visual matrix (VM) style engagement. The artwork was commissioned by TWT property group and produced by Bec Dean and curated by Tulleah Pearce. It was a large-scale, site specific installation consisting of 20 artworks at 12 sites along Atchison Lane, St Leonards, the surrounding area, and on the campus at Bradfield Senior College. In addition, images of the artwork in situ were exhibited at the Bradfield Senior College Gallery.

The project built upon the design and text-based work of Cameron Cripps-Kennedy and was developed using a participatory and collaborative process. Cripps-Kennedy and poet, Omar Sakr worked with students at Bradfield Senior College, St Leonards to create poetic texts about mental health and connection to place. TWCT brings issues around mental health into the public realm, reflecting on the possibilities for creating living and working environments that are conducive to better mental health.

Methodology Network and participants

An arts engagement program was developed using the TWCT installation as stimuli. Researchers Dr Gail Kenning and Fiona White engaged directly with research co-collaborators and four councils; eight aged care facilities and community centres; two galleries, three community service organisations, and a senior college. In these organisations they engaged with Directors of Nursing, Lifestyle and activities personnel, carers, family members, curators, council team leaders in arts and culture, social inclusion community officers, access and inclusion officers. They also engaged with the participants, who were members of the public, from community groups, from aged care facilities and gallery goers.
Engaging with art

Twelve groups of people from community centres and aged care facilities were invited to view the TWCT artworks. The Laneway viewing continued for 30-40 minutes. Two facilitators accompanied the groups. A total of eighty people attended. The age range varied from 65 to 92. The groups varied in size from 2-12. Participants were from diverse ethnic backgrounds and, along with English, spoke Armenian, Cantonese, and Mandarin. For those who did not speak English a translator was available and accompanied the groups. Participants had a range of physical and cognitive access needs, they used walkers, had walking sticks, had hearing and vision limitations and included people with a diagnosis of dementia. Care needed to be given in guiding the groups down the laneway to see the artworks. Chairs were provided for those who needed to sit down when viewing the artworks. The groups were guided along the laneway where they viewed six artworks sited on the walls, windows, inside garages, and over doorways in the industrial laneway. The facilitator read out each poem and asked participants to contemplate the words, the text, the colour of the artworks and the location.

Visual Matrix

After viewing the artworks participants were invited into BHCF meeting rooms to extend their arts engagement through a visual matrix experience (Froggett et al., 2015). The visual matrix (VM) is a method for researching a shared experience in response to stimuli, such as artworks, and a research question. The research question for this VM focussed on mental health and wellbeing and connection to place. During the visual matrix participants were invited to share their response to the artworks they had viewed over a period of 30-40 minutes. This was followed by refreshments. The VM experience invited participants to respond to the artworks using an associative process, which brings to the surface peoples’ thoughts and concerns, but resists critique and judgement. For this project the VM was extended to also engage
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participants in a creative activity. All VM were audio and video recorded for post-event analysis, researchers made notes and researchers debriefing sessions were held.

Creative responses
The participants were invited to respond to the artworks they had viewed and the experience of the VM through text or poetry. They were invited to select two pieces of coloured card from a wide range of colours on offer, and pens, ‘Textas’ and pencils. The facilitators worked with participants to verbally summarise the discussion that had taken place throughout the engagement. Participants were invited to write words and phrases on the card. They were then placed on the wall, echoing the placement of the artworks viewed in the laneways.

Intergenerational engagement
Two arts engagement sessions were also held at Bradfield Senior College where the TWCT artwork was also being exhibited. The first was an intergenerational event with older members of the community and students from the college. The second event was with only students from the college.

The participants viewed the work onsite at the St Leonards Campus and photographs of all of the artworks on show in the gallery. Participants were then invited to respond to the artworks by engaging in a VM hosted by guest researchers Scientia Professor Jill Bennett (Director of The Big Anxiety) and VM creator Professor Lynn Froggett from University Central Lancashire UK. The VM was followed by a co-analysis of the VM engagement with all participants and researchers.

Outreach
In addition to the arts engagement sessions at Atchison Rd, St Leonards and at Bradfield Senior College, reproductions of the artworks and images of the art in situ were taken to community centres where an art viewing, discussion and creative response took place.

Findings
Arts engagement activities have the potential to be transformative. They evoke and impact feelings and emotions. A key aspect of successful art engagement activities is in ensuring that participants arrive at the art viewing, discussion or artmaking activity in a state where they are open to possibilities. Therefore the logistics of how this is achieved cannot be underestimated (Kenning 2016). The TWCT arts engagement activities
engaged with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, people with cognitive and physical access and care needs. Therefore, careful consideration was needed to ensure safety and inclusivity.

**Project considerations**

A major consideration in organising the arts engagement activities was in relation to the safety at the laneways site where the artworks were viewed. The laneway had no footpaths, the roads were uneven, and the laneway was on an incline. It was also used as an access road by cars. The pace of viewing needed to accommodate people with walkers, walking sticks, people uneven on their feet, and those experiencing memory loss and confusion because of dementia. The engagement needed to allow extra time for when a translator was on site.

In most cases, participants were accompanied to the arts engagement activity by community leads, care staff, or volunteers, who maintained a duty of care throughout the engagement experience and were responsible for getting people to the location, on-time, and advising facilitators if they felt participants needed to rest, or were becoming tired.

One of the aims of the project was to build a community and network to fulfil the immediate project needs, and to build relationships with older members of the community for ongoing research. Great care needs to be taken to act ethically and responsibly in the building of these relationships, and for this to operate at a pace comfortable for all partners. This meant establishing trust and respect, and was often a slow process, requiring face to face meetings with key people in the community. Without their support and backing it was not possible to engage with such a wide range of people. The partner organisations on this project were keen to facilitate the project, to inform potential participants and encourage them to take part. Not all organisations approached were keen to take part.

The translators both facilitated and curtailed discussion and engagement. On occasions the translator exercised judgement as to whether a participants’ questions or comments to the facilitator should be translated or not. In addition, it was apparent that on occasions not all of the comments and information provided by the facilitators was relayed to participants.
The support of case workers, care staff and volunteers, and council staff also impacted how the arts engagement activities were received by participants. Most were open, curious and enthused, engaged in activities alongside participants. However, when the support person assumed their carer role, power relations could be glimpsed, which sometimes impacted on behaviours and responses observed in participants.

The visual matrix is a sophisticated methodology used to elicit responses to stimuli and can be used in a wide range of circumstances. The aim was for the VM experience to be inclusive and to ensure that people were not excluded due to mobility issues, frailty, mild cognitive impairment (diagnosed or otherwise), or because they did not speak English. Therefore, the strict protocols required by the research methodology could not be achieved in many of the TWCT engagements. Often the process of engagement needed to be adapted ‘on the fly’ to take into account memory loss, insecurities, or language differences. These variations to the VM format allowed for high levels of engagement and interaction and provided important insights into the mental health and wellbeing of older people.

**Responses**
The project created meaningful arts engagement experiences for diverse groups of people. For most participants viewing the artworks in the laneway was something they had not experienced before. Interestingly, those who expressed greatest joy in walking along the industrial laneway, were those with the most advanced physical and cognitive access needs. They enjoyed the curiosity of being in the laneway and ‘somewhere different’, and of not knowing what to expect. Similarly, the CALD communities showed little concern about navigating the viewing location. The more able participants were often more hesitant and concerned about the location of the artworks.

Participants were interested to know more about the artworks they viewed in the laneways, who had created them, why were they placed here, who gave permission for them to be here? Discussion in the laneways focussed on the content of the poetry and the artists and students who had made them. Some found the artwork ‘very sad’. On several occasions participants expressed surprise that young people could feel so sad,
‘when they should have their whole life ahead’. Two participants were teachers and the artworks and discussion of the students prompted stories about their experiences. The mood out in the laneway mostly remained contemplative and thoughtful. However, one large group of mothers and grandmothers robustly argued that the parents were at fault for the students feeling this way. While one person away from the group talked quietly about the ‘issues’ she had had with her son, who was no longer alive.

As participants were escorted to the meeting rooms of BHCF participants talked about what they had seen. A reproduction of one of the artworks which focused on Home was placed at the front of the room, so that they could read the poem again. The mood in the VM was different to that in the laneway. The protocol had been adapted to allow the facilitator to provide structure to the engagement. This was particularly needed for people with dementia and for those who spoke little English. Participants were encouraged to think about associations with the artworks, to think about their own homes and their joys and anxieties. Here discussion began to focus on themselves and each other rather than the poetry and the students.

Some of the stories that had been told in the laneways seemed to be tales that were repeated often. They were rehearsed. However, in the VM participants began to talk more authentically about their past, about how they felt and what concerned them. This was often interspersed with everyday information about what they did last week, who they saw or what they were doing next week.

Often discussion was self-regulated or curtailed by other members of the group or care staff. This happened when participants expressed concerns about their past or future. Any sense of sadness was greeted with phrases such as ‘you can’t dwell on it’ or ‘can’t complain’. The range of topics discussed included death and dying—in relation to themselves and others; the joys and stresses of family, migration, war, poverty, violence; perceptions of self; the importance of their careers and work life; and what they wanted to do in the future.

When participants first arrived and viewed the artworks it was not always apparent if people had a diagnosis of dementia. In the laneway conversations flowed and were lively and most participants in each group actively engaged in discussion. In the VM engagement it became more apparent when
participants became tired, got ‘lost’ in the thread of conversation, or forgot what they wanted to say and repeated themselves often. While all appeared to enjoy the engagement, over the course of 90 minutes some participants needed significantly more support at the end of the session, than they had at the beginning.

Having refreshments and creative, making activities offered a change of pace and participants often became more enlivened with the change of focus. The simple act of choosing coloured cards and pens stimulated lively discussion, reflection, sharing of preferences, such as ‘I must have the blue card’, and storytelling. Most participants were keen to write words, phrases, or draw on the card. This included some participants with dementia and limited verbal abilities. The Artworks they made featured text that related both to the everyday and the poetic.

**Intergenerational**

The intergenerational engagement at Bradfield Senior College, included students from the college (none had been involved in the making of the artwork) and older people from the Waverley Hub, an independent group of people who came together to engage in social and cultural activities. They viewed the artworks in situ on the college campus, and reproductions of all the artworks in the college gallery. Many older members expressed concern when viewing the works. They were surprised by the references to mental health issues, suggesting they ‘didn’t realise they had such problems’. One participant began to identify with the content, suggesting he ‘had been there’.

After the viewing, all participants engaged in a VM engagement. Interestingly the students were more active and vocal than the older members of the group who were much quieter, listening intently. As the engagement continued a range of topics were covered. During the VM researchers made notes which were put on a board for all participants to view.

Afterwards all participants were invited to engage in some initial analysis of the discussion that had taken place. The topics were categorised and linked to imagery that arose. For example, there was symbolic and metaphorical discussion of walls, barriers and boundaries. It became apparent that while both the younger and older members of the group had a good understanding of how poetry could be used to engage with feelings and emotions, the younger participants were also highly literate regarding mental health wellbeing and the mechanisms of self-care.
Discussion

The aim of the project was to engage with older members of the community to understand their wants and needs. It was important to engage with a wide range of people, social circumstances, access needs and life experiences. The aim was to move beyond question and answer sessions to understand what participants care about, and what matters ‘beyond the surface’.

It was apparent that to be inclusive and to work with a wide range of people meant that time had to be invested into understanding the community, engaging with existing networks, and finding out what support was needed to enable people to engage (transport, information, support). We needed to build sustainable relationships and trust. Once this had been established, we recognised that it was often those with greater access needs who were most open to ‘trying something new’. Sometimes it was those with fewer access needs, who were already active and able, who were less inclined to try a new activity.

Paying attention to the logistics was important to allay safety concerns. It was also important to ensure that, to minimise stress and anxiety, everyone understood the procedures. This ensured that participants arrived for the activities in a condition where they could engage to their fullest extent.

While it was apparent that some of the stories from participants were ‘rehearsed’ and had been told many times before, the unfamiliar terrain, artworks and engagement approach, also reduced this type of response. Participants often spoke from the heart on things that concerned them. There was both laughter and tears and much social connection and support amongst the groups.

An important issue that arose often, and in many different ways, was the curtailing of emotive conversations that might be perceived as sad or negative. This was particularly noticeable in relation to topics about having lived in a warzone, ‘ahh well that’s all in the past’ and in relation to discussion of mental health issues.

Participants spoke of things that deeply concerned them, Terry talked about how he lay awake each night thinking about ‘how much time he had left’. He was not afraid, he said, but was just curious as it was becoming inevitable. The conversation was cut short by attending care staff, who suggested, ‘yeh, let’s talk about something else’.

On many occasions the care staff in attendance were very encouraging to participants encouraging them, through verbal and non-verbal prompts, to speak out. They took great delight in listening to and talking with participants in their care.

The program for engagement needed to be flexible and adaptable. It needed to adapt to the pace of the participants in any one engagement, and to change the protocols to ensure inclusivity. For example, the VM methods were not always appropriate for people living with dementia and people who did not speak English. The original protocols call for minimal eye contact and limited direct exchange between participants. But, in this instance such approaches can promote insecurity within the group, and so exchanges were encouraged.

Working with people in meaningful engagement of viewing art, discussing personal associations, and engaging in analysis or creative responses over a 90-minute period provided insights into participants needs, wants and concerns, it also revealed group dynamics and the way in which participants both ‘police’ and support others.

It was clear from the engagement that people with diverse access and care
needs can actively contribute and provide valuable insights into our understanding of the needs and the wants of older people.

**Conclusion**
Meaningfully engaging and connecting with a diverse range of people through art, gave insights into the extent to which the participants want to be active and to contribute. They enjoyed the opportunity to engage in new experiences which included visiting areas of the city they would be unlikely to go to, engaging with artwork that are challenging and on occasions confronting. It also showed the extent to which participants overcame limitations with regard how far they could walk, their instability on outdoor surfaces, and their speech and hearing limitations, to engage. It showed that with support and consideration all participants were able to engage, and their voices, stories, concerns and joys and anxieties could be heard.

**References**


