

# STICKYBRICKS

2004 - 2006

**MAKE:** Site specific outdoor performance work and community feast

**BUILD:** Community trust in a fractured public housing estate

**DRIVE:** An end to isolation in public housing

## CONTEXT - THE HIDDEN STORY

In 2004, after delivering many projects exploring homelessness across regional and isolated communities, Big hART turned its thoughts to another isolated community in the heart of Sydney - the Department of Housing's high-rise Northcott Estate. Sitting across the road from Belvoir St. Theatre in gentrified Surry Hills, Northcott had developed a notorious reputation for violence, murder and dysfunction. Callously dubbed 'suicide towers', and demonised by the press, the community needed to find a new narrative. Housing NSW had forced 900 neighbours with high needs into a vertical suburb, with little thought to the consequences, and the community was in a downward spiral.

Big hART maintained a long-term contact with a talented community development worker on the estate who, in tandem with a respected local police officer, worked closely with the community. A loose coalition of partners was formed to 'try and do something'. The project began with little engagement from funding bodies and was met with trepidation by the New South Wales Housing Department. Soon however, as the results started to roll in, the Northcott Project began to build a positive reputation, attracting the attention of the Mayor of Sydney, the New South Wales Premier's Department and the Sydney Festival.

## THE PROCESS

Sydney Festival included the project in its 2006 program, and a group of





residents began working with artists in a creative workshop program running out of the community centre, building towards a large, outdoor, site-specific hybrid performance.

The community development process involved many smaller events and initiatives to draw out stories from the community, and break down fear and barriers among neighbours. Big hART became a platform to support the work of the Housing Department and police, with artists and arts workers providing a series of community engagement workshops which generated narrative and trained the community cast.

The festival show, *Stickybricks* was devised around themes from the resident's lives, such as: 'Arriving at the Building', 'Love in the Building', 'Fear in the Building' and 'Dance in the Building'. These feelings and experiences were then mapped throughout the building in 3D, turned into images and projected onto the large vertical façade during performances.

The *Stickybricks* show sold out, and Big hART produced a feature documentary called *900 Neighbours* for film festivals and ABC television, as well as 14 other short films and a second documentary capturing the performance itself.

#### THE CONTENT

Most residents were part of some kind of diaspora coming to the Northcott building - attracted by the utopian ideals of slum clearance after the war, the Swedish design on the highest hill in the inner city, or forced there in later years by the Department of Housing.

The *Stickybricks* performances set out to follow the transformative dreams of the building and its origins, to reignite the desire for community amongst tenants, and to reclaim the outdoor space from the more sinister associations of drugs, suicide and violence. In preparation, derelict cars were shifted and the building's carpark was laid with fresh turf, transforming it into a peaceful green park. The set, comprised of large white sculptural shapes and stages, grew amongst the gardens, with light and projection on the 14-storey highrise forming the backdrop.

As the audience arrived they were greeted by residents and handed large white polystyrene seats to carry in and arrange in concentric curved lines around the three sculptural stages.

*“It’s hard to resist a community show that so joyfully welcomes the public in to gawp...best are the memories that seem to leak out of the brickwork and windows of this extraordinary place...”*

THE AUSTRALIAN



*“...this is not oral history or tenant life narrative. It’s rather a façade-cracking and joyous slice of life, a self portrait in hope, possibility and pop songs.”*

SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

*“If Linehan (Sydney Festival Artistic Director – Fergus Linehan) was looking for resonance Stickybricks has so much it’s almost bouncing off the walls.”*

THE AUSTRALIAN





Wheelbarrows full of white dinner boxes were brought out and the crowd ate together in a communal meal, as baskets of fresh herbs were offered and the immersive entertainment began. The effect was like creating a village green for a picnic, and an outdoor theatre. Each night the Sydney Festival crowds showed up and the feared reputation of the building was disarmed by an evening spent together, helping the audience and neighbourhood to rethink their negative assumptions about the Northcott Estate.

*Stickybricks* had all the hallmarks of an embedded festival show - integrated into the life of the city, involving a large, participatory cast and crew, and using a diverse array of artforms to tell many hidden stories. Through portraiture, photography, music, immersive sound, movement and image projection, every aspect highlighted the residents and their journey to the building in a new and inclusive way.



**FAVOURITE MOMENT:** Watching Dolly, the very first tenant in the building having her portrait painted by Robert Hannaford, an artist renowned for painting Governors-General and Prime Ministers.

