



Podcast Transcript

Creative Responders: in Conversation with John Richardson

September 2020

Hi I'm Scotia Monkivitch,

Welcome back for another episode of Creative Responders: In Conversation; our monthly interview series where we hear from people on the front lines of the arts and emergency management sector as they prepare, respond and recover from disaster.

If this is your first time joining us, welcome...you might like to know that this interview series is just one part of our podcast offerings, we also have a documentary series exploring case studies relating to creative recovery which you can find in our podcast feed in episodes 1 to 4.

The next season of the documentary series is coming soon and we look forward to sharing those episodes with you in November.

Today's guest is John Richardson who is the National Resilience Adviser for Red Cross Australia.

John is someone who spends a lot of time thinking about disasters - how we make sense of them, how we can better prepare for them, and how they transform the individuals and communities who go through them.

I wanted to talk to John about the uncharted waters of 2020 and what lessons we can learn about resilience, response and recovery from this unique set of challenges we are facing.

John has a deep understanding of disaster across many contexts and I was particularly interested to hear his thoughts on the social dimension of recovery and how the current climate of layered disasters is highlighting in a really stark way that a stronger emphasis on social connectedness is key to building more resilient communities.

I hope you enjoy this conversation with Creative Responder, John Richardson

Scotia: So welcome, John. I'm here in my little wardrobe studio on Meanjin country in Jaggera Turrbal land in Brisbane.

Welcome to our In Conversation series. It's really great to be able to capture a very busy man for a good chat. So welcome, John. Whereabouts are you today?

John: Thanks Scotia for the welcome.

I'm down on the lands of the Yalukit Willam clan and the Boonwurrung people down by Port Phillip Bay here in Melbourne so that's what we would call Elwood but it's the lands of the Boonwurrung people who are the coastal peoples around around the whole of Port Phillip Bay, which is also before it was known as Port Phillip Bay, was known as Nairm. Thanks for having me on.

Scotia: Oh, it's our pleasure.

We thought we'd start by just asking you for a bit of an overview into your journey into the disaster management emergency management sector and what led you to your current role. So your title is National Resilience Advisor for Red Cross Australia. What brought you to this place?

John: Well, yes, it's a it's a long journey. I suppose if I actually think about it, I really probably started this when I was around seven or eight years old and my younger brother and I, were mad Lego fanatics, and we used to build towns and then we would invariably destroy them. There'd be earthquakes or floods or cyclones or something like that. And then we would rebuild them. And this was of course this is growing up in the 70s. This was the real decade of the disaster movie...

Scotia: and our real fascination with death and mayhem.

John: Yes, absolutely. And boys. You know, we were boys as well. So Towering Inferno, all those sorts of things. So we were always, we were quite into the disasters. And then I think, as I said, as I grew older, I was and I went through school, went to university.

And when I was studying university, I undertook a geography degree.

And one of the subjects in that was natural hazards. And it was actually it was actually the best subject that I did while I was at uni.

And it sort of really provoked a real interest in that sort of intersection between sort of hazards and people. So it was where you were able to bring a kind of physical geography and a natural human geography together so very interested in that.

So in the mid 80s there weren't a lot of jobs for geographers so I ended up going and doing my nursing qualification, and nursed for about sort of 10 years or probably a little bit more.

And I just happened to be one stage and I was looking looking at roles when you used to look for jobs in the newspaper, and there was a role that was at Red Cross, which was in the emergency services team, and I thought I'll give that a go. I don't think I'll get it because, you know, it's obviously a specialised role. But with my nursing qualifications and experience and my and my geography I think I obviously made a fairly good case because they gave me the role and so I started working in the emergency disaster space in 1997.

And since then I suppose I've had a number of different roles. I was with Red Cross for a couple of years, then ended up managing the programme and then went across to the Victorian state government in the State Emergency Recovery Unit, which looked after sort of supposed disaster assistance in in Victoria.

And I was with them for seven years and then did a number of different things, had quite a range of different experiences from 9/11 and our response here, the Bali bombings, we had the Alpine bushfires. I was fortunate enough to be sent to the US as part of a team post Hurricane Katrina to sort of look at what we could provide as a country.

So I had a range of different experiences.

And then one of the things at that time I see, you know, when you work in recovery, as you'd know, Scotia, you know, you do see a lot of you know, you see a lot of challenge and and sort of heartbreak. And it did make me so think, you know, I we have we got this right in terms of how we helping people prepare for disaster and and just quite out of sort of good fortune, I suppose at the time, I was talking to a former colleague who is now my boss at Red Cross, and he said, we're thinking about doing some work and being more active in the disaster preparedness space. Would you be interested?

And so I said, yes, I would, because I really saw that as a great opportunity to try and I guess influence the, you know, how we can improve outcomes for people beforehand so they perhaps didn't have to go through some of the heartbreak and trauma.

So I crossed over back to Red Cross in the national team in 2007 and have been a sort of permanent fixture then. So my role has evolved over the time from being a sort of a programme manager to where I currently am now that role with a very, very officious sounding title, National Resilience Advisor.

Scotia: It's an interesting word, isn't it, that you choose the notion of resilience and I'm interested to hear about your idea of preparedness and I know you're going to a national week that's looking at promoting preparedness but often in the arts, we talk about practice - as artists, we practice - that idea that in practicing, you deepen your skills, you deepen your reflection processes and you deepen your capacity to be ready when the opportunity arises for you to do your work or your performance when it's called a performance rather than just practise.

But, you know, even when you're referring to the idea of risk mitigation and how we think about risk, I think that's changing, too, don't you think, in terms of how we are looking to the future? Certainly, Covid is teaching us that the combination of risk from a point of view of tangible concrete risk, as perhaps we used to think about it in terms of land and land impact comparatively to risk mitigation of social psychology and health and wellbeing, needing to be much more meshed in this idea of how we build resilience, how we practice preparedness and how we respond.

John: Yeah, I think that's a great, great observation there and a parallel sort of with practice in the performing arts and I think I think you're right in that and that's the sort of notion of resilience. So seeing what we have as a system.

So I think we've we've tended to within the sector sort so focus on things in a very linear way. So, you know, if we if we prevent and then we prepare, then we will respond that we will recover. And then that's the end of the story, which I mean, I suppose in some ways you can kind of see those sort of parallels if you're developing an idea for a movie script and you work through all those sorts things and just seeing it in a very linear away. But life life is not linear and we do live in in systems. And so I think that's where I like the idea of kind of resilience as a concept, although I'm very mindful that it is a very loaded term and there are many different definitions. But I try and bring it back to trying to be a relatively simple it is around seeing things as a system and it is, you know, what are the kind of capacities that we have across a whole range of things, whether it's our health or well-being, whether it's our financial abilities, whether it's our cultural considerations, our access to knowledge and our connection to people and place.

And if you think of that as as as a system now, preparedness is one part of that and that helps contribute to it. And so then we talk about disaster risk reduction and I think that's again, that's another part of it.

But it sort of overall focuses on, you know, we want people to be able to kind of withstand the shocks and stresses of of challenges and take into account a whole range of different factors.

And that's a disruption that happens to people's lives and then to be able to kind of come out the other side and sort of say, you know, where am I at now? So how do I adapt to to these changes? Because there are changes you know we often talk about resilience as bouncing back or bouncing forward, but we've actually got to recognise that disasters are transformative events for people and maybe small scale or maybe large scale. So we have to think about or what's the transformation here and how do people adapt to it?

So a focus on resilience, building, etc, helps give people, I think, the capacity to sort of be able to to transform and then lead the lives that they value living. You know, we all want to live kind of good, valuable lives. We do that in different ways, obviously. But, you know, that's where I think where we're aiming for.

Scotia: Understanding in any any ecology, there's a kind of fluidity and constant change.

John: Absolutely. Yes. I think that's part of our our challenge and a sort of a dominant, dominant narrative around disasters is we've often just seen well, we just we just need to rebuild what was there because that's it, you know, it was like we lost something, we replace it.

And rather than actually sort of seeing well, how fluid our lives are, how much have we changed? If you think back to what you were doing five years ago or ten years ago or whatever it might be, it's very different. Now we're very different people. So that, I think that's a maturing that we're just starting to see, I think across the sector where there's a sort of recognition of that complexity.

Scotia: Yeah, and I think in current day, even more of a need or a learning in the sense of layering, layering, experience you knows as we go nothing is stationary and what we're dealing with is much more of a cascading situation where impacts come on impacts, you know, as they do in life. So if we're systemising our response, then we have to kind of have the fluidity of life around that as well.

John: Yeah, I think that's so true.

I mean, we we kind of in in this area have focussed on, if you think about Maslow's hierarchy, you know, we we've tended to focus on the bottom level and sort of say ok, we're just really about providing food, water, shelter, a bit of money and, you know, I think a bit of and I'm doing kind of inverted commas here "counselling" will help people so that that's all we need to do.

But you think about how people want to live good, decent, sort of valuable lives and so by by doing that, that's what we've got to have in frame when we're thinking about disasters and how, you know, prevention of but also, you know, our response to and recovery from.

Scotia: Well, we created a recovery network where we're trying to advocate for the role of creativity in this process and, you know, coming from a creative background, understand the value of what we can potentially bring. I'm interested from your perspective, John, what you think is the place or what are some of the ways that we could help support the work of organisations like yours, the Red Cross and other service organisations and government bodies that are looking at developing rigour around preparedness and recovery? What do you think it is that creatives could bring in and support?

John: Look, I think there's a whole range of aspects around sort of creative, you know, creative inputs into sort of processes. You know, we tend to think in a fairly linear way as we sort of approach problems. And so the kind of problem solving approaches say, I think having a different way of thinking and thinking about the sort of creative processes. I think I think that certainly would add to how you might come up with quite different solutions to challenges.

And, you know, I think I mean, I also don't want this to sound like, oh, you know you creative types you just have all these, you know, crazy ideas sort of thing, because I understand that there is also a degree of rigour that goes into, you know, goes in to creativity, whether you know, the idea in an interview with Keith Jarrett the jazz pianist, which talked about the, you know, in his learning of technique and an immersion in his technique and understanding, all of you know, all of the theory around music allowed him to improvise.

So, you know, we tend to think all improvising as just kind of making it up as you go along well it's not, it's obviously grounded in in something. And so I think that's one of the things that I think is really important.

And I kind of liken it to, you know, we often approach to disaster management as almost like a symphony orchestra.

You know, there's lots of people up there. And then this one generally a guy, but sometimes it's a woman up the front with a baton, then they're conducting away. And if they fall over, then the first violin will jump up and take over.

And so it's all very structured and you have to play it pretty much the way that it was written you know, two or three hundred years ago or otherwise, the critics will have your hide and all that sort of thing.

And, you know, so we kind of approach it that way. And it doesn't sort of allow for flexibility or or or creativity.

Whereas I actually thought, you know, it is perhaps a bit more like a jazz ensemble. You know, I think about Miles Davis' 'Kind of Blue' where you know, it's got an extraordinary rhythm section that kind of anchors the album and then allows, you know, Miles and and Coltrane and Cannonball to improvise over this anchoring.

So I see that that's sort of intersection where you can bring creativity into sort of solving problems.

You need a good, good, strong anchor and well versed

Scotia: Mmm, and all people who know their skill and their capacities to support each other in making the orchestrated sound at the ends I suppose...

Yeah. And the strength of collaboration, which is so key to emergency management.

[00:20:44] Yeah, so I think you can kind of see that bringing a different sort of viewpoint in is, I think really, really key.

Over the years I have employed people who have come from creative performance backgrounds that are moved through sort of almost like event management because again we the audience often see these things and they all run really, really well, whether that's theatre shows or music shows or whatever and you never get to see what happens back of house, which is actually is, you know, kind of managing crises or disasters quite often.

Scotia: All the time John!

John: Yeah. So it is bringing those skills in is really, again, is really great.

But I think look, just probably to kind of round this off.

I think just that recognition of the value that the creative arts allows to help people make sense of of what they are going for or what they could potentially go through.

So, you know, again, we've sort of recognised, I suppose, yes, you know, people do go through very challenging and traumatic experiences.

You know, again, a dominant sort of paradigm was really around let's get them some mental health services and we'll get them kind of formal clinical supports but quite often people, you know, they need to make sense of it themselves and they might not be able to articulate that within a formal clinical setting. And so, you know, the creative pursuits allow people to try and make sense

Scotia: To unpack an experience...in a safe way

John: Yeah. And that's a really, really important part of the disaster experiences, is making sense and making meaning out of what has happened.

Scotia: I know that you worked quite closely on the development of the Strathewen, well, one of the Strathewen bushfire memorials that were deeply layered by a range of processes and led very strongly by the community. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Because in some ways that's a kind of tangible way of how a kind of creative process and a very tangible outcome has been used as a way of doing that very thing, finding a safe way for people to process, to mourn, to look to the future.

John: Yeah, look, that was a really, I was deeply fulfilled by that piece of work which took place over, I think, about the course of nearly three years from the time I was sort of, you know, asked to the time the memorial was finalised and it was great to be able to be trusted by the community.

I'd had some involvement in the Bali Memorial in Lincoln Square. And you know, kind of strong, interest in how do we kind of represent grief and mourning through other areas, and so being able to be kind of invited into the community - and I was I was vouched for by one of the community members who I had known for some time - and really, you know, it was a small group of us who each brought different experiences from the bushfires, there were people who were mourning family members, there were people who lived in the community and people who didn't live in the community and there was I think six or eight of us.

It's really it's really an opportunity just to, I kind of allowed them, you know, not allowed them, but my presence allowed them to be able to talk about what their kind of wishes were in a safe space.

So that was, you know, we created a very safe space for these conversations to be had. We did put in place a very rigorous and long term process. It was interesting, they said to me well, we should have this sorted by the first anniversary - and this was, I was approached in October - and I said, look, it definitely won't be the first anniversary and it's probably unlikely to be a second anniversary as well if you want to do this properly and you want to try and engage people as we go through.

So we did put in place a really rigorous process. And I spent a lot of time in the community just talking with people, trying to really rather than say 'come to us with your plans for a memorial' - because that's often what happens, people draw on a bit of paper and say, I want this or I want that.

We were really we're trying to facilitate having a conversation about what's important to them. What purpose did they want to see from the memorial?

Scotia: I think what I saw in the beauty of that piece was the ongoing reflection of stories, which is evident in its structural form, but also in each of the layers and the sense that it's an ongoing conversation rather than a full stop.

John: yeah. I think that's the thing. They were very keen to say we want to not forget and we want to learn from this so that was how they kind of were able to sort of manage that. And they also wanted to tell the story of before the fire as well as, you know, during and after. So they didn't see it necessarily just as a point in time.

Scotia: it's a very beautiful representation of that cycle which you just mentioned before. It's not you go through the linear step and then it's done but there is the cycle, the story of continuation, the pre the post and the future.

John: Yes, it is. And then, you know, kind of getting to a point where we're able to form a brief and that's sort of the point where I started to kind of step back further.

And then the committee was able to sort of, you know, put out expressions of interest. And that's where we ended up with the designers who realised the the end result, which I think is quite, quite extraordinary

because, you know, I have seen some disaster memorials it's a it's certainly an interest of mine and, you know, I think sometimes some of them can try try a bit too hard. They try and get everything in. Whereas I think this is a really extraordinary representation of of when I look at it I can see these are the sorts of things that people were saying to me over the course of a couple of years before.

Scotia: Mm hmm. But also, I think what's telling is that community continued to engage with it and build on it and kids last year or whenever it was were writing poetry as a response, like, that's been a very beautiful point of ongoing focus.

John: Yeah and you know, you've got to recognise that you're not always not everyone's going to be happy with processes, whether there's some people who say we don't think there should be a memorial at all. That's that's our view. That's a view but, yeah, as you say, you have to, you obviously have to recognise that and you can't necessarily please everyone but you hope that you get to a point where everyone can look at and say, OK, I'm comfortable with this I could live with this, I think this is okay.

Scotia: It's an ongoing journey, as you say, in recovery, certainly seeing as there's no sort of timeframe.

I'm just interested in your role as national resilience adviser and given what we're learning currently with Covid, which in some ways doesn't have a full stop for us either into the future, we can't necessarily have an assumption of where it's going to take us.

And meanwhile, we are having a preparedness phase at the moment into our bushfire season carrying on the back of a very major, impactful one from last year.

How do you think we take these learnings? And where are you thinking new approaches might arrive in terms of managing an ongoing preparedness, resilience building approach, when - often I think about it, you know - athletes are trained for high performance so there is a period of time where they're at peak performance. Then they have the rest and then they prepare again and there's peak performance.

And we could look at the disaster management cycle like that. You have rest, preparedness, peak performance. But our peak performance is getting more and more layered and we don't really have a lot of time for the recovery or the gathering of our energy again - we're about to go into preparedness process now whilst we're also engaging with, you know, a lot of tiredness and a lot of people working at high peak performance level for a long time without any downtime.

How are you thinking or how is your organisation or the general conversation in either disaster management cycles thinking of what we take from these lessons to build better processes into the future?

John: Yeah, look, I think that's a really great observation. And I think these are sort of uncharted waters, too, to some degree because of that that layering as you say, you know, that people have been under in some parts of the country, been under stress for years. If you even if you go back before bushfires, you think about drought. You know, we had significant parts of the country also under stress in a drought, and then you have fires and then we had smoke and then Covid so I think, yeah, we are certainly in in very, very sort of challenging circumstances.

And so I think this is probably a kind of adaptation period that we're in where, you know, we probably don't quite recognise it, but it's you know, it's so it's sort of like the start of the start of the summer where it always feels sort of hotter, even if it's only, you know, kind of 23 or 24 degrees it feels like it's, you know, 10 degrees warmer because your body hasn't physiologically adapted to the heat. It takes about six or so weeks to do that.

So I think we're possibly in in a similar situation where we're having to sort of adjust to this corner trying to be up or at peak performance all the time.

So it's certainly we're certainly very mindful of that. And I think it does come have to come back to sort of real real sort of basics.

And that's why, you know, one of our strong sort of focal points is on community, connexions and individual connections and sort of being able to invest in that social capital that you can draw on to sort of help you help you get through.

And this is what we've found - the survey we did before Disaster Preparedness Week suggests that nearly seven out of 10 of us across the country basically say, look, I really had to draw upon my personal and social connections to help me get through.

So I think that's where we have to really, really focus. So a lot of sort of preparedness has been very much around the practical, tangible things like, you know, clean your gutters out, put together an emergency kit and those sorts of things. Now they're all still very important things. And, you know, you need you need those to survive if the cyclone is coming through or the flood or fire but I think we've got to have a much stronger emphasis on on the social the psychosocial dimensions and, you know, whether it's helping people prepare their minds, helping them to kind of manage through stress, really strong focus on on stress management, I think is important and obviously has really everyday benefits so it's not only just during an emergency, but also then, how do you build your social connections further, what can you do to kind of reach out to people.

Scotia: John, would you have in your own preparedness kit any personal examples of perhaps how you might have used creativity or the arts as a way of connecting in, building your your social circle, your connections or your health and wellbeing sensibilities?

John: Yeah, I suppose, you know, one of the things that we do, you know, we always have a Christmas function here with our friends. I have a couple people of friends of mine who play in bands. So they they come and they play at our Christmas functions and you know, people know, oh, we should get along to that because there'll be there'll be a band playing and it's always great to hear live music people love live music. So that's a way of kind of bringing people together and sort of build, build social connections. We do a similar thing in our street here where we usually have a street party once a year.

And again, there's this couple people in the street who play in bands or play music. So they get out guitars and amplifiers and play as in a couple of other artists too, who do things like face painting and that stuff. So. So again, it helps bring people together around sort of common purpose and there's a there's a reason, sort of a four or four coming along.

I suppose the other thing for me is, you know, I write a lot, and whilst it's not creative writing, you know, sort of part of my blog, you know, I kind of try and capture the moments that are around and how can we use those moments to help people think about the sorts of things they might do. So being able to use the written word, I think is really important to sort of, again, build that kind of psychosocial, you know, what goes on inside of inside your head and what goes on outside your body and builds that sort of resilience is really key I think.

Scotia: So inside your preparedness pillow or your kit, you think about putting a journal or your knitting or colour pencils and some things that are about different parts of your needs rather than just the concrete wall and keys to the lockbox. So, yes.

John: Yeah, most definitely.

And also identifying those things that are also really important. You know, we've got some examples of the kids artwork that we would have in our box or, you know, there's one of my favourite records has a particular meaning for me. So that's the sort of thing I would want to also protect.

So, like, if, say, the worst thing did happen and we had to sort of re-establish our lives, then there would be elements that are not just the practical, but not that I would be able to sort of, you know, kind of live, not as I was, but have those connections. And that's really important. This sort of notion of psychological continuity so that, you know, that's stuff that makes us who we are continues through and, you know, it builds up with our memories and the like. And these the sorts of things that can help anchor us in the past and help us go forward.

Scotia: I was just thinking memory making is often around these shared points of sensory engagement and often the arts are the container for that.

John: Yeah. I mean, if you think about people, people talk about what are memorable moments and they might be a concept that they went to or some function or maybe a book that I've read or a movie that, that that's had massive impact on them. So it's those sorts of things that do shape and help us kind of reflect. It's it's not necessarily three litres of water and a flashlight, which, you know, are important things.

But, you know, you're not going to remember those sort of in in your in your twilight years necessarily.

Scotia: I wish you all the best, John, with the Australian Disaster Preparedness Campaign Week, is that is that the title?

John: Something along those lines, yes.

And your very big job, actually, I think it's you know, it is really something of our time now and into the future to think and unpack what we understand to be resilience and how do we support each other in the resilient journey.

I think particularly the learnings of this last summer and our current experience of Covid and thinking of climate change ahead of us resilience is such a weighted and important factor that we need to be growing to love and understand.

John: Yeah. Thank you. I think, yes, it is sort of our time is now and I also thank you for the work that you're doing as well, because again, being able to be that lightning rod around which creativity can contribute to this process.

Again, if I think about my journey as I described earlier, we would not have been having this conversation 23 years ago, but now we can. So it does demonstrate a maturing of of the sector and the importance, I think, you know, having an organisation such as yours and you being able to kind of have a kind of clear vision of what you can contribute, I think has as been a massive leap forward for us. I think it's been it's been great so thank you.

Well, thanks for the encouragement and the support, and the Red Cross is a strong loved organisation in Australia and we're very we're very thankful to be in conversation with you, sir. All the best for your campaign. And I look forward to an extent.

John: Yeah, great. Thanks, Scotia.

Scotia: Thanks John - and I've been enjoying your blogs.