

# CREATIVE RESPONDERS

## Podcast Transcript, July 2023 In Conversation with Dr Margaret Moreton

**Scotia:** Welcome to Creative Responders in Conversation, I'm Scotia Monkivitch from the Creative Recovery Network, and this is our monthly interview series where we hear from creative leaders, disaster management experts, artists and community members who are strengthening disaster planning through creativity.

Today I'm speaking with Dr Margaret Moreton. Margaret is the Executive Director of the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience - our national Institute delivering a range of products and services on behalf of the Federal Government to support a disaster resilient Australia.

It's a great time to speak with Margaret as AIDR is gearing up for their annual conference taking place in August so I was excited to hear from her about the program for this year's gathering - the first to be delivered under her tenure - and talk about the ways she is working to enhance the inclusion of diverse voices and new platforms within the program which includes a dedicated focus on creative recovery for the first time.

Prior to her role with AIDR, Margaret worked in Federal Government across a range of social policy and program areas. Motivated by her own experiences during the 2003 Canberra fires and the 2009 Victorian bushfires, she embarked on a community-based research project exploring the key factors that contribute to disaster recovery and resilience.

We'll hear more about that from Margaret shortly and how this led her to her current role with AIDR and her commitment to building a collaborative approach to how we plan for and respond to disasters.

Please enjoy my conversation with Dr Margaret Moreton.

**Scotia:** So welcome to Creative responders, Margaret. I'll start by paying respects to the traditional owners, ancestors and elders, past and present, on the lands on which we're podcasting today. So I'm on Jagera / Turrbal Country in Meanjin in Brisbane. Where you joining me from today, Margaret?

**Margaret:** I'm joining from Wurundjeri Country down here in Melbourne and it's lovely to be here both with you and on this Country. It's a beautiful sunny day, which is a bit of a change for us.

**Scotia:** Oh, I hear it's been biting. Well, you live in Ballarat, don't you? So cold Central.

**Margaret:** I do. Yep. Yep. In Wadawurrung Country. And it's even colder and rainy than anywhere else. But I still love it.

**Scotia:** Well, we're so pleased you can come on to the podcast, Margaret. I know it's I've known you for some time and had the pleasure with working you most recently in your role as Executive Director of the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, or AIDR, as we refer to it. I'm sure many of our listeners will be very familiar with Institute, but for those who aren't, I thought it would be a great start to hear from you about the Institute and also a little bit about your journey in community-based work and research that led you to this role in heading up the organisation.

**Margaret:** For anyone not familiar with AIDR, the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, we are Australia's National Institute and we are in particular, knowledge creators, curators, brokers - we have an entire set of handbooks that are focussed on a number of issues related to disaster risk reduction and resilience. We produce our major incidents report every year. We create companion documents and guides for people working with communities. So there's a lot of knowledge creation. We do that in a very collaborative way with people working in the field, with specialists and others, and by doing it in a collaborative way, there's a lot of ownership of the products we produce, but we don't stop there. We then use those products as a platform and we support a number of networks of people as they explore the issues in disaster risk reduction and resilience. And we host a national conference every year. It's coming up quite soon and we run webinars and other events and activities to help people learn from and share their experiences based on that knowledge that we've created, but also based on the lived experience of practitioners and of communities themselves. So we see ourselves as that core central knowledge repository and, and helping people work out how to utilise that knowledge. We have a knowledge hub on our website which is used extensively. I'm always amazed at the downloads and the evidence of people using our information as.

**Scotia:** Well, so it's so necessary to have that centralised gathering point, isn't it? Because the hardest thing is there's so much to find and to have that centralised space is so useful not only for researchers but for practitioners looking for connections or ideas or case studies or.

**Margaret:** Absolutely, Absolutely. And we often describe ourselves as that step, that translator in between the research and the knowledge and how to actually put it into practice on the ground. And we. Another metaphor I've been using of late is that we're a doorway into a whole lot of resources so more and more people are coming to us saying we'd like you to host our information and resources on the website. And I think that having that central door where people know that if they open the door and look inside, they'll find all sorts of different bits of information and knowledge that can inform their practice. And I think that's a really important in fact, I get feedback all the time from our users, I don't like that word, but from practitioners about how useful that knowledge is.

**Scotia:** Hmm. The Miraculous Library. So you referred earlier that your background was in community based work. Can you tell us a little bit about that journey and how how it led to you to where you are now?

**Margaret:** Sure. Happy to. And in fact, it's it's one of those things when we look back on our lives, I now see patterns that I didn't realise were happening at the time. So I'm forever grateful that I was born in a small country town and grew up on a farm in western Victoria. I learned when I joined the public service many years later that I grew up under the poverty line. I had a great childhood, lots of outdoor, fresh food and ran around without shoes on most of the time. And I'm grateful for that, beginning in the country. And it gave me my first language, which is the language. Forgive the flippancy, but pretty much of everyday Australians. And if I hadn't had that, I wouldn't be where I am now. And my first fire was when I was in my teens. And it was in the 1970s perhaps 1973, the local town Strathern in Victoria was raised and there were lives lost. And my first realisation of community, I think that I remember anyway, is that the then local newspaper, rural newspaper called the Stock and Land took a photograph of my father feeding hay from our hay shed to someone else in the region's sheep. The wind changed and our home and our farm was not affected at all and others were, which is a common story. And the journalist asked my father for his name to put under the photograph should it make the paper. And as a young kid I was super impressed with my father's answer and I have the article and I have the original photograph, and it's been I've had it ever since. And my father's answer went something like, "my name doesn't matter. Look around you. We're a community and we're here helping one another". And he said a few other things, but he basically refused to give his name. And so that's what they printed under the photograph. And for me, that was my first, as I say, my first real awareness of community, the football club, all sorts of people came out to help one another. There were no payments for disaster support back then. I joke with people and say, I'm 100 years old. There was no disaster scheme, there were no financial arrangements, people just helped each other get back up. Since then I have worked in the public sector in Canberra, setting policies and running programs for the Federal Government. And then I reached the ripe old age of 50 and for anyone who's listening to this podcast, 50 is not too late to change your career. And I went to university again and did a PhD, and it's the people I interviewed for that day that changed my life. I went to four different emergency affected communities - fire, flood, cyclone and then a community that had fire, flood, fire or was it flood fire flood - one or the other - and interviewed 120 people and interviewed the heads of recovery in each of those cases and gathered information about what resilience means to them and what it looks like on the ground. And I carry some of those people with me today, as I can clearly recall, sitting on verandas. And that's where my and speaking rural Australian helped. Not my speaking Canberra bureaucrat, but by speaking rural Australia. I had lots of fantastic conversations listening to people's stories of what resilience meant. And then I knew I could never go back to being a bureaucrat again. And began to do a lot of community based disaster resilience work in different communities across particularly Eastern Australia. And then from there I've worked in other organisations and the AIDR position became available and I, I have to say credit to Amanda Leck, my predecessor, who rang me and told me that it was going to become available, and I realised I wanted this job very badly because of the

ability to support the system and through the system to support Australian communities for a very long time into the future, which is what I'm hoping that we will do. So I have a pretty personal experience from a young age. I did protect my home in the Canberra bushfires and that gave me a real experience of what, the middle of a crisis. It feels like I recall it in a great deal more detail than the fires when I was a teenager. I think grassfires are quite a different experience to the fires burned in Canberra. And I think the other fires that had the greatest effect on me personally were the Victorian fires on Black Saturday in 2009. Perhaps being a Victorian by birth, and perhaps because of how many children perished in those fires. For Australians, 173 people, it's a lot of people.

**Scotia:** Well, those fires were instrumental for so much change, weren't they?

So you mentioned that one of the major initiatives of AIDR each year is your annual conference, which is coming up at the end of August. So a great time to be catching up with you to hear more about how it's all coming along together. And there's always many interesting components to the conference programme. But I was particularly pleased this year that Creative Recovery has been identified with its kind of own platform of work, with a special session dedicated to it. Can you talk a little bit about the programming decisions to incorporate that and perhaps whether you see this as reflecting a shift in the sector over recent years as to the value of arts-based programs in disaster management?

**Margaret:** I think it does reflect that shift and I think it also reflects my arrival at the Institute, it was really interesting, I got here in the nick of time, the theme for the conference was one of the first things that was being finalised after my arrival and we sat as a team and had quite a few conversations about what we wanted the theme to be and we decided we wanted to take a fresh approach, which is difficult doing a conference every year, but we wanted to take a fresh approach and identify a few themes that would bring forward different voices, voices that aren't on every conference agenda. I know that there was a bit of disappointment as people who have spoken at a number of AIDR conferences before weren't chosen on this year's agenda and aren't part of the programme, and that's always difficult. We had over 800 abstracts submitted to this conference, this ADRC in 2023, and that's a huge number of abstracts to review for effectively less than 30 timeslots.

**Scotia:** Well, that in itself is interesting, isn't it? Because in some ways the field of recovery and that's kind of more the frame of reference comparatively to the bigger disaster management conference that sits around yours is, you know, has been really growing in the last, you know, five, ten years. And to see such an interest and also an evolution of how people are engaging in building better practice, it's that's pretty exciting to have 800.

**Margaret:** It's very exciting and I think it's been reflected in our program. I think it's a shift more toward preparation and recovery, not not just to focus on the crisis itself and the response. It's a shift toward creativity. There are other elements on the program where there's some nature based solutions that's made it onto this year's program for the first

time. There's a shift to understanding the whole a little more. So there's a lot of conversation happening now about what's in the system, what's the systemic approach to disaster risk reduction and to building resilience. And there's the interest, I think reflects a desire to understand the entire system that surrounds an emergency event. It's not just lights and sirens, although I do pay expressed gratitude to the response agencies who do that really important work. But we've now got, you know, insurance and land planning and how how to engage different groups across society that haven't perhaps been engaged before, how to build collaborative approaches to the challenges we face. So these are the kinds of issues we think are now emerging, and we want to reflect it in this year's conference to to engage in a new set of conversations. And interestingly, I get a bit nervous when I feel like I'm skyting and I'm very excited because we already have considerably more registrations at the conference than we've had before. So it'll be showing every sign of being a larger group than last year or the year before that or the year before that.

**Margaret:** Excited because that's an interest and that that demonstrates a passion and a growing group of people who want to learn and share.

**Scotia** [00:10:05] Yeah. And an understanding that we fit into a broader ecosystem complex unto itself, but that we all have to play role which you know, our, you know, our, our large country policies talk about that as well. But it's different when you think about it in practice.

**Margaret:** That's right. And because it's such a complex system that's affecting all of this work, it's even more important that we find ways to collaborate with people who've been doing this work for a long time, but also with new players who are wanting to be more involved. And we have to find really effective ways of collaborating well with a whole range of people now.

**Scotia:** Well, from a programming standpoint, you've also platformed Indigenous leadership within the disaster management system which is another area that's deservedly gaining more prominence within these types of gatherings. Can you tell us about what people can expect from those sessions and some of the key influencers that will be speaking at the conference?

**Margaret:** So it's it's very interesting. We've intentionally expanded our connection to Indigenous Australians who are working in disaster resilience and risk reduction in particular. We're also providing some support to, if I can give a bit of a plug to Bhiemie Williamson, who's an Indigenous disaster risk reduction leader, he's conducting and leading a team, conducting research into how First Nations have been in fact actively building resilience and dealing with disasters way before the rest of us. And we're helping him with an Indigenous summit that's happening on the Monday before the conference, hoping to showcase Indigenous ways of looking at these issues. I know that Bhiemie will speak at that summit. We have a number of Indigenous speakers at the ADRC Conference and also at the AFAC conference more broadly trying to make sure we bring

their perspectives into how we imagine resilience and how we work together in ways that really haven't occurred before. And I think it's it's high time that they did.

**Scotia:** And can you just explain AFAC Margaret because people may not know that analogy.

**Margaret:** Oh, thank you. AFAC is the broader conference that happens at the same time and location as the ADRC conference and AFAC is the Foreign Emergency Services Council in Australia and New Zealand. And they too have more Indigenous speakers this year than they've ever had before. In fact, I think between the two conferences we are sitting at something like 40% Indigenous speakers across the whole, which is sadly not usual and I think will make for a very, very interesting exchange. We've chosen to call some of our sessions in the ADRC conference, you know, things like "People Place and Power" and have some Indigenous voices in that session. We really want to explore, and there are other sessions, I encourage people to look at our website. We really want to explore giving greater prominence to an Indigenous way of viewing the challenges that come from increasing frequent and intense disasters in this country.

**Scotia:** Yeah, such a necessary contribution. So, you know, one of the great things about the AIDR conference and other gatherings of this nature is the opportunity to be in the room with people from all these different parts of the disaster measurement ecosystem and something we've been focusing a lot on Creative Recovery Network over the years, particularly in the area of disaster planning, is this collective responsibility, which you've already mentioned. So the current landscape of frequently occurring disasters requires new approaches, and a kind of cross-sector collaboration is a key for tackling effectiveness really in the ways that we build, plan and respond. We've been very pleased to welcome you onto our National Taskforce for Creative Recovery, which is a group that brings together representatives from a range of sectors looking at our own engagement or building better practice, collective practice around risk reduction and and response and recovery. Could you talk about this importance of collaboration a little more and why it's so essential that we move forward into this, you know, call it a new era or a new way of thinking about disaster planning, collective disaster planning?

**Margaret:** Sure. I'm delighted to be a part of the Taskforce. I was very pleased to get that invitation, and it had me reflecting on a number of recent invitations in the last few years in particular. I remember speaking to a group of architects. They were town planners and architects designing a new suburb north of Melbourne in Victoria. And interestingly, I was asked to be their lunchtime speaker pretty much as a source of entertainment

**Scotia:** Did you wear your party hat?

**Margaret:** Indeed! And so that appealed to me and I had a great time and talked to them about how physical place and places of connection, places where people could socialise together, art spaces, playgrounds, all sorts of things. How much of a difference those places make to a sense of community and how that plays out in the event of an

emergency. And the session was very animated. I mean, I gave a brief introduction, but then the people who were present were really interested and they hadn't thought about it before. And that kind of reaction happens regularly. So particularly in the town planning space, I go, I hesitate to say this, but I may as well because we've got to address it. I drive past particular areas on a daily basis. There's an aged care centre not far from where I live and it is in a hollow, quite low. The roofs are at the same height as the road I drive on when I drive past and I know that they're vulnerable to flooding because of where they're placed and we're putting aged care centres there? So there's a lot to be talked about around transport, education, town planning, building design, community design, all of which have a huge impact on the resilience in the long term of the people and the households and the community in those places. And until we engage with people who don't usually think about fire, flood, cyclone or storm, we don't have those aha moments that I had with the architects and town planners where the penny drops and I see it drop. And I know that's that's where AIDR can continue to do really useful things. And all of us working in this space, because we've got to have that penny drop more often.

**Scotia:** Yeah, it's like having to put in, put on a different kind of lens, isn't it? Because we're thinking about sustainable futures and a lens around looking at ramifications of choices, then we have to be thinking more broadly than just the build or the structure or the economic kind of imperative that drives particularly our construction industry. If we're not thinking with long term care, then these kind of perhaps inefficient processes are continuing to be perpetrated because they're not seeing themselves within that broader picture.

**Margaret:** I agree. And this is where the nature based conversation also needs to come in, because I think I'm hopeful that one of the things COVID has taught us, and I'm hopeful will reflect more and more as it recedes into our past, I have my fingers crossed, is our connection to land and our need for fresh food. And because things supply chains were disrupted so dreadfully during COVID and of course they are for every community after an emergency. But until we're all affected by it, a lot of people don't realise the difficulties that affected communities have in just obtaining the necessities of daily life. And in remote Australia, that's and that's a daily occurrence to have difficulty obtaining necessities for daily life. So I'm hoping that the way we think about our place in the world will have shifted as we were all affected, most of us, by COVID, because that's the kind of thing that affects communities before and after emergencies as well.

**Scotia:** Well, it's kind of interesting, isn't it, though? When we think about crisis, it's a point of change. But if we don't if we're not part of that crisis, it doesn't necessarily carry the weight. So it is about how we think about educating communities, people, individuals about thinking about, yeah, maybe the place in this kind of ecological situation that we're living now or perhaps their place within the community to see see it in a different way. So even though it's not been impacting, you can understand or have some empathy about the needs that sit beyond your localised communities so that you can see the ramifications of choices being made locally and how they impact more broadly than that - it's such a big cultural shift that we need to engage with, isn't it?

**Margaret:** It is. And that brings me back to the value of the creative groups and people in our community, because it's through stories and through plays and through probably through TV shows, through artworks, it's through music, it's through all of the creative elements of our lives that we share that experience in part at least.

**Scotia:** Or get an insight at least into someone else's, or get an insight into someone else's perspective.

**Margaret:** That's right.

**Scotia:** What do you think from your experience and the things that you've been learning that we most need to be focusing on, on building capability, the capacity of local communities to face these challenges ahead because we know they will be increasing. What do you see as the key areas we need to expand or improve or to build leadership and self-determination for communities to manage sustainable futures?

**Margaret:** Yeah, there is so much. There is so much. I often talk about how important it is to invest in children and young people, and I'm old enough to remember when seatbelts were not worn in cars. And now, of course, we wear them all the time. And I'm old enough to remember the slip from slip approach to sunscreen and sun protection. We somehow need to build into our everyday way of life an understanding that we live in a country that has all sorts of challenges and has regular fire, flood and cyclone and storm. So that it becomes second nature. We also need to understand that the science is really clear. These events are becoming increasingly frequent and intense. There's no doubt about it. We've just had I think it's the fourth hottest day on record globally as a global average ever. And we had them one day after the other, the four hottest of the last four days. It's essential that we get that. It's essential that we take that seriously, that we build it into our everyday life and that the organisations like AIDR, like federal and state governments, like large NGOs, support the local efforts that are required if communities are to be well prepared and face the future. Local governments are really stretched and we need to work together. It goes back to your collaboration comments earlier. **We absolutely need to work across different sectors in a united way, in a place based way, in order to make sure we are well prepared for the futures that are faced. We know where these events will occur. We know the most likely locations in Australia. We need to act on that information.**

**Scotia:** Well, and that's it is cultural change, isn't it? How do we how do we find spaces that we can be truthful together, that we we can't actually always do what we say our job says we're going to do. You know that we do have to share resources and we do have to share skills and knowledges is in a way that the system currently isn't necessarily set up to do in an effectual way.

**Margaret:** And I think we have to we have to respect and genuinely respect the various voices. You know, we have to learn from, from and with First Nations people, we have to understand who lives in the places that are vulnerable to these events and work with those people. And we have to listen and we have to share the knowledge we have.



**Scotia:** Yeah, well, part of our part of being able to contribute is to be educated about what we're contributing to and that's one of the big gaps in terms of community education. How do we work more effectively to ensure that we know what we need to know in order to contribute and to where where that knowledge goes once once the conversation is established.

**Margaret:** That's right. I think we also need to pay attention to current research because of Daniel Aldrich has recently completed a period of time in Australia and he has excellent examples of the value of social capital and social connections and how they compare to some of the grey infrastructure or the physical built environment changes that people sometimes call for. We need to understand what's going to create the most resilience and invest in that. So there's a financial question here as well. Hmm.

**Scotia:** Well, and he does highlight cultural infrastructure as being a core well, the potential of that being a core mitigator and preparedness space for people to come around. It is really another area of collaboration that's key for development, this area of research. I know that AIDR has been working with partners, not just with Daniel, but to kind of build research initiatives. And how do you think we can better embed collaboration around this research? Where do you see the value of this kind of collaboration for your organisation, specifically AIDR, but also more broadly throughout the sector?

**Margaret:** It's really interesting, since I've been in this role, the Natural Hazards Research Australia team have been in regular contact Andrew Gissing and I get along very well and we're connecting with one another about research I've just sponsored and we've been delighted that it was successful, a concept that will be taken through the NHRA research process now for Indigenous disaster resilience. It's really important that the research include First Nations perspective. So I'm thrilled that the project we sponsored, the project concept we sponsored has been successful. I'm also reaching out to other academic institutions. There are a number of universities now that have either invited me or members of my team to be involved in planning days on expert advisory committees in exploring what the new challenges will be for research. And I'm very, very keen that we connect research to the work of AIDR, but also connect researchers to one another because of the position we're in sometimes, we were just talking about this earlier today, sometimes we become aware of projects or approaches or research concepts that different people are developing, not realising that others are also developing a similar concept. And so we've taken on a role recently of starting to introduce people to one another so that if a project is being explored for research or on the ground in a community, that that knowledge is shared with others who are doing similar work either in the same place or in different places, I think we need to build that collaboration in the research sector as well, and that's been our efforts to do that has been very well received. So I think we'll do more of it.

**Scotia:** Yeah, so important. Otherwise you're just doubling up aren't you, And yeah, rewriting over the top of each other. Yeah there's so much happening and so much to do,

isn't there? I think it's always a challenge. Like, how do you keep a priority focus? I know that for Creative Recovery Network, that's always a challenge so much that we need to do to build capacity on a local level, but also to kind of educate and change perspectives around the role of culture and the arts. But, you know, it's really important that we have friends in and with organisations such as yours to be able to help know what the kind of best pathways are to follow.

**Margaret:** And you know, I think that's one of the reasons why the task force is such a good idea and why the collaborative approaches are so essential. It's such a complex area of work. We can't we can't face the future effectively if we don't find a whole lot of different perspectives and mutual respect and then ways of working together to face the future, because otherwise it's just too complex to face in piecemeal ways now.

**Scotia:** But interesting, I think it's also there's a kind of relief, you know, if we think about the umbrella of climate and the climate experience or emergency, however the words you want to put around it, you know, it's it's the sort of umbrella under which everything now sits really like everything will be need to, if it's not already engaging or being responsive to that. So the world of disaster management has a way to kind of be not only instrumental, but kind of lead ways of how people can think about how we engage and care and drive sensibilities around our human relationships and how we are going to be able to survive and thrive together. And how are we going to be thinking about the way that we sit in partnership or in the ecology of the world is changing so very rapidly.

**Margaret:** That's right. I agree.

**Scotia:** So what an amazing place to be working, through the trajectory of your career, Margaret.

**Margaret:** I have to pinch myself. I'm so aware of what a privilege it is to be here and what a pleasure. And I feel like it's a match. I just I feel like we're I'm I'm I am where I am supposed to be and I know that in itself is a, is a privilege to be able to say not many people get there, so...

**Scotia:** Well thanks, Margaret, for joining us and all the best for the conference. It's just around the corner on August the 23rd and 24th here in Meanjin, Brisbane, and we'll include the links in the show notes for the conference programme and also to AIDR for the listeners who'd like to know more or access the material on the knowledge hub, I use it a lot and encourage people to use it it's such an amazing resource. We look forward to seeing how things develop in the years under your leadership, Margaret, and certainly engaging you at this year's conference.

**Margaret:** Thanks, Scotia. I appreciate all of that. I'm looking forward to seeing you. And I do recommend to any listeners of the podcast that they do hop on to our website and have a look.

**Scotia:** Thanks for joining me for Creative Responders in Conversation, a podcast from the Creative Recovery Network and special thanks to Margaret for making the time to speak with me today.

We'll link to AIDR in the show notes if you'd like to find out more about their work and resources.

If you're new to the podcast, you might also be interested in our documentary episodes where we deep dive into communities and projects that are harnessing the arts to strengthen disaster management. They're all in the Creative Responders podcast feed alongside our In Conversation episodes - if you scroll back you'll find them all.

You can also find our full archive at [www.creativerecovery.net.au](http://www.creativerecovery.net.au)

You can listen to all of our past episodes and access transcripts and related case studies for each episode.

If you have any feedback on the podcast or know a Creative Responder you think we should know about, you can contact us at [comms@creativerecovery.net.au](mailto:comms@creativerecovery.net.au).

This podcast is produced by me and my Creative Recovery Network colleague, Jill Robson. Our sound engineer is Tiffany Dimmack and the Creative Responders theme is composed by Mikey Squire.

We'll be back next month with another conversation.

Thanks for listening.