

# **FUN PALACE - EVERYONE AN ARTIST, EVERYONE A SCIENTIST**

## Abstract

In 2015 State Library of Queensland (SLQ) led and facilitated Fun Palace events at libraries across Queensland. Originating in the United Kingdom, Fun Palaces are free, welcoming events combining arts and sciences, made for and with local people held in the first weekend in October. The Fun Palaces campaign is an ongoing movement for culture at the heart of the community. Held at libraries, museums, town halls, theatres and more these family events are as large or small as the organisers want to make them. In 2015 SLQ provided funding to seven public libraries, these were libraries from Gold Coast, Mossman, Beaudesert, Lowood, Longreach, Weipa and Thursday Island. The libraries hosted jugglers, archaeologists, cartoonists and robotics experts and enthusiasts from their local community to celebrate art and science in all its forms. Participants at SLQ could tumble, skip, leap and hoop with Vulcana Kids Circus, meet a giant virus and help it grow, program, control and battle a robot, go air surfing with walk-along gliders, paint a mural with veggies and much more. SLQ also developed a comic maker as our contribution to the global event. This paper will share what happened, what we learned at our first Fun Palaces and why this program is an important part of SLQ's commitment to inspiring Queenslanders' creativity. The future direction of Fun Palaces will be discussed including our aim to incorporate more community led and created activities as part of our commitment to increasing community engagement in libraries. The paper will also include a sneak peek at the 2016 Fun Palaces programs.

## Fun Palaces – What are they?

Originating in the United Kingdom, Fun Palaces are free, welcoming events that combine arts and sciences, made for and with local people. Initially conceived of in the early 1960s by designer Cedric Price and theatre director Joan Littlewood, as a 'laboratory of fun' and 'a university of the streets', the "Fun Palace" was to be a temporary and movable home to the arts and sciences but was never built (Glynn 2005). The Fun Palaces concept was reborn in 2014 by Stella Duffy and Sarah-Jane Rawlings, not as a building but as a weekend of events, where arts and sciences are the catalyst for community engagement. Held annually on the first weekend in October, the UK Fun Palaces team report that there have been 280 Fun Palaces conducted across 11 nations with over 90,000 people taking part (Fun Palaces 2016). Parkes Shire Library in regional New South Wales participated in 2014. State Library of Queensland (SLQ) held its first Fun Palace in 2015.

The Fun Palaces' manifesto is:

*We believe in the genius in everyone, in everyone an artist and everyone a scientist, and that creativity in community can change the world for the better. We believe we can do this together, locally, with radical fun – and that anyone, anywhere, can make a fun palace (Fun Palaces 2016).*

Fun Palaces have been held in places such as swimming pools, libraries, schools and museums. The fundamental philosophy of Fun Palaces of free and fun activities made by local people for their own communities, bringing together arts and sciences matches the trend of establishing creative spaces within libraries worldwide (Boyle, Collins, Kinsey, Noonan & Pocock 2014). Unlike traditional exhibits and programs in

which the library or museum provides content for visitors to consume (Simon 2010), Fun Palaces promote participation. They are creative spaces that provide new and varied opportunities for people to come together to share an interest or to learn a new skill, building social connections across generations (Boyle et al 2014). The best participatory projects, like Fun Palaces, create new value for the library, participants, and non-participating spectators (Simon 2010). By engaging in activities such as Fun Palaces, libraries become less a storehouse of books or information and more a locus of community involvement, innovative forms of service and instruction, and as laboratories of ideas and invention (Metropolitan New York Library Council 2012).

#### State Library of Queensland and Fun Palaces

SLQ provides information services to all Queenslanders, including more than 80,000 registered members and via state-wide library services in partnership with more than 340 public libraries and 23 Indigenous Knowledge Centres. As a physical and virtual space for sharing, learning, collaborating and creating, SLQ meets the Library Board of Queensland's legislative responsibilities to contribute to the cultural, social and intellectual development of all Queenslanders (Library Board of Queensland 2015). SLQ is committed to "inspiring Queensland's creativity forever" (State Library of Queensland 2015). SLQ is committed to engaging with communities by providing opportunities for diverse visitor co-produced experiences (Simon 2010). SLQ's Signature Program team lead the library in this challenge, designing and delivering programs and services for the community through an annual programming framework. In 2015 we identified strong linkages between our programming framework and the Fun Palaces ideology. Like Fun Palaces, our programming activities are more and more being developed 'with' and 'by' community, rather than 'for' community. In addition, Fun Palaces mirror current State and Federal

governments' agendas which strongly focus on increasing community engagement in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), particularly in schools (Office of the Chief Scientist 2014). Examples of investment in this include the Queensland Government's #codingcounts initiative (Department of Education & Training 2015). #codingcounts is a commitment by the Queensland Government to incorporate digital technologies curriculum into Education Queensland schools. #codingcounts activities include improving digital literacy skills, providing students with coding abilities, skilling teachers and resourcing technology labs. As a government-funded agency, SLQ is committed to engaging communities in digital literacy and STEM activities. Fun Palaces matches our engagement framework to program both for, by and with the community. Additionally it is an annual weekend of events, where arts and sciences are a vital catalyst for community engagement and full participation for everyone.

State Library of Queensland ran our first Fun Palace in 2015. Held on Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> October and spearheaded by staff from Signature Program and The Edge, the event attracted more than 1300 participants. SLQ was transformed into a wonderland of scientific enquiry and creativity as art and science collided. Participants were offered the opportunity to:

- Tumble, skip, leap and hoop with Vulcana Kids Circus
- Meet Wild Thumper the Rescue Robot
- Help to build a giant virus
- Create a lab journal
- Program, control and battle a robot
- Discover a world of 3D printing

- Go air surfing with Walkalong Gliders
- Explore the anatomy of a book with the SLQ conservation team
- Make a ginormous periscope
- Build a magic colour spinner
- Create an artwork with a swinging pendulum
- Play a game of giant scrabble
- Explore a special selection of art & science books
- Paint a mural with veggies
- Learn about musical vibrations with gongs and singing bowls
- See a 30-minute science demonstration by Science Steve.

The event was programmed primarily for an audience of 8-12 year olds, who were expected to be accompanied by parents or grandparents. The attendance on the day did attract this target group. However a significant secondary audience of 3-8 year olds and 13-17 year olds also attended, most likely as siblings of the core group and we have identified the need to program activities for these two groups at future Fun Palaces. Visitors attended either in the morning, leaving around 12:30pm, or in the afternoon, arriving from 1:30pm. Feedback from adults attending the Fun Palace made reference to their having to leave to attend events for the AFL Grand Final held on the same day. Regardless, our aim of 1000 visitors was exceeded. We utilised our limited marketing resources effectively taking advantage of free online media, estimating around \$12,000 in free media with a circulation of around 200,000. This included promoting the day at our stand at Brisbane Festival and an ABC radio segment.

Activities throughout the Fun Palace were run by State Library staff or by contractors sourced by the Signature Program team. Our goal of collaborating with multiple areas within SLQ to increase visitor access to services, collections and expertise was judged to be successful. We delivered strong engagement with services, collections and the expertise of staff across SLQ's four branches - Signature Program, The Edge, Collection Preservation and Literacy and Young Peoples' Services. In 2016 we have begun to engage with other teams earlier in the planning stage to increase staff participation. We had hoped for a community organisation to deliver programming for us, however this did not come to fruition. Lots of groups expressed an interest but wanted a longer lead time. For 2016 we have approached our colleagues at the Queensland Museum to collaborate with us on the event.

It was our intention that everyone was actively involved in activities with limited spectators. Many activities demonstrated strong, continuous visitor engagement, attracting queues to participate and resulting in suitable take-away products. For 2016 we will add an outdoor information booth to facilitate way finding and not rely on the library's Welcome desk. We will have roving activities to entertain people in queues. We also need to spend more time testing and refining activities to ensure they cope with the volume of visitors and are suitable for the core age group. The scheduled performance activity from Science Steve was very popular and a strong drawcard. We intend to have a similar activity in 2016. Many activities supported effective child and adult interaction as part of their design.

#### Fun Palaces at Queensland public libraries

In 2015 funding was made available to support five public libraries to conduct Fun Palaces with their community. The Signature Program team worked with the

Regional Access and Public Libraries team to manage the grant process.

Expressions of interest were sent to all Queensland public libraries to receive grants of \$8,000 for 2015 Fun Palace. Thirteen separate applications were received with five full grants (Weipa, Somerset, Gold Coast, Scenic Rim, Thursday Island) and two part grants (Douglas, Longreach) allocated. Signature Program and The Edge staff committed to assisting the libraries in their marketing and programming material, event preparation and trouble-shooting specific areas of concern. SLQ also supported the libraries by designing marketing templates and sharing programming ideas through Dropbox.

All seven funded projects were successfully delivered. Program content varied across libraries. Some libraries operated independently while others partnered with local organisations, teachers and community groups. All regions reported good attendance numbers with engaged participants, with the exception of one whose numbers were low due to it being in school holidays and most of the population being out of town. All made use of the marketing images and files we provided for signage and promotion of event. Attempts were made to support marketing of regional events through a separate budget allocation, however this fund was underspent. The timeline and lack of information provided about how to use are two likely factors contributing to the underspent funds.

In 2016 we have moved away from providing significant funding to Public Libraries to providing mystery packs. These mystery packs include art, science and play resources valued at \$1,000. We chose to do mystery packs this year because we did not want to give people instructions to follow, rather in the spirit of Fun Palaces, we wanted to provide inspiration. It is important that these events are sustainable moving forward and funding is not guaranteed for future years. The mystery packs

will include stationery and art supplies, tools to deliver science activities, books for the library collections around science and art themes and an information package with suggestions on how to use mystery packs. Templates for local libraries to market their events are also provided. All libraries and institutions conducting a Fun Palace can access marketing templates and activity ideas via State Library's website. Additionally the Fun Palaces UK website has plenty of information and collateral for people wanting to conduct their own event.

### Engagement beyond SLQ's walls

Fun Palaces can be run by anyone at any location. They are not just something for libraries or museums to run. In 2016 SLQ's Creative in Residence, Matt Finch is encouraging other organisations outside of State Library to participate in the Fun Palace movement. SLQ has partnered with QUT to help students to run their own Fun Palaces. Other universities are considering running events. We started working earlier this year to let organisations and libraries know about Fun Palaces. Team members from Signature Program presented at universities, to members of the Queensland Police Service, to Brisbane City Council Libraries and at public library forums. We hope to see this translate into a large Fun Palace movement in Queensland.

Within SLQ, we have encouraged staff from all over the library to submit their creative ideas to their manager. Ideas can come from staff at any level. With programming not just being the responsibility of one work unit we are seeking ways to create a space for creative conversations between staff in different departments. We want to break down silos. We also hope that by partnering with other teams and

combining our individual small budgets, we can produce better funded programming outcomes.

### Collaboration across the globe

State Library was approached to work on a collaborative project with Fun Palaces UK. Team members from The Edge created the Fun Palaces Comic Maker from a concept by Matt Finch. This was a wonderful way to showcase the expertise of the Edge team with our colleagues in the UK and the wider Fun Palace community. The team used the Fun Palaces posters as inspiration, developing characters that could be dragged and dropped into a comic book story. Participants were invited to arrange the images, capture them and tell their own story about their Fun Palace experience. Participants were able to share their stories at the Fun Palaces Tumblr account. This activity is available online. Libraries are places where literacy is the foundation of their philosophy and programming. This is an activity that enables the development of digital literacy and transliteracy as well as developing foundation skills in literacy. The Comic Maker could also be adapted to use for other activities outside of Fun Palaces.

### Inspiring Queensland's creativity with Fun Palaces

State Library of Queensland's initial foray into the world of Fun Palaces has been a positive experience. Our 2015 Fun Palaces attracted new audiences, engaged staff across the library in programming and strengthened partnerships with public libraries in regional and rural Queensland. The learnings from the first event are currently being implemented as we plan for this year's Fun Palace on the weekend of October 1<sup>st</sup>. The opportunities to create new partnerships with community groups, universities, schools and the Fun Palace organisation are many. The challenge for

SLQ is to continue to develop these opportunities in sustainable ways. We encourage all libraries to consider investing with their communities in Fun Palaces - everyone an artist, everyone a scientist!

### Fun Palace Resources

- Be inspired: short films with Makers talking about how they connected with local community, raised funds, linked arts and sciences, and what it's like to be a Fun Palaces Maker: <http://funpalaces.co.uk/inspire-me/>
- Fun Palaces Toolkits: <http://funpalaces.co.uk/toolkit/>
- State Library of Queensland Fun Palaces: <http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/whats-on/calevents/general/learning/fun-palace-at-slq-2016>
- The Fun Palace Comic Maker <http://funpalaces.co.uk/fun-palaces-comic-maker/>

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