

AUSTRALIAN SILO ART AND WELLBEING

First Public Report—SUMMARY
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REPORT SUMMARY

Background and aim of this research

Six years have passed since Australia's first silo art site in Northam, Western Australia (completed March 2015). The Australian silo art phenomenon continually attracts widespread media coverage and public attention throughout the country and overseas. Silo art has even been referred to as a 'media darling'.

With 48 completed sites across five states as of June 2021, and at least a further 15 additional sites in the planning stages, there is no sign of this movement slowing down.

Many small towns undertake silo art projects to attract visitors to places they have never heard of, to create a lifeline for struggling local businesses and to revive community pride. Public and media discussion often emphasise tourist attraction and immediate local business stimulation as the primary outcomes of these projects for rural and regional towns, many of which are home to several hundred residents or less.

However, public and independent evaluation of silo art projects is lacking. Therefore, the many community groups, Local Councils, Shires, tourism boards, funding bodies, arts organisations, artists and citizens involved in (or impacted by) these projects are presently unable to access a solid evidence-base to guide future organising and action.

This report represents the first step in providing much needed empirical and critical investigation into the social and economic impacts of Australian silo art. Specifically, the aim of this research is to explore (1) how visitors and local communities experience silo art and (2) the impacts of silo art experiences on the wellbeing of visitors and communities.

The data: Interviews and the first national Australian silo art survey

In this report, we focus on the experiences and perceptions of silo art visitors, residents who live in silo art towns, and local business owners. Specifically, the findings are based on 61 video and phone interviews (Stage One), and a combined total of 1,140 responses to the first national silo art survey (Stage Two). 714 visitors participated in the survey. 243 residents (i.e. equivalent to an average of 5 residents per silo art site) and 183 local business owners/managers (i.e. an average of 4 per silo art site) participated in the survey.

Crucially, the findings of this report draw on both quantitative and qualitative data. Indeed, quantitative results (percentages etc.) of multiple choice survey questions provide instrumental insight. However, responses to open-ended survey and interview questions that allow participants to respond in their own words (i.e. qualitative data) are necessary to delve deeper, and build a more comprehensive understanding of silo art from both visitor and community perspectives.

The findings

The findings presented in this report are structured in four main parts: (1) the five distinguishing elements of Australian silo art, (2) visitor perspectives and impacts, (3) local community perspectives and impacts and (4) broader critical issues, challenges and opportunities identified by both visitors and local communities.

Part 1: The five elements that distinguish Australian silo art in the eyes of visitors and local communities

To provide a guiding framework for future discussion and projects, we collated and analysed how all participants surveyed and interviewed in this stage of the research (a combined total of over 1,300 visitors and residents) described and talked about Australian silo art, and what makes Australian silo art different to other art forms, other tourism experiences and other community projects.

- Element 1: Silo art tells genuine local stories in ways that ‘wow’ audiences
- Element 2: Silo art should develop through sound community consultation, and artist–community engagement
- Element 3: Silo art is inherently public, accessible and for everybody
- Element 4: Silo art is located in small previously drive-by or forgotten towns
- Element 5: Silo art invokes a desire amongst many visitors to ‘give back’ to local communities

These findings highlight several key considerations to assist with preserving the essence of Australian silo art as a unique form of public art and art tourism in the minds of visitors and local communities (e.g. prioritising small towns, not large regional centres, in funding decisions).

Part 2: Visitor perspectives and impacts

Understanding the impacts of silo art on visitors can inform evidence-based strategies to maintain and grow visitor interest over time. The findings of this research show that silo art has a largely positive impact on the emotional, social and cultural wellbeing of visitors.

Evidenced benefits for visitors include expanding arts access and engagement amongst citizens not otherwise interested in art, inspiring amateur and professional arts participation, visitor self development (e.g. learning about oneself), rewarding interactions with the natural environment, positive re-discovery of Australian art, culture, history and towns, positive social interactions, enhanced social relationships, and positive emotions stimulated by opportunities to ‘give back’ to struggling rural and regional communities in small yet symbolic ways (e.g. coffees, bakery items, overnight accommodation).

Six main silo art visitor appeal dimensions and corresponding tourist groups

Overall, visitor participants emphasised six main benefits of silo art. Each main benefit represents a different dimension of silo art’s appeal to visitors and each dimension corresponds to a different tourist group:

1. *Art*—the Art Lovers
2. *Local Stories*—the Local Story Seekers
3. *Cultural Learning*—the Cultural Explorers
4. *Place*—the Place Explorers
5. *‘Giving Back’*—the Socially Conscious
6. *Human Connection*—the Interaction Seekers

Although visitors may perceive many benefits, between 2 and 3 dimensions dominate each visitor's experience of silo art. For instance, as well as providing a visitor with an awe-inspiring art experience, visiting silo art can also open up opportunities to support struggling communities, and a means of spending quality time with other people.

Therefore, silo art tourists are not a homogenous group and each visitor is motivated by several benefits.

As silo art's appeal to visitors is multi-layered, silo art towns should consider tailoring strategies, campaigns, messages and other initiatives intended to promote existing sites and build visitor interest by tapping into multiple dimensions of silo art's appeal, rather than pursuing 'one size fits all' approaches.

More broadly, the findings reinforce that visitors experience Australian silo art as a distinct/particular form or genre of art and, and art tourism. Hence, irrespective of whether all individual sites and branded trails or clusters work directly together or not, all silo art sites scattered around the country are interconnected in the eyes of visitors.

Three main silo art trip design types

Analysis of visitor survey and interview data indicates three main silo art trip design types that also correspond with nuanced motivations: (1) Trip initiators, (2) Pit/Rest Stoppers and (3) Trip variers. Identifying these three main trip design types provides a further resource for communities, Local Councils, tourism boards, arts organisations and other groups involved in developing and executing strategies to promote existing and future silo art sites, extend visit duration and encourage return visits.

Other key survey findings – Silo art visitor behaviour and perceptions

- 59% of visitors reported that they spend between 10–30 minutes looking at each silo art. A total of 80% of visitors spend an average of 30 minutes or more at the silo art site.
- 29% reported that they spend between 30 and 60 minutes in each town with silo art. Slightly less (26%) spend between 1 and 2 hours in the town.
- 44% spend between \$11 and \$50 in each town they visit with silo art. 25% spend between \$51 and \$100.
- 54% of visitors would have probably not otherwise visited these towns. 34% may have visited. 12% would have definitely visited anyway.
- 48% visited multiple silo art sites or a trail in one journey. Almost the same amount (47%) visited silo art as a 'pit stop' within a longer journey with multiple purposes. 26% journeyed specifically to visit one particular silo art.
- Average time spent at each silo art site and in the town about the same across different trip types.
- Average spend in each town about the same across trip types (e.g. 'pit stoppers' don't necessarily spend less).
- 38% of visitors would like to visit more silo art in the future although they are not planning a particular trip at the moment. 25% are currently planning a trip involving silo art beyond their own state. 20% would like to visit more silo art, but are delaying such travel until COVID-19 restrictions ease.
- 97% of visitors recommend other people visit silo art.
- 96% of visitors consider silo art a worthwhile investment for regional Australian towns/communities.

Visitor identified issues and opportunities

According to visitors, multiple critical issues that should be addressed in order to optimise the tourism potential of silo art (see pages 49–50). Issues discussed include absent, poor and out-of-date online and print information about the town and local businesses (with opening hours listed) to enable trip planning, minimal or no road signage and a lack of place-specific local produce or home-made products. More broadly, the perception that towns paint their silos to attract tourists sets up visitor expectations when they arrive, in turn leading to frustration if few or no businesses are open.

Part 3: Local community perspectives and impacts

The findings of this research indicate that, from the perspective of local communities, the specific social and economic impacts of silo art vary between towns, between individual businesses, and between individuals within each community.

Local community—Social impacts

Some of the benefits of silo art for local communities evidenced in this research include happiness stemming from enjoyable interactions with high quality art (70% of all resident participants), beautification of the everyday environment (72%) and reinforced or increased town pride (65%). Looking beyond more specific and immediate benefits, other survey results indicate that many residents consider silo art a worthwhile investment:

- 68% of resident participants reported that they value how silo art is helping to develop the art scene/community in their town.
- 75% reported that they value how silo art is helping to transform their town into a tourism destination.
- 59% reported that the silo art in their town makes them feel part of something ‘bigger’.
- 88% of residents consider silo art a worthwhile investment for regional Australian towns/communities.

However, in isolated cases (between 3 and 4 sites/projects in total), some resident participants reported that the silo artwork in their town embodies an extremely limited connection to the local community, or no local connection at all. Data underpinning this finding pertains to clear indications of artworks with a limited or no local connection, rather than individual assessments of artistic style/s or colour choices. Difficult or uncomfortable encounters with visitors who ask about how the artwork relates to the local community underscore the potential for this issue to adversely impact residents’ emotional wellbeing. Some participants also discussed more generalised negative emotions surrounding everyday interactions with large-scale artwork that lacks a local connection, particularly given the physical prominence of many silos in the township or district, and that both residents and visitors have come to expect that silo artworks represent the local community.

Highly variable levels and forms of community consultation emerged as another key issue shaping the extent to which local communities identify with and enjoy the silo art in their town. Residents who discussed artworks that lack a local connection often related this issue back to limited or no community consultation.

Further, some resident participants discussed several isolated cases (i.e. between 2 and 3 sites/projects in total) in which one particular group inhibited or disregarded all community consultation regarding a silo art project. According to participant descriptions, community members’ attempts to provide input or have any say in the processes or outcomes of the project were ignored, in turn resulting in an artwork that depicts phenomenon that are not present in the town (i.e. no local

connection). Particularly pertinent in terms of community wellbeing, these residents expressed a loss of trust in the group that inhibited or disregarded community consultation.

Hence, together, these findings indicate that key factors shaping how local communities experience silo art and the potential social impacts of these projects include: (1) levels and forms of community consultation and engagement and, relatedly, (2) silo artworks that embody elements of the local community which residents enjoy talking about.

Local community—Economic impacts

The overwhelming majority of local residents reported that silo art consistently attracts visitors to silo art in their town. However, what happens ‘next’ (and the extent to which silo art directly stimulates local businesses) varies greatly across towns and individual businesses, and is largely oriented around what visitors interact with when they arrive.

Indeed, a marked contrast between business owners/managers who attributed the survival of their business entirely to silo art visitors, and those who reported that silo art has made no difference whatsoever to their trade, is evident throughout the data. Survey results such as the following percentages illustrate this variation:

- 47% of the 183 business owners/managers responded that, regarding stimulation of local businesses in their town, silo art has had a *Noticeable/observable positive impact*. 34% responded *Some indications of positive impact*. 11% responded silo art has had *No impact on local businesses*.
- Overall, 64% of local business owners/managers responded that silo art attracts customers to their business.
- Some variation by state in the business owners/managers who responded that silo art attracts customers: Victoria 76%, New South Wales 67%, South Australia 58%, Queensland 55% and Western Australia 38%.
- Some variation by business type in the business owners/managers who responded that silo art attracts customers to their business, for instance: Grocery/corner store 86%, Café etc. with in-house dining 83%, Art-focused business 83%, Accommodation/Tourist service 77% and Take-away food/beverage 70%.
- Of those who responded that silo art attracts customers to their business, 70% responded that the art attracts some customers. 26% indicated the art attracts a lot of customers.
- 43% reported that, overall, the number of silo art visitors who visit their business increased during COVID-19.

Analysis of survey and interview comments indicates that key factors shaping variable town- and business-level economic impacts include: (1) ongoing site activation and management ‘after the paint dries’, (2) the nature and number of businesses operating in the town and (3) the extent to which promoting silo art, and partnering with local businesses is considered part of longer plans to utilise the art as a launching pad for broader tourism development and economic revitalisation.

Factors shaping the extent to which individual businesses benefit from silo art visitors include business’s specific location within the town (e.g. main street, side street or outskirts), whether other businesses are closer to the silo art site, and whether the business offers facilities such as toilets.

Therefore, more broadly, these findings reinforce that the act of painting a silo, in isolation, will not necessarily or automatically ‘save’ local businesses, and ongoing activation and development of the site (and the town) is crucial to realising the potential economic impacts of these projects.

Multiple audience groups within the community

Analysis of how resident participants talk about silo art and the benefits and drawbacks of these projects in interviews and survey comments shows that different residents perceive and experience the silo art in their town in different ways.

Specifically, this research identifies 11 main ways of thinking about silo art within local communities: (1) the Art Lovers, (2) the Beautifiers, (3) the Proud Locals, (4) the Business-Focused, (5) the Future-Focused, (6) the Concerned, (7) the Disappointed and/or frustrated, (8) the Everyday Place Ambassadors, (9) the Local Experts, (10) the Opposed and (11) the Indifferent.

Identification of these groups provides a valuable resource for tailoring community engagement strategies, before and after a silo art project.

Key issues and challenges identified by residents and local business owners

The third part of the report concludes by identifying six key issues and challenges involved in realising the potential social and/or economic benefits of silo art for local communities. In addition to sound community consultation, community members highlighted absent, poor or out-of-date information about the art and local businesses (with opening hours), poor or incomplete site infrastructure and limited or incomplete site activation strategies. Business owners/managers also discussed practical challenges involved in extending opening hours and recruiting additional staff.

Part 4: Broader critical issues, challenges and opportunities identified by both visitors and local communities

Both visitor participants, and participants living in towns with silo art, discussed nine broader critical issues, challenges and opportunities in survey comments or interviews:

1. Cultural representation and the inherent selectivity of art;
2. Use of silos as canvasses;
3. Longevity of the paint and ongoing site maintenance;
4. Public safety issues, enhanced by the variable nature of each site;
5. Originality and differentiation of the artworks;
6. Audience desire to preserve originality and push boundaries creatively by combining unique artistic styles and genuine local stories that only certain towns can tell;
7. The extent to which silo art currently appeals to children and younger audiences;
8. Re-framing and activating silo art as a launching pad and strategic asset that can reposition small towns in a new competitive arena; and
9. Constellations of small towns (with and without silo art) working together as networks or 'webs'.

Outlining these issues, challenges and opportunities provides a further resource for towns to consult when undertaking or considering a silo art project, and when designing strategies to activate and manage existing sites.

Implications and recommendations

The report makes a number of recommendations for the planning, implementation and management of silo art projects. For instance, it is recommended that silo art towns:

- Direct greater attention to and investment in the ongoing activation, promotion, maintenance and stewardship of existing (and new) silo art sites.
- Seek to collaborate with local businesses in these towns as strategic partners in the development of deeper and more varied tourism offerings.
- Seek to proactively address the ‘return visits challenge’ (see page 36) that stems from continual visitor emphasis on discovering ‘new’ artworks and ‘new’ places (e.g. What would make silo art visitors visit again? And how can you make visitors fall in love with your town?).
- Address the disconnect between: (1) visitors eager to ‘give back’ (but frustrated nothing is open when the visit), and (2) local businesses who would like more customers (e.g. ensuring visitors can access up-to-date information about businesses and opening hours before they travel, and also providing information about businesses, opening hours, walking/driving distances etc. at the silo art site).
- Actively consider the different ways local residents think about the silo art in their town (see pages 72–76), and opportunities to develop ongoing community engagement strategies (i.e. after the artwork is complete).
- Engage with the multiple dimensions of silo art’s appeal to visitors (see p. 40–44) and tailor strategies, campaigns, messages and other initiatives intended to promote existing sites (rather than pursuing ‘one size fits all’ approaches that assume all silo art visitors experience silo art in the same way).

Recommendations for towns considering or undertaking such projects include:

- Community consultation before and throughout the silo art planning process is essential to facilitate artworks that tell genuine local stories, and to foster broader engagement with the project amongst the community. Ensure budget components of funding applications include resource allowances for consultation with the community, and artist-community engagement.
- Ensure community consultation enables local business owners and managers to share their specialised knowledge of the area, and provide input towards key decisions during planning and development phases that can in turn facilitate the potential for silo art to benefit local economies.

Concluding note

Together, the findings of this report reinforce the potential for silo art to benefit visitors and local communities alike. As noted above, over six years have passed since Australia’s first silo art project in Northam, Western Australia. Now is the time to plan strategically and make informed actions to foster the potential and longevity of this art tourism movement. We hope this report provides a valuable resource towards this end.