

Broken link for Artlink



Artlink staff Gayle Clark, who has since resigned, and Jenny Altmann, with artist Alex Rees who is one of the program's many success stories.

Analysis – Carol Altmann

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[dropcap]ust when things were looking up for **Artlink** – the unique art program for people with disabilities – it is being taken out of Warrnambool's CBD and dropped into the industrial estate. From here, it will surely wither and die.

We [wrote about Artlink late last year](#) and, like others before us, were impressed by what a small, hard-working group of artists has achieved in bringing so-called "outsider" art into the mainstream.

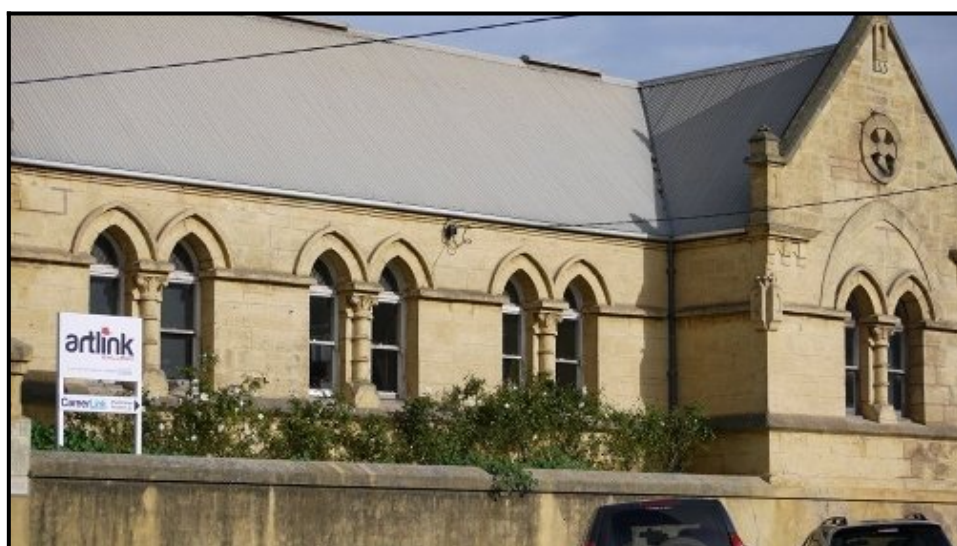
Art by people with disabilities is a [growing, global movement](#) and the opportunity to create, display and sell art in a high-profile public space is critical to its commercial and personal success, otherwise we have not moved on from the dark

days of such work being created in “sheltered workshops”; well away from the mainstream.

It makes sense, then, that the success of Artlink hinges on its high-profile location in the 124-year-old Ellerslie College building in Koroit St, which was leased by **Western District Employment Access (WDEA)** in 2010 and which it beautifully refurbished to create a light-filled gallery. (WDEA still uses this image on its [home page](#)).

The gallery had hosted several successful exhibitions, including the wonderful, annual [Warrnibald portrait prize](#) that was first held in 2012 and has shown the potential to become something very special for the city. Several Artlink artists have also developed their own following, such as **Alex Rees**, who has Down’s Syndrome, and whose work now hangs in many Warrnambool homes.

Things were gathering momentum, but now the wheels have fallen off.



Home no more: Artlink has moved out of the beautiful Ellerslie College building and into the industrial estate.



The Albert St building where Artlink will be co-located with various WDEA work schemes.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] T
[/dropcap]he three-year lease on the Ellerslie College building expired last December and, for reasons which are yet to be fully explained, WDEA decided not to continue there but to instead find another home for Artlink.

That new home was announced by media release as being 11 Albert St, Warrnambool: where Artlink was once 150 metres from the WDEA headquarters in Fairy St, it is now 150 metres from an abattoir.

Eleven Albert St is where WDEA operates many of its work programs that involve recycling e-waste, clothing, garden waste etc and it is appropriate that these be located in an industrial estate, but an art program and art gallery?

How many people will wander into an industrial estate to see an exhibition? How many drinks-and-nibbles openings can you host with the smell of the meatworks wafting in through the windows?

In its media statement, WDEA says it hopes the Artlink artists will have their work displayed in other galleries around the

city, but if this was as easy as it sounds, surely there would have been no need for Artlink in the first place.

The official reason for moving out of Ellerslie was “high operational costs”, but when I asked what these costs were, I was told that WDEA CEO **Mick White** didn’t wish to give any more detail. How strange.



The \$3.5 million WDEA headquarters in Fairy St, Warrnambool, that opened last year.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] S
[/dropcap] I can’t tell you what these high operational costs were, but I can tell you that there is a lot of money in disability: not necessarily for those with disabilities, most of whom struggle financially, but in the provision of services for the disabled and those in need.

In 2009, WDEA had a total income of \$6.7 million, the majority of which is government funding for the various services WDEA provides. In 2013, that total income was almost \$16 million: almost triple that of four years ago.

While more funding means more programs and therefore more

people being assisted, what troubles me is that fast-growing organisations like WDEA can also become bloated and vast amounts of money are soaked up by bureaucracy and buildings, rather than on the very people they are intended to serve.

Shortly after WDEA secured the lease on Ellerslie, it bought a property at 52 Fairy St, hired talented local architect Dean Picken, and built an impressive \$3.5 million office block that opened last July – six months before it broke the news to Artlink that it was moving out.

Here are some more of WDEA's operational costs: staff costs have climbed from \$3.3 million in 2009 to \$9.2 million in 2013. In the same period, the value of its car pool has climbed from \$697,000 to \$1.34 million and the annual cost of running these cars each year has more than doubled to \$236,518. Advertising and marketing costs have similarly climbed from \$158,000 in 2009 to \$338,825 in 2012.

WDEA has been hugely successful – it now operates out of a growing number of regional towns including Horsham, Ballarat, Ararat and Stawell – but has it become so big as to lose sight of why it first began in 1989?

When you are small, like Artlink, it is easy to get lost in the never-ending expansions.

It is up to us, as a community, to ensure that they are not forgotten.

Disclaimer: Artlink artist and staff member Jenny Altmann and I share the same surname because she was once married to my brother. We remain friends, but, like most of my friends and family, she would prefer I did not write articles that feature her. Sorry Jenny.



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