

How ACSA Inc. Began – A Personal Recollection.

I mostly remember Bloor Court as hard work, and much of it physical. Initially, I think that the old, three storey, red brick building in which we began, had been used to manufacture parts for the car industry. In the 60/70s our floor, the top floor, was the home of the Women's Electoral Lobby and later it was a disco. At the time that we signed the lease in 1982, it was used for band practice and the walls were covered with car tyres, apparently to improve the acoustics. It was a mess; full of junk and quite filthy. Heather Nicholson (my wife at that time and still a very dear friend) and I removed the tyres, cleared out the junk and rubbish, cleaned the floors as best we could and painted the whole place white using a spray gun. Heather also decorated and made welcoming the stairwell from the small foyer on the ground floor to our double doors at the top. I built all the tables and heavy duty easels with the help of Tony Colangelo, who cut all the parts to size. The rest of the furniture and equipment we scrounged, or got from second-hand places. It was in the middle of summer and the building was like an oven. The physical work continued for me throughout the six years of our tenancy in Bloor Court. At the end of every day I would clean the teaching studio, toilets and kitchen ready for the next day's classes.

It wasn't just hard work though. In fact it was exhilarating effort and lots of fun. We had exhibitions, parties and regular after-class drinks and discussions. Very importantly we felt that we had the enthusiastic support of the Arts Community and many friends. It also happened that the School and studios (Central Studios) were immediately successful. Very good artists wanted to teach and/or join the studios and a surprising number of hopeful students enrolled in the school as soon as the doors opened.

At least, that was how it was in the first year. In the second year, things declined. Enrolments were very low and discouraging, although the studios remained mostly full. At the end of that year I came close to abandoning the whole project. The trouble was that I still believed in it and, so it seemed, did many others. We felt that it offered something good and quite different; something that was concrete and valuable. I made some changes to the course structures, timetable and what was to be offered and committed to making it work. And, strangely perhaps, I must have believed that it would.

It is amazing that the school, and Heather and I survived Bloor Court, although, unfortunately, our marriage didn't. Although there were indeed many intangible rewards, we had so few resources, the business generated so little income and it was such hard work and long hours. We had two small children and to survive financially, I taught a few sessions a week at the South Australian School of Art and sold a few paintings; Heather got a job as an art teacher in a high school. Without accreditation - which was not possible at that time - we had little to reward students except a personal reference and a portfolio that assisted them to enter formal study elsewhere.

Nonetheless, during the following four years enrolments steadily grew until 1989, the year we moved to much larger premises at Gilles Street. At Gilles Street, in a large, dilapidated warehouse with space, light and a wonderful atmosphere, the School took off. Enrolments doubled, and we were able to employ administrative staff and cleaners. The pathway to accreditation then opened, and we moved to the relative luxury of the old Norwood Girls High School site, where ACSA became the first private art school in Australia accredited to offer a bachelor degree, enabling the School to eventually become established much as it is today.

Rod Taylor AM (Head of ACSA 1982-2008)
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