SEVENTIES: Some of the Community Arts Project pioneers. From left to right Pam Warne, Debbie Bourne, Jon Bennett, Jill Jeubert, Lucine Le Grange, Maxioli Othole and André Pretorius.

DONALD PARENZI

The Community Arts Project is 21 years old this year. It has just received the Cultural Development Project Award from the Arts and Culture Trust.

When CAP holds its open day this Saturday, the street of the old St Phillips Church in its Chapel Street grounds will be quite justified in adding some stories from the 18 years of CAP's residency there.

Decades of different kinds of turbulence have seen the Arts project adjust its role to respond to Cape Town's quick cultural and political changes. CAP cut its teeth in the 1970s, struggled its political tension in the 1980s and had to tighten its belt quite sharply in the 1990s.

That pattern might seem familiar to many people, but CAP, it seems, has managed to emerge as a balanced, reasonably wise and streamlined education and training centre for the arts needs of the city's unemployed.

Talking to Mario Piarro, the project's director, one gets the impression that behind him there is a small but imaginative group of people who are fully practical in their approach to their work.

It is an eye opener for anyone who has known the volatile weather of Cape Town's society over the last 20 years. CAP has come through the black consciousness era, the civil rebellions of the 1980s and the funding crises of the 1990s.

Now it has transformed its shape and purpose quite noticeably. The arts project is one of the few cultural NGOs that have managed to survive the 1990s without losing its head to its stomach, as it were.

The project was started in 1977 by people such as Wendy Wilson, Gavin Young, Peggy Delport and John Wildman, from SCEED and the Michaelis School of Art.

It offered informal art practice to people the city's townships. By the mid-1990s CAP had become a key centre for the artistic surge of people's culture that flooded Cape Town.

The old church was first the famous Arts Festival '86 which was banned by the government soon after it opened. For the next 10 years CAP hosted many discussion meetings, workshops and performances, all of which helped to shape a vibrant cultural movement in the country.

In 1989, under the leadership of Mike van Graan, the project started education and training for artists of the various organisations in Cape Town. This was a move toward a more focused vocational direction although CAP kept its strong links with local civic and women's organisations.

The CAP that entered the difficult 1990s had just experienced a peak in funding, with a 1989 budget of R7,4-million. 33 full time staff and projects in the visual arts, theatre, media and children's art. It had a complex, ambitious programme trying to reach out to people in the city's fringes while still being a training centre at its base.

When international funding died abruptly after 1990, the crisis hit hard. Van Graan returned from fund-raising overseas to find half the staff had lost their jobs. After Van Graan left, there was no leader until 1992 that Zondi Mnyati was appointed the new director.

"Zondi introduced a culture of reflection," says Piarro. "In a time of scarcity, strategic planning and re-organisation was crucial. 1991 and 1992 was a time of re-building."

CAP started working with adults who worked with children at preschools. This seemed a good direction because it opened a rich field of children's art education. "At a time when we were being urged to move far from popular art to engage in reconstruction and development," Piarro said, "the response was poor. Some tough decisions had to be made. They were forced to drop evening classes of adult's art group. In the 1990s, left to form its own company. The dream of the art centre faded."

In 1996 CAP had trimmed its work down to two areas: adults working in preschools, and unemployed people. "Because these were the people who kept coming to us," says Piarro.

Surely it's a risky venture to offer art courses to unemployed people? What about earning a living?

Piarro is unflustered by this question. He energetically explains the careful thinking behind this approach: "Our want to create access for those left out of regular art education. CAP teaches art and theatre skills, but also micro-enterprise training and things such as financial management and working with others on conflict management. These are adults and they are highly motivated. CAP has already achieved a 71% course completion rate."

On the question of employment for artists, Piarro points out that the department of transport has commissioned CAP students to paint murals on pedestrian safety. Piarro speaks about murals in churches, local churches and restaurants, the rich possibilities of community tourism.

Some students have found work using theatre in prisons and using theatre to address community issues such as crime and domestic violence. Then there's TV, film, radio drama, even advertising.

"The arts council's new national qualifications framework opens up a space for people previously left outside the system to gain a qualification and there is a gap in the system in the FEF, further education and training, band of what we know as standards eight to 10. Art education was previously undervalued in these years. The problem is that although the NQF allowed for art education, it was very slow to happen."

"What are the other organisations have been designing 'outcomes-based education standards' for the department, it is not possible that CAP might turn into a simple feeder for industry or an mini-bureaucracy? What about all the possible of using art for healing and affirming identity? Does art always have to be functional?"

EIGHTIES: Print by David Helfgott.

NINETIES: The late Simba Pembenayi leading a theatre class.

These, Piarro says, are the rich possibilities that could be captured by those who work at CAP. The new education framework offers flexibility and the freedom to innovate and this is already happening. Each facilitator shapes his or her own material, emphasis and style. CAP will continue its non formal tradition without being too casual about it. CAP is holding an exhibition of 1996 student work at its centre at 106 Chapel Street in District Six, from 9am on Saturday.

The director general of the Western Cape Department of Education will deliver an address.

Call Mario Piarro on (021) 465-3189/48 for further information.