

Creative Construct: Building for Culture and Creativity

Case Study: Developing Cultural Infrastructure through Local Government: an examination of a ten year program of support for artists by Arts House at the City of Melbourne (CoM), Australia.

In 1905, the City of Hotham (the City of North Melbourne) local government area was amalgamated with the CoM. This was one of a large number of amalgamations of Councils that have taken place in Australia, continuing to this day. These amalgamations resulted in many public buildings becoming surplus to use and local communities often campaigned to maintain them for public access.

In North Melbourne, the Town Hall (NMTH), a Victorian era edifice, was no longer required for formal civic use, although, fortunately, its partial function as a Post Office saved it from complete degradation. For 90 years, the 'civic' section slowly deteriorated, saved by limited community use. In 1996, the Arts & Culture Branch of the CoM went to Council with a proposal to renovate NMHT as an arts venue providing subsidised offices, rehearsal and performances spaces at affordable rental rates and a continuation of its community use. Councillors supported the proposal. The building was renovated at a cost of nearly AUD\$4M, and in May 1998, the newly renovated building was opened with five arts organisations as tenants on three-year leases. The main hall was converted to theatrical use and a smaller hall dedicated to community access. All spaces in the building were available for casual hire.

NMTH operated as a venue for hire for two years, at which time Council provided AUD\$180,000 for a grant program for artists wanting to present their work in the venue (\$226,600 in 07/08). The Venue Manager, Jim Cathcart, was then able to encourage artists to apply for grants to use NMTH and gradually developed an annual program for the venue.

In 2000, a second venue, a Victorian era Horticultural Hall was added to the CoM cultural venues inventory, under a lease from the State Government, and a Venue Management Team established to look after the minor maintenance and rental of the two venues (the Horticultural Hall proved to be too expensive for artists' use and was leased to the Victorian Opera in 2005 as their rehearsal hall and offices).

In 1999 Sue Beal, Team Leader, Arts & Culture (with oversight of a number of programs, including cultural venues), had commissioned Phillip Glass to work with one of Australia's most highly respected didgeridoo players, Mark Atkins, to compose a piece for the Melbourne Town Hall organ for Melbourne's 2000 Millennium celebrations. Phillip Glass invited Mark to work on the composition with him in New York and a close working relationship developed, continuing to this day with Orion which has toured internationally.

The work commissioned for the organ was enormously successful, eventually travelling to NY to be performed at the Lincoln Centre as part of a Philip Glass retrospective. The success of the project, not just in terms of bums on seats, but in the recognition and work opportunities for local artists, encouraged Sue Beal to look for

other ways of supporting artists beyond simply providing cheap space and/or the granting of funds. Even though the venues were available for rent at low rates, most emerging artists could not afford the cost for extended periods, and many artists in receipt of grant funds had a limited capacity to extend the life of their work.

The Glass project had introduced Sue to the outgoing Artistic Director of the Next Wave Festival, Steven Richardson, and they started working on a plan to introduce a comprehensive and integrated program of support for artists that offered them (the artists) an environment in which their creative output could be maximised.

Through a number of industry consultations, it had become clear that there were many areas in which support for contemporary artists had been limited or was being eroded.

Since the late 1970s, Australian Federal, State and Local Government arts funding agencies have steadily increased the proportion of their performing arts funding committed to the support of the large, high profile, 'flagship' companies and the venues and administrative infrastructures in which they operate.

These commitments now account for the majority of the public subsidy of the performing arts. The proportion of expenditure within these companies that is committed to the direct production of art has simultaneously reduced. While administrations have expanded (both in size and pay-scales), there has been growing concern that the employment of artists within these companies has cut back. In addition to these phenomena, the output of many of these companies has become less innovative, despite their increased public support.

At the same time, the arts funding agencies had moved individual artists and many small companies to one-off project funding models. Some agencies refuse to fund the same artists in consecutive years, most refuse to consider supporting ongoing operational costs and others have introduced eligibility criteria that mandate against work without public performance outcomes.

The result of these policies has been that artists working in areas involving artistic risk are guaranteed to be also working in a context of economic risk. Despite public statements to the contrary, the conditions under which innovative work can receive effective public support have become unworkably circumscribed.

Arts House (the title given both to the CoM's cultural venues and the team responsible for them), having recognised the urgent need to stimulate dynamic cultural development, and the limitations of current modes of public support, decided to develop alternate processes to facilitate artistic experiment, innovation and risk.

The chance to put the new plan into practice came with three opportunities.

The first was the Australia Council's 2004 decision to fund a national touring circuit for contemporary performance, Mobile States, and the search for venues to partner the proposal in five States (the Australia Council is the Federal Government's arts funding agency). Arts House proposed to the Council that NMTH be the Melbourne venue and Council supported the commitment of partnership funds required to present

the works. Arts House then made a successful submission to the Australia Council with the first Mobile States show “Still Angela” touring in 2005.

At the same time Arts House developed its 2004/05 business plan which proposed the introduction of a curatorial approach to the programming of the venue.

This proposal was also supported by the Council and became the operating template for Arts House in 2005. An Arts House Advisory Panel, made up of working artists from all disciplines was appointed to provide policy and programming advice to the Team.

The third opportunity arose with an approach from the State Government. Arts Victoria was looking for a management solution for the Meat Market. The Meat Market, another Victorian era edifice, had, from 1880 been the central meat sales market for Melbourne. In 1979 it became the site for the Victorian Craft Collection evolving to the Meat Market Craft Centre in 1986 which ran successfully until its closure in 1999. Community consultation had resulted in a plan to convert the enormous building into an arts hub for thirty-plus arts tenants, rehearsal and performance spaces, visual art galleries, exhibition and installation spaces, and conference and meeting rooms.

The CoM submitted a proposal that the Meat Market come under the management of Arts House and become the site for a range of creative development programs that would link to the curated presentation programs at NMTH.

Arts Victoria recognised that programs to support creative development were an urgent need and selected Arts House to manage the programming, the building’s maintenance and capital works. The relationship between Arts Victoria and the CoM’s Arts House has become an enormously productive one, largely because it is a genuine partnership, with the parties sharing a vision of how to support creative development and a commitment to achieving it.

In 2007, Arts House embarked on a plan to develop an old NMTH-associated two storey warehouse into two residential studio spaces to enable interstate and overseas artists to be accommodated for extended periods to work with local artists. It is planned to complete this project in 2010.

The buildings in the Arts House inventory are all historic Victorian era public buildings. Their transformation within heritage constraints has been arduous and challenging. It has involved negotiations with heritage societies and local community members with an interest in maintaining the heritage elements of the buildings. These interests have sometimes been in conflict with proposals for contemporary arts use. Compromises, on both sides, have had to be made, but the results have been reasonably acceptable to all parties.

All the buildings have now been converted to arts spaces that integrate subsidised office/work space for arts organisations and individual artists, performance spaces, rehearsal and development spaces, meeting rooms, galleries, a digital media and sound studio (with recording capability), visual arts studios, a writers lab and a producers’ hub.

The key planning issue in the design of the program has been the recognition that quality arts development requires a level of nurture far more complex than the traditional ‘pay for presentation’ funding approach. In consultation with artists working in the area of contemporary arts development, Arts House has built programs, processes and infrastructure that provide support for artists through a series of stages: from the original creative conception and development with no requirement for presentation or exhibition, through initial presentation if appropriate, and on to extended seasons and touring that extend the life of the work.

The key components of the program are:

- A clear mandate from Council to seek out and nurture new ideas;
- A recognition that the infrastructure is there to serve the work (this moves beyond the traditional view of public cultural venues as simply ‘buildings for hire’ and also allows for a single management structure that can efficiently operate multiple and transitory spaces);
- An artistic policy that recognises that the key to innovation, or rather, dynamic cultural development, lies in cross cultural and/or cross artform exchange and collaboration – through its curatorial role, the team has the capacity to initiate such exchanges – without the pressure of there having to be an immediate public outcome;
- A small creative team with a significant production budget (this allows the team to go beyond the traditional ‘grant-dispenser’ role);
- The capacity to negotiate ongoing partnerships (the movement of new work across State and national boundaries becomes possible through sharing and exchange);
- The authority to attract external funding from government, philanthropic bodies and individual givers to support the development, production and touring of new work.

There are three publicly advertised grant programs;

- CultureLab: in partnership with Arts Victoria, offers space and cash for the development of new work, across all art forms, with NO requirement to publicly exhibit or produce the results;
- Presentation grants: funded by the CoM offers space and cash for the presentation of new work;
- TransLab: funded by the Australia Council and in partnership with the Performance Space in Sydney, offers development and presentation funding for intercultural work.

Arts House staff provide the technical, production, artistic, promotion and fundraising advice and support for these programs.

Each year between 70 and 130 artists are supported through Arts House activity, across all art forms. A great deal of the work developed and/or presented at Arts House has been picked up by other arts producers for local presentation and often toured interstate and overseas, thus value-adding to the initial support through Arts House, extending the life and exposure of the activity and providing contemporary/innovative artists with longer periods of employment.

One of the most outstanding examples of this success has been “Black Arm Band – murandak”. In 2006, Arts House developed and produced a music and film performance event featuring Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists in a celebration of Indigenous struggle in Australia. The project was timely in that it reflected on the last 30 years of the Indigenous civil rights struggle in Australia presenting the music that accompanied this social movement. It coincided with a change of Federal Government and the formal apology to the stolen generations. It has been presented at the Melbourne, Sydney and Perth Festivals, and WOMADelaide. In 2008 it will appear at the London International Festival of Theatre at Royal Festival Hall at the South Bank Centre and return to the UK for WOMAD UK in 2009.

This initiative makes real the intentions informing the original plan:

- Cross-cultural explorations produce work that is of great interest to presenters around the world;
- Managed appropriately, the life of a work can be sustained for extended periods;
- With the right kind of support, ‘invisible’ artists can achieve exposure and recognition way beyond previous expectations;
- With creative and supportive planning, investment and management, the economic circumstances of struggling artists can be transformed.

In 2003 the CoM commissioned a comprehensive research project which would look at developments in housing the arts in Melbourne. A final report was presented to Council in November 2006 which recognised that without some form of assistance, accommodation or 'housing' for artists, whether for performance, creative development/rehearsal space, studios, office space or residence in the inner city is increasingly out of reach for many arts organisations and individuals. This is largely due to occupancy costs for rental space or the increased cost of purchasing property. The report called for further investigation of a wide range of options, which were supported by Council including:

Incubator for the Arts: Opportunities to develop an incubator for the arts, including the provision of shared resources and spaces, within a Council operated building;

Short term residencies: Partnerships between Council and developers/building owners to upgrade buildings destined for redevelopment to enable artists use in the short term while permits are sought and plans are being prepared;

Over-shop residencies: Council providing financial incentives to property owners to upgrade fire and OH&S requirements of spaces above shop fronts for artist use;

Partnerships with the State Government: to develop surplus government-owned buildings for arts purposes (similar to the Meat Market partnership with Arts Victoria, the Mercat de les Flors in Barcelona and Tramway in Glasgow);

Working in partnership with real estate agents: Council to consider hiring or working in partnership with a real estate agent to act as a broker to identify and negotiate spaces for artists;

Working with developers: Encouragement for developers to include arts facilities in the development (the Vancouver experience);

Forward Planning: Planning for areas and precincts to include arts facilities within master plans;

Low cost artist housing: Advocate for affordable housing projects to include artists in “low income earning” categories to ensure that artists can live in affordable housing developments in the city.

In addition to the Housing the Arts Strategy, Council, in partnership with Arts Victoria and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, has developed the Creative Spaces website to assist artists to locate spaces for their work. It offers information on and listings of affordable and accessible spaces in metropolitan and regional Victoria in which artists can create and exhibit their work. It will also work as a portal through which artists can come in contact with owners and managers of disused and vacant spaces for the same purpose.

Since 2005, Arts House struggled with a staffing structure that had been put in place when the venues were run as venues for hire. This structure undermined the growth of the program until a restructure was effected in 2007.

There are now 14 staff employed for their professional arts industry experience to develop and manage the projects and programs, administer grant delivery, manage the Creative Spaces website, develop Housing the Arts strategies, manage the minor maintenance of buildings, oversee major capital works development, touring projects and renting spaces. Casual staff are brought in to provide assistance to the technical and artistic staff when required and marketing and publicity support are provided by external agencies. It has been possible to manage such a large program with a small team by not reproducing management structures in every venue.

Unlike many cultural building projects, that do not provide adequate programming support once built, Arts House has been generously resourced. In 2004, CoM contributed nearly AUD\$1M to the management of the NMTH. Since the inclusion of the Meat Market and the Warehouse, CoM’s contribution continues at a little under AUD\$1M while the program is up to 4 times bigger than at the start. This has been achieved through Arts Victoria funding of the Meat Market operation and the raising of over AUD\$1.5M through a complex arrangement including performance fees, partnership funding, government support and philanthropic and individual giving.

The complexity of this investment (particularly from three levels of government) has brought with it a need for constant impact assessment. While this has added to the administrative burden, it has ensured that Arts House is able to make a significant contribution to wider planning issues.

The range of stakeholders with an interest in the Arts House program has been, and still is, extremely wide. Balancing the often competing interests of, for example, small and struggling cutting edge arts groups, community groups, residents, heritage

activists, government bureaucracies and elected officials has been both challenging and rewarding.

In conclusion, and in the context of this forum, the following points may be useful to participants:

- The development of a creative environment in which cross-fertilisations can develop organically is the key to the Arts House vision;
- Supporting extended creative development periods with no requirement for public seasons is a useful initial approach;
- Assisting the channelling of results on to national and international touring circuits is an effective way to develop the independence of local arts production;
- Clearly articulating the function of culture in relation to social, economic and environmental sustainability is an important basis for policy development;
- Developing multi-stranded partnerships and support sources is essential: Arts House began (and continues) with partnerships between three levels of government (Local, State and Federal). Recently, private philanthropy, non-profit agencies and even commercial interests have begun to invest in the project;
- The function of Arts House as a creative hub and incubator is its most important. Its roles as community centre, presentation venue and arts office building(s), housing 34 arts tenants, are significant, both independently and as a support to the incubation function, but it is as a crucible that Arts House is most valuable;
- Historic buildings can be used creatively without sacrificing their heritage ambiance – indeed, it is possible that the age of the sites positively contributes to the quality of the work;
- Integrating the use of ‘hardware’ (building and equipment management) with ‘software’ (support services from development to promotion) has been at the heart of the Arts House vision;
- Cultural tourism: Arts House is attracting increasing interest from out-of-town visitors. While the primary purpose of Arts House is not to stimulate tourism, it is clear that it does;
- Community engagement: important in the growth of Arts House has been the profile of the facility in the surrounding communities. While pursuing innovative arts directions, it has simultaneously built relationships with diverse communities in its locale.

Arts House website is:

<http://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/info.cfm?top=186&pg=2163>