

Submission  
No 29

## INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

**Organisation:** Blue Mountains Cultural Centre - Blue Mountains City Council  
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Submission to the NSW State Inquiry into museums and galleries  
Blue Mountains Cultural Centre Establishment Committee  
A Committee of Blue Mountains City Council  
5 August 2016.

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### **Blue Mountains Cultural Centre**

Opened 17 November 2012, the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre features the Blue Mountains City Regional Art Gallery, the permanent World Heritage Education display *'Into the Blue'*, the Gallery Café, Shop and multiple meeting rooms and public spaces. The Cultural Centre is co-located with the Katoomba Branch Library.

The Cultural Centre showcases innovative, diverse, distinctive and creative cultural programs for enjoyment by residents of, and visitors to, the Blue Mountains. Built on the highest point in Katoomba with panoramic views of the World Heritage area, it links the main shopping precinct on Katoomba Street through enhanced pedestrian connections.

Being the first publicly owned and managed, purpose designed facility of the Arts to be constructed in the Blue Mountains, the Centre significantly contributes to the economic health and cultural vitality of the Blue Mountains and the surrounding regions.

Since opening in 2012, Blue Mountains Cultural Centre has welcomed over 450,000 visitors and presented over 90 exhibitions from local, national and international artists and arts bodies.

The Mountains are home to an astonishing number of very sophisticated artists with international reputations. Artists such as Joyce Hinterding and David Haines, Sean Cordiero and Clair Healey, Mike Parr, Ian Millis, Roger Foley Fogg, Alan Schacher, Wei Zen, Jon Rose, Joan Ross. There are many more and all of them take an active part in the community through exhibitions and events at a number of different venues. The Blue mountains Cultural Centre is a sophisticated venue with excellent facilities and a very ambitious program less than two hours from the Sydney CBD.

## **Inquiry into museums and galleries.**

The following submission addresses the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4 inquiry into and report on the performance or effectiveness of the NSW Government agencies responsible for the organisation, structure and funding of museums and galleries in New South Wales. This submission follows the format of the terms of reference as presented at

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/inquiries/Pages/inquiry-details.aspx?pk=2403>

### **a) NSW government policy, funding and support for museums and galleries, museum and gallery buildings and heritage collections, including volunteer managed museums and museums managed by councils.**

The Blue Mountains arts and creative industries communities share a common concern regarding the city's ability to compete for arts funding made available by the NSW Government.

#### **Key concerns:**

##### **1. Funding exclusions**

The Blue Mountains Cultural Centre is a relatively new arts space. The current Arts NSW funding programs preclude new facilities accessing program funding, as they require that organisations achieve three years of successful 'project' funding before being able to apply for 'program' funding. This requirement results in many peer facilities with smaller visitor numbers, less programs and less community engagement receiving program funding due to a historic precedent. As a result, the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre, launched in 2012, which is exceeding all expectations in terms of performance and delivery, cannot access annual program funding from Arts NSW and consequently has been unable to roll out its full strategic program.

## 2. Blue Mountains -- Western Sydney?

At a State level, the Blue Mountains is classified as Western Sydney, yet it is geographically and demographically vastly different to this area. Blue Mountains City is the only Council in NSW and one of only eleven in Australia designated as '**Urban Fringe Large**' under the Australian classification of local governments.

As the Blue Mountains bridges Western Sydney and regional NSW, it is often overlooked by funding schemes targeted for each region. For this reason the Blue Mountains is yet to secure adequate funding support dedicated to either. Significantly, as a key tourism destination, the Blue Mountains community and audiences include diverse regional, national and international visitors. There is an increasing demand from domestic and international tourism visitors for quality, authentic cultural tourism experiences. The strong, unique identity of the Blue Mountains meets this demand for authentic experiential travel and the Cultural Centre exhibitions and programs reinforce this sense of place and enrich connection with community. The NSW Government is urged to take a holistic view when considering the Blue Mountains' case for arts funding. The infrastructure and programs not only services the local and regional population but a vast and important tourism population also.

## 3. Disadvantaged by statistics

*"Arts and cultural expression are an important part of our daily lives, are part of our identity and reflect our values. Arts and culture contribute to personal and collective wellbeing, as well as contributing strongly to a diverse and robust economy and have considerable value in contributing to social and community outcomes."* (discussion paper 'framing the future: developing and arts and cultural policy for NSW', 2013).

A large proportion of the cultural programs, projects, events and festivals undertaken throughout the Blue Mountains are designed to successfully bring tangible, positive and social outcomes across the community.

However, statistics present a disadvantage. The Blue Mountains is ranked in the top 30 of all NSW Local Government Areas for socio-economic advantage. For example, the city is consistently ranked above Penrith and Parramatta. The city has obvious pockets of disadvantage amongst its 27 villages located across the thin ridgeline, but when aggregated results are used to determine a city's eligibility for arts funding, the Blue Mountains is excluded as it is categorised as not officially socially disadvantaged. The Blue Mountains wishes to work with State and Federal Governments to build on the strengths of its communities, in particular its creative sectors.

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**b) potential funding impacts on museums and galleries affected by council amalgamations.**

The Blue Mountains City Council has been assessed as fit for the future and will not be impacted by amalgamations. This raises the questions of the competitiveness of smaller councils for funding when larger councils are formed through amalgamations.

The Blue Mountains City Council has an alliance with Penrith Council and Hawkesbury Council, with arts and cultural facilities across all shires working in a collegiate way to maintain arts and cultural services. Although this alliance is valuable, projects that celebrate and engage audiences in specific sites, such as the Blue Mountains, are very important to maintain. At present, the Blue Mountains is lost within the regional boundary of 'Western Sydney' and in consequence little state government funding to date has supported Blue Mountains specific arts projects.

**c) opportunities to revitalise the structure, reach, and impact of museums and galleries, and their research and collecting priorities.**

The model of funding museums and galleries has over recent years been focussed on social need projects. Funding for arts projects with the intent of supporting emerging or established artists to pursue their artistic practice and attain higher levels of professionalism are often not supported if a social inclusion component is not a part of the project. This has precluded many valuable arts projects from obtaining funding and resulted in arts projects being repurposed away from their core intent purely to meet social need based criteria.

**d) access to the collections of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, the Australian Museum and any other state collections held in trust for the people of New South Wales, and programs that promote physical and online access.**

Accessibility to major collections is of paramount importance for regional public galleries. This accessibility can be improved by reducing loan fees and resourcing state institutions with appropriate staff to both promote and facilitate the loaning of pieces to regional institutions.

Touring exhibitions emanating from major state institutions has traditionally been an excellent way for state collections to improve accessibility to collections. The number of touring exhibitions throughout Australia has seen a dramatic decrease in recent years as national and state institutions look more inward with their operations. We urge for this decline to be addressed and resources for touring be reinstated or created.

**e) the sale of the Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo and its proposed move to Parramatta, and whether there are alternative strategies to support museum development.**

The sale of this site is not widely supported by the arts and cultural industry as much needed funding is being funnelled to this project to the detriment of other important areas in need, such as capital works and repairs of existing arts and cultural buildings throughout the state. Moving an existing facility and not backing existing facilities in Western Sydney or not creating a facility that specifically responds to the region assumes that quality can only come from the CBD. This proposal is therefore not seen as strategic or of significant benefit to the western Sydney region.

**f) the development and transparency of advice to the government on priorities for NSW museums and galleries.**

The Blue Mountains is an undisputed Creative Industries and cultural hot spot of NSW yet there is little to no ongoing support provided by Arts NSW to the creative sector of the region.

Statistics show:

- 7.6% of the total residential population of the Blue Mountains is employed in the Creative Industries, compared to the NSW state average of 4.7% and the national average of 3.5%.
- Creative Industries is in the top 5 of all employing sectors in the Blue Mountains.
- 8% of the locally available jobs are in the Creative Industries.
- The Creative Industries is the third greatest contributor to the Blue Mountains Gross Regional Product. (\$152 million).
- The total output of the Blue Mountains Creative Industries is estimated to be \$592 million.

An unparalleled number of artists live in the Blue Mountains. There is a strong desire to work, perform and exhibit in the Blue Mountains. Many Blue Mountains residents are exporting art to national and international audiences. The city boasts a depth and breadth of skill and experience across a range of disciplines. These factors are not reflected by the level of engagement Arts NSW is having with the region, particularly in relation to exhibition spaces and ARI's.

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Museums and Galleries NSW (MGNSW) and Regional and Public Galleries NSW (RPGNSW) are the recognised peak bodies for public museums and galleries in NSW. These organisations play a vital role in disseminating information to the industry and advocating for the needs of museums and galleries across the state. These organisations also ensure that the museum and gallery sector of NSW is engaged at a national level. Ongoing government support of these bodies will ensure that the government is cognisant of priorities as identified by the sector.

**g) the impact of the efficiency dividend on the budgets of museums and galleries over the last 10 years, and funding levels compared to other states.**

Despite being the largest and most visited arts facility in the region Blue Mountains Cultural Centre has not been able to attract Arts NSW grant funding support since opening in 2012.

Unlike other states such as Queensland, the structure of Arts NSW 'program' funding includes unreasonable barriers for new institutions to access funding, such as the requirement to be successful in 'project' funding for 3 years before being eligible to apply. This places new institutions at a significant disadvantage when support is needed the most. An urgent review of these barriers to program funding access is needed to ensure that new public arts institutions are supported.

**h) the economic impact of museums and galleries on cultural tourism, and their role in supporting the visitor economy in Sydney and regional New South Wales.**

Cultural tourism plays a vital role in supporting economies in the Blue Mountains. The Blue Mountains has iconic status as a place for arts practice and engagement together with tourism, with the region representing a major drawcard for visitors to Sydney and surrounds. Over the last 5 years the Blue Mountains City Council has invested heavily in building arts infrastructure including the construction of the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre in Katoomba and the Blue Mountains Theatre & Community Hub in Springwood. The ongoing operations of both of these facilities are funded entirely by local government with no state government support.

With over 120,000 visitors per year to the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre and an average of 20 major art exhibitions per year, the facility has established itself as a significant tourist attractor for the region. Support from State Government agencies including Arts NSW and Destination NSW would greatly assist in further capitalising on this tourist drawcard.