

Submission
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INQUIRY INTO THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARTS AND CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE OUTSIDE THE SYDNEY CBD

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**SUBMISSION TO THE PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE,
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**

**INQUIRY INTO THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARTS AND CULTURAL
INFRASTRUCTURE OUTSIDE THE SYDNEY CBD**

Information and Cultural Exchange (ICE)

Information and Cultural Exchange (ICE) is an arts, cultural, digital media and community organisation working across Greater Western Sydney. Our programs and projects engage thousands of people and provide important pathways for artists and communities to engage with the arts and digital media, develop skills and capacities, develop and share their own works and stories, and participate in arts, cultural and digital life. ICE received its first triennial support from Arts NSW 2006-08 and we are currently seeking support for the next 2009-11 triennium. ICE also receives support from the NSW Film and Television Office, and from 2008 has been recognised by the Australia Council for the Arts as a Key Producer. ICE also has strong partnerships with local government across Western Sydney – including in particular with Parramatta City Council around the Switch Multimedia and Digital Arts Access Centre.

We welcome the interest in this critical issue of cultural infrastructure by the Public Works Committee, and seek to make a number of key points in relation to this question.

1. At the core of our submission is the central challenge that faces our team every day: that one of the **key constraining and limiting factors** for ICE and for many other organisations, cultural producers and enterprises in the Western Sydney region is **appropriate and affordable space** for artistic and cultural production and presentation – and the increasing costs and competition for available spaces.
2. As an organisation specialising in the field of digital media and multi-artform production, the pace of technological change requires urgent consideration the **digital aspects of cultural infrastructure** as a core part of the equation (particularly as noted in the reference paper for the Inquiry, which notes the context of the new economy as a framework for understanding the role of culture.
3. Any exploration of cultural infrastructure needs in NSW should take into account complexity and diversity of the needs of Greater Western Sydney (in size, in the pace of change, in its diversity, as well as in the costs and demands of urban living that place the region and its diverse populations at a significant disadvantage in comparison to other parts of the city).
4. Support for cultural infrastructure **needs to entail** a core commitment to partnership with and support for the ‘third sector’ non-government arts organisations, emerging enterprises and independent producers. As in the Sydney CBD (from the Wharf to Carriageworks) and in other leading hubs around the world, public support in terms of providing subsidised development, production and presentation spaces is **absolutely vital** to the success and development of independent cultural production and the emergence of specialist activity and successful cultural clusters and activity. At the moment, affordable space is one of **the key constraining factors** in production, development and the development of the independent cultural sector in Western Sydney.

*** The missing digital connection of cultural infrastructure**

As noted in the Inquiry's terms of reference: in the context of the new economy, culture is understood as a central wealth-creating aspect of the new economy. But access to this 'new economy', and to its enablers (creative skills and capacity, and technology) is not just a question of having access to a computer. Participation in the 'new economy' and the opportunities opening up in the growth areas (both in terms of employment, as well as creative and social participation and engagement) requires not only *continuing* access to technology, but also the skills and capacity to engage, involve, create and participate.

In relation to digital media and creative applications of technology, there is still a digital divide between Western Sydney and the rest of Sydney. It is impossible to ignore the rapid transformations that technological change are having on working, social and economic life – particularly since the widespread uptake of social networking and developments of interactive and user-generated media and content, the rapid expansion of the gaming industry, and the growth of online marketing and trade. The digital divide goes beyond the question of access to technology – what is equally important is whether and how people and communities are regularly (even daily) using these technologies in ways that connect them to creative, social, economic, learning, participatory, employment and other forms of active social engagement.

Organisations, producers and artists working with digital media and multimedia face significant infrastructure challenges in the next 3 years with the advent of high definition video technology and the need to upgrade equipment, hardware and software (as well as skills and capacity internally) to meet this challenge. The creation of digital hubs is a fragile ecosystem requiring ongoing maintenance and technical support. Investment in digital capital is only viable when accompanied by investment in the capacity to provide ongoing technical support and maintenance and in-built planning for obsolescence of equipment (which occurs much more quickly than most other capital investments).

With a few noted exceptions, there are currently very limited options for producers in Western Sydney other than personal investment in technology. The pace of technological change is making this a difficult option for producers and creatives (particularly those working in moving image areas of production).

*** The complexity of cultural infrastructure needs in Western Sydney**

Western Sydney faces many challenges in relation to cultural infrastructure compared to the rest of the city, and even to other parts of regional Australia. It is the most culturally diverse region in Australia, as home to our largest urban Indigenous population and still the most significant gateway for new arrivals to Australia, and home to some of Australia's most socio-economically disadvantaged urban areas. Residents face higher living costs compared to other urban centres, along with large areas of the region inadequately serviced by public transport creating a heavy reliance on the car as the primary source of transport.

The complexity of the diverse population is a core feature of the region's vibrancy and creativity. It also poses challenges for cultural producers and services, with the sheer diversity of demands

for support and opportunities. For those producers and services working through the arts and culture to animate social and cultural participation, and address disadvantage and social exclusion, the complexities are comparatively greater still.

Disadvantage in the community is further entrenched when lack of access to cultural participation is reinforced. Where cultural facilities are not available, where they are not available in schools, where parents and families are not involved in a community or social environment that encourages and supports creative expression, those voices are silenced and diminished. The lack of access to cultural and social participation, including in particular through opportunities to participate in the arts, further entrenches isolation and disadvantage.

*** Cultural and creative production and activity in economic development**

As noted in the terms of reference, culture is key to wealth-creation in the new economy. Despite convergences of technologies and cultural production, there is still a 'silo' approach in many areas of funding and investment in the arts and culture – with sometimes competing policy priorities between different agencies of government (or even within an agency).

For instance, there is often artificial competition between different artforms (with artists or productions that work across artistic platforms unable to secure adequate support). The recent review of the Western Sydney Arts Strategy noted that the place-based funding (rather than artform-driven / silo funding) model had provided greater flexibility in funding infrastructures that were not limited to any specific artform, and had also impacted on production and specialisation in the region, with greater levels of multi-artform production and innovation emergent. We have also encountered competing and contradictory funding priorities between government departments (eg where economic development policy is focused exclusively on private business, without scope for a range of contributors such as social enterprise to the economic development mix).

In planning for cultural activity and infrastructure, it is important that a range and mix of cultural activity is supported, and that conditions are created where artificial barriers between different kinds of creative and arts production activities are not reinforced. Commercial creative activity (and the people who undertake it) are not always separate from the other aspects of cultural and creative production they undertake 'in their own time'. Similarly, there are sound examples of where cultural development and engagement projects have led to production and cultural outcomes that have generated significant returns in audiences and sales.

If NSW is to become competitive with other cultural hubs and centres around the world, and in particular if its production outcomes are going to be recognised on a world stage, infrastructures and resources must be put in place to support greater levels at the development stage, alongside spaces and opportunities for producers to present their work to audiences locally, to gain skills and confidence, and build up their capacity and reputation. This is not simply a question of funding, but a mix of policies that involve and encourage all levels of government, a critical and recognised role for the 'third' sector, educational institutions, and importantly the private sector and business, to be actively involved in encouraging and supporting 'creative communities' and production. There are synergies across a wide range of policy priorities (from tourism to regional development, to education, to social and community participation to innovation) that could potentially be met in this kind of policy mix, however the State Plan and Metropolitan Strategy do not clearly articulate or encourage this kind of policy convergence around cultural development (or culture-led development).

It should be noted that NSW is currently losing out in film production activity. Despite being the centre of Australia's film, television, digital media and interactive and online production and gaming industries, NSW is increasingly losing out in terms of production activity. Despite being the primary location for many production companies, for instance, their productions are increasingly being attracted to other states with greater investment and industry-friendly production arrangements.

*** Valuing cultural production and participation**

In thinking through issues of cultural and artistic production, infrastructure and economic development, it should be recognised that there are certain aspects of cultural production and activity (particularly in the developmental and community engagement areas of artistic and cultural production) that will continue to require support from governments, philanthropists and other social investors if these critical forms of cultural and creative participation are to continue.

It is the transformative and intangible aspects of cultural participation, production and engagement that also tend to be forgotten when the emphasis is placed strictly on economic development outcomes. There are currently a range of research projects underway in Western Sydney exploring the widespread impacts of arts and cultural projects and infrastructures – and whether and how these can be measured (from the social, economic and other impacts of working with at-risk young people and young offenders through music to the impacts on recently-arrived migrants and refugees in being able to communicate through their own media about their experiences of migration and settlement, and overcoming some of the prejudice and challenges they have encountered on their journeys).

Nevertheless, we can also see opportunities even within these areas where outcomes from such programs can potentially have wide appeal: where significant social enterprises and small businesses in cultural production could potentially emerge into viable enterprises providing important employment as well as cultural outcomes, and also where digital outcomes from community projects in particular have the potential to reach and move large audiences.

*** Cultural clustering and hubs**

Clustering of arts and cultural production has a demonstrably positive impact on land values, amenity of civic and public spaces. When planned well and properly invested, they have demonstrated the capacity to enliven and animate neighbourhoods, attract visitors, grow economies, and once centres begin to emerge, attract businesses to establish and locate in the area.

The benefits of cultural clustering, in addition to the generation of a critical mass of activity, also enable the close proximity of artistic and cultural producers – allowing for greater levels of interaction, experimentation and collaboration. What is critical is the issue of sustainability. Cultural spaces need to be maintained, and adequate levels of support for programming and development, before a critical mass begins to build. A whole range of other questions (transport, accessibility, proximity to other venues, the mix of production and cultural activity in the cluster, and in particular the emergence and nurturing of independent cultural organisations, artists and producers whose work attracts widespread attention) is also of critical importance.

In terms of sustainability, the investment in cultural infrastructure should not come at the expense of 'soft' infrastructure, and organisations and producers cannot realistically compete with commercial rents. Particularly in urban areas where commercial property is unaffordable, the most successful clustering policies have demonstrated the need to provide subsidised spaces for cultural clustering to occur without squeezing the production capacity of arts and cultural producers.

Clustering approaches should consider a range of options for supporting and attracting cultural production, including with private landowners. Untenanted buildings could be opened up to community arts and non-profit groups under control of some kind of property trust to assist building owners with tax concessions. A similar approach should be taken to un- and underutilised state and local government-owned facilities. (Similar schemes could also be considered to encourage churches and other large landowners with underutilised spaces to consider opening up their spaces for cultural production and community arts activity).

Consideration in initiating or developing major cultural or community infrastructure and clustering initiatives should afford sound consideration of the infrastructure needs of a range of contributing partners (particularly not-for-profit entities). When infrastructure decisions are often made, contributions of this sector needs to be factored not in terms of the dollar value that they might bring to the equation (which in many cases will be contingent on gouging funded projects and programs) but on the *cultural value* they will bring. Many have specific expertise, established partnerships and networks that will better animate and produce cultural outcomes directly

*** Arts and cultural education and learning**

Challenges remain for arts and cultural education in Western Sydney. The cutbacks at the University of Western Sydney have resulted in the downgrading of specialist tertiary education arts training – including in performance (theatre / drama and dance) and the recent closing down of teaching in many areas of the fine arts will have a longer term impact on arts education in the region, with recognition that those who are seeking specialist education in these fields recognise it as necessary to go outside the region to secure it. With the loss of high quality training comes the loss of teachers and professionals in these fields, as well as local exposure of student works-in-progress, development and outcomes.

NSW is lagging behind the UK, Europe and some parts of Asia in relation to skills development to equip communities to participate effectively in the 'new economy'. Although a number of high-end facilities have been established, there are still significant disparities in terms of pathways in learning that mean that access to high-end tertiary educational facilities is unlikely to be an option for certain groups. We can see the impact of this longer-term in the kinds of outputs at the high-end production of the Australian film industry at present. Certain voices, and the stories they could potentially be bringing to screens, are ultimately not having the same kinds of eventual access to funding and industry support – in our view to the detriment of the industry.

Cultural agencies have the capacity to provide learning environments and spaces that are adaptable and targeted to specific needs. Support for learning and skills development partnerships between educational institutions and community-based agencies needs to be considered as part of the mix of policies in addressing the gaps in arts education in NSW.

*** Trends in arts and cultural funding and support, and the need for a healthy ‘third sector’ in the arts and cultural policy mix**

The impact on the ‘third sector’ and on direct support for artists and independent producers needs also to be considered when exploring and evaluating available Federal funding availability to local councils from Arts NSW, and the role of private and philanthropic funding and infrastructure.

As mentioned earlier, and recognising the wider funding pressure that local government is under in relation to infrastructure in general, ICE stresses the importance of recognising the ‘third sector’ as a critical and equal partner and contributor to these discussions. Local government (through grants, partnerships, sponsorships and through the contracting of specialist cultural services) has become an important investor in independent cultural production (including infrastructure for cultural production) in Western Sydney and other areas.

Local government have increasingly recognised the importance of arts and culture in local development and place-making, and many have developed strong cultural plans and institutions that are becoming critical and central to local arts and cultural life and identity. In a context where local government faces funding and infrastructure pressures in general, the pressure to secure additional external funding for cultural programs – as well as to generate revenue streams within these programs – this is also adding some complexity to the funding environment. Without diminishing the important investment by local government in ‘third sector’ arts and cultural services and production, and the important reciprocity and exchange between local government and the third sector that has become a critical component of a healthy cultural program, it is also important to acknowledge that local government and other non-government agencies are occasionally competing for the same pools of funding (particularly for cultural infrastructure).

In relation to a new cultural accord, the changing nature and complexity of funding arrangements across the various tiers of government – and resources available for non-government agencies, as well as independent producers and artists – needs to be part of the discussion. The funding environment should encourage and prioritise partnership models, and encourage greater involvement of the third sector in cultural planning to encourage greater synergies and reduce duplication. The third sector needs to be recognised as a key partner in the cultural life of local government areas; particularly in relation to cultural infrastructure, and should encourage and provide incentives and support for local Councils that build partnerships with and invest in non-government and independent arts and cultural services and production facilities.

Another key issue in relation to cultural infrastructure is that the funding environment has tended to favour investment in physical infrastructure without comparable investment in the ‘soft’ infrastructure necessary to properly animate and program these spaces. Once the spaces are established, then comes the critical scramble to secure support for the development of sustainable programs and infrastructures, placing huge pressures on the producing agencies and artists to stretch resources to production. As a result, the quality of production suffers (particularly in speeding the development phase), and there are significant adverse impacts on personnel, with burnout and loss of skilled staff to higher-paid and more stable employment in other sectors.

*** Impact of the arts and cultural participation on quality of life, healthy and sustainable communities**

The arts and cultural sector has the potential to play a leading role in responses to environmental sustainability and climate change. The sector is already recognised as a space where new ideas and ways of thinking can be creatively explored and communicated. There are already a number of leading examples where cultural organisations have taken up these questions (the carbon-neutral festival, for instance), but questions of sustainability should also be considered in the development of new and in upgrading and maintaining existing cultural facilities and infrastructures.

ICE thanks the Committee for the opportunity to make these comments. The issue of cultural infrastructure is a critical issue for Western Sydney, and it is encouraging that the Legislative Assembly is encouraging widespread contribution to high-level consideration of these issues.

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