

CULTURAL MELBOURNE: A COMMENTARY

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Editor: Helen Cronin
Project Champion: Warren Bebbington
Contributors: Phil Batterham
Mark Considine
Kieran Crichton
Chris Healy
Ian Holtham
Andrea Hull
Marcia Langton
John Maidment
Chris McAuliffe
Winsome McCaughey
Philip Morrissey
Kate Shaw
Carolyn Whitzman
Johanna Wyn

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Introduction

To assist the City of Melbourne in formulating its next five-year plan, *Future Melbourne*, a group of academics with expertise in cultural fields was asked to comment on the Council's key directions and initiatives in the cultural area.

Commentary was first invited on the *Arts Strategy 2004-2007*. Participants were asked whether the priorities and commitments set out in that document had been appropriate for the past four years, and how they perceived the Council to have performed in achieving these priorities. Second, they were asked what the priorities and commitments for the coming 10 years should be, and what we would expect of the cultural programs in a major city of this size and cultural complexity elsewhere in the world.

This document is structured around a discussion of the Council's role in the arts and the seven themes of the *Arts Strategy 2004-2007*:

1. Indigenous arts and culture
2. Regional, national and international perspectives
3. Engaging communities and cultural development
4. Arts spaces and places
5. Art, heritage and history
6. Investing in the arts
7. Ideas, discussion and critical debate

A compilation of the contributors' comments follows.

1 Council's role in the arts, the themes

Any discussion of arts and culture in the City of Melbourne invariably turns on the sheer scale of opportunities. On any day of the week, there is a vast array of exhibitions, performances, concerts or forums on offer. Any arts strategy must address the challenges that this surfeit of riches presents. Is the strategy about making the arts sector manageable: containing scale, corralling disparate activities, giving audiences the means to effectively sort through an array of events? Is the strategy about effective engagement: event notification, a coherent annual calendar of events, precise segmentation of audience and interest? The risk in such responses is that arts strategy is about effective consumption rather than about an ongoing creative culture.

The Council's arts strategy shows remarkable discipline in meeting this challenge. It is premised on an overarching vision that recognises the scale and intensity of cultural activity in the city, but it also establishes points of focus—venues, programs, policies—that build foundations for long-term cultural practice. In addition, there is a strong sense of complementarity connecting these points of focus. The declared vision of the *Arts Strategy 2004-2007* for Spaces and Places, for example, is appropriate. It recognises that Melbourne has reached a point of 'critical mass', with substantial cultural infrastructure and an enormous creative community accompanied by sustained audience development, educational and cultural tourism strategies. It makes sense for the Council to claim national leadership as this is now not only acknowledged but expected within the cultural sector.

It is equally appropriate to recognise that sheer momentum is a necessary, but not sufficient, foundation for an arts strategy. A strategy must nuance the cultural sector, for example, declaring Indigenous culture and experience a priority adds an essential historical and political character to the strategy. And the target of long-term viability sensibly resists the temptation to 'live in the moment'—an understandable temptation given how much 'low-hanging fruit' is available for harvest.

1.1 Priorities and commitments 2004-2007

The key themes of the strategy are well pitched and have been pursued systematically. There is a powerful sense of locality in much of the city's culture which is tempered by a confident cosmopolitanism. Melbourne can productively claim the status of a 'global' city, intelligently combining global and local cultures. The rationale for the strategy is clearly based on values like social inclusion and cultural diversity as well as economic growth. It is thus somewhat surprising that the executive summary, and the strategy as a whole, chiefly refers to 'economic vitality' as a criteria for success.

The strategy is reasonably explicit about the economic development role of the arts. Its first objective is to encourage 'particularly the links between the creative strengths of the city and on-going sustainability and economic vitality'. The emphasis on city marketing is clear and repeated throughout the strategy, with the intent to 'celebrate Melbourne on the world stage' (p.10)—a highly achievable objective.

All the priorities and commitments of the *Arts Strategy 2004-2007* are appropriate, in particular the vision of Melbourne as a 'crucible for the arts' where 'artists and creative industries are encouraged and enabled to thrive in a vibrant and challenging atmosphere' (p.4). The preamble to the strategy is strong and well justified; it is correct to declare that Melbourne 'has a strong and established profile as a city with a depth and diversity of the arts', and that it has a 'reputation as a city where the arts can

flourish' (p.6). The city does indeed have a strong international reputation, especially for its street art and live music scenes, and its range and variety of local subcultures.

The strategy's explanation of Council's role in the arts is insightful. It recognises that the role is multi-faceted, not just in relation to the dual function as capital city and local government area, but in relation to cross-council responsibility. Importantly, the strategy observes that 'the Arts and Culture Branch ... will work with other areas of Council ... towards realising the vision expressed in the *Arts Strategy*' (p.7).

This interdepartmental collaboration is vital to achieving the strategy's overall objectives. The second of these (on p.7) makes reference to the Council's *City Plan 2010*. This reference is entirely appropriate. *City Plan 2010* is the Council's strategic planning document. It outlines directions for and objectives of urban planning in Melbourne. It is through the planning system that many of the fundamental objectives of the arts strategy will be achieved.

However, the simultaneous achievement of economic vitality through international recognition and 'visible and vibrant arts in the public realm' (p.14) requires interdepartmental and probably intergovernmental cooperation that to date has not been forthcoming.

1.2 Comments on performance

The principles of the *Arts Strategy 2004-2007* read as rather bland in their emphasis on affirmation and inclusion. These are, of course, admirable in themselves, but they appear to displace other qualities associated with the arts: challenge, experimentation, innovation. It is not enough to embed those in a statement about freedom of expression. A real risk for a city so well-endowed with cultural activity is that the complacency of a purely affirmative or celebratory understanding of art will smother creativity in a fog of 'feel-goodism'. A city seeking to be a crucible for the arts should explicitly declare support for experiment, pursue that support and wear the consequences (whether positive or negative). There have been failures of nerve in recent years, usually in the form of hyped-up media controversy. The City of Melbourne is big enough and its cultural ambition robust enough to risk and actively contest such attacks.

While there is good mention of specific groups such as children and Indigenous people, there is insufficient discussion of how to include young people, particularly international students, who make up a large and growing proportion of the resident population as well as visitors.

Generally, there is a lack of reflection into the effects of the objectives. If they are successful—and indeed they already are to a significant degree—then a key measure of that success is an increase in land values. Of course this is occurring in Melbourne and the displacement of artists from the city has been acknowledged in recent Melbourne Conversations and various other forums as a serious concern. Cultural activity that is alternative, experimental and able and willing to take risks, needs low overheads and cheap space. This is well-accepted internationally and various cities are implementing strategies to provide cheap living and working spaces for their subcultural producers.¹ One project of particular note is the Breeding Places Program in Amsterdam with the catch-phrase 'no culture without subculture'.²

1.3 The next ten years

The whole strategy document implies that that 'the arts' are a set of activities or 'industries' quite separate to the activities being pursued daily by the rest of the population, and being undertaken by a quite separate profession—'the artists'. For example, the Mission states that 'people are to be encouraged to participate in and attend 'the arts'''. While there is certainly a recognised set of 'arts' activities that are highly desirable for the Council to nurture and support, nevertheless creativity and cultural processes are also an integral dimension of a vast range of other activities underway in the city not generally designated as 'the arts'. For example, many forms of cuisine, hospitality, fashion, advertising and publishing are highly creative.

Whilst an entire shift in direction is not recommended, the 2008-2010 strategy might place more emphasis on fostering and encouraging creativity as an integral part of the other activities being undertaken every day throughout the city.

Following from this, the Council might take a lead from the Queensland Government and direct all its departments and agencies to build cultural objectives into each agency's business plan and to commit a portion of their budgets to supporting arts and culture.

Specifically, the new strategy might:

Explicitly support experimentation

Take steps to avoid a descent into affirmative culture. Instead, empower artists to present challenging and confronting works; take the audience out of its comfort zone.

Challenge the 'major event' economy

Festivals, blockbuster exhibitions and the like offer the kind of concentrated activity suited to marketing, tourism and audience development campaigns. But major events also engender the belief that culture only happens within a declared annual event cycle. An arts strategy should make clear the quotidian nature of art, its longevity and the *longue durée*. Authority and posterity are built on days that roll into years, not in a one-week festival.

Emphasise the health of the arts rather than straight output

Melbourne's scale and energy is such that it is tempting to register the health and achievement of the arts sector in terms of volume.

Pay greater attention to process, dialogue, knowledge and cumulative impact

These are all 'legacy' issues rather than 'deliverables'. Can the arts strategy incorporate generational timelines? Can it plant seeds that bear fruit decades rather than months down the track?

Export locally-made culture

The Council should broadcast activities and achievements more vigorously. There is a sharp functional distinction between culture made locally and culture imported for local consumption; functional because artists themselves are neither isolated from nor intimidated by international culture. The major event economy risks suggesting the opposite, however, by lauding the benefits of the bringing the world to Melbourne without at the same time seeking to take Melbourne to the world.

Nurture rhizomatic culture

Can the strategy enhance the loose and lateral connections between multiple arts practices? The problem here is atomisation and segmentation: the arts as a degustation menu of unintegrated delicacies. The great moments in cultural history are recognised as those in which an ensemble of relations between multiple artists, art forms, event and venues is achieved; not a festival but a sense of pervasive connectedness, a commonality of values and purpose. It may be simply the format of the strategy but there is a strong sense of the arts as line items rather than as a corpus.

2 Theme 1 - Indigenous arts and culture

2.1 Overview of the theme

Melbourne's Indigenous population is culturally diverse and includes Traditional Owners from the Kulin Nation, Aboriginal people from regional Victoria and interstate and Torres Strait Islander people. The City of Melbourne values and respects the art and culture of Indigenous peoples and recognises and supports their contribution as integral to the city's cultural richness and diversity.

Council's primary goals are to:

- *Build on its existing leadership in Indigenous arts*
- *Link other policy commitments to Indigenous communities*
- *Pursue a new profile for Indigenous heritage and the contemporary Indigenous community*
- *Advance and strengthen Indigenous communities and their direct management of key projects and programs.*

Arts Strategy 2004-2007, p. 8.

2.2 Priorities and commitments 2004-2007

It is commendable that the Council recognises the diversity of the Indigenous population in Melbourne and balances acknowledgement of the traditional owners with recognition of Aboriginal people from regional Victoria and interstate and Torres Strait Islanders. The priorities reflect Melbourne's history as home to an Indigenous community with a tradition of strong leadership and advocacy on behalf of Indigenous people and the fluid nature of the contemporary Melbourne Indigenous population. As Indigenous people move to Melbourne from regional Victoria and interstate to access opportunities in employment and education they bring additional historical, cultural and intellectual inputs and the priorities reflect this complexity.

In the Melbourne Writers' Festival, not a year goes by without at least one Aboriginal author presenting on a new publication. The Premier's Literary Prize night is a special event, with an Indigenous section, and again, substantial entries. The priorities listed under the heading 'New Directions and Changed Priorities for 2004-2007' and 'Ongoing Commitment and Priorities' are sound, for they have as their basis the commitment to capacity building in the Indigenous community and the development of partnerships involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. It is noteworthy that the priorities combine a respect for tradition with an acceptance of the need to respond to changing economic, social and cultural environments.

2.3 Comments on performance

The acknowledgement of traditional owners and the generous support traditional owners give to public events in Melbourne is one of the salient aspects of the Council's public face and is a model for other cities. Projects funded from the Indigenous Arts and Cultural program have generally reflected the richness and diversity of Melbourne's Indigenous communities and range from arts which are popular and community based, to those which push boundaries. The fact that so many of these projects are free to the public is to be commended, although in some years projects funded have been limited in number and not really reflective of the richness and diversity of Melbourne's Indigenous communities.

2.4 The next ten years

What is the extent of the infrastructure available to take some of the major priorities forward? Take advocacy for a site of national significance for Indigenous culture as an example. Ambitious priorities are to be commended but should be preceded by a careful evaluation of resources available for advocacy.

The Council has established a sound basis for future development. It gives every indication of being aware of the evolving needs of the Indigenous communities and having the capacity for sensitive liaison with diverse stakeholders. It has a very strong community arts practice. But given Melbourne's importance as a cultural centre it would seem a matter of priority for the Council to give every support to the development of a flagship Aboriginal cultural organisation paralleling Sydney's Bangarra Dance Theatre.

Specifically, the new strategy might:

Develop a flagship Aboriginal cultural organisation

The Ilbijerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Co-operative is a strong Indigenous performing arts community resident in Melbourne. The further development of a company like the Theatre Co-operative would represent the diverse Indigenous communities of Melbourne as well as the city itself. In order to accomplish this, a detailed strategy may need to be prepared.

Foster greater awareness of Indigenous cultural heritage

A new goal in this area should be to foster greater awareness, understanding and appreciation of Melbourne's Indigenous cultural heritage on the part of non-Indigenous Melburnians and visitors.

3 Theme 2 – Regional, national and international perspectives

3.1 Overview of the theme

Melbourne is recognised for its influence on, and contribution to, Australia’s cultural identity. Its distinctive characteristics are clearly demonstrated by its arts, cultural and heritage institutions, the presence and visibility of artists, the production of innovative art work and the enthusiasm of communities to engage with the arts.

Council’s primary goals are to showcase Melbourne’s strengths and capability in the arts as part of its capital city role and to strengthen its relationships with regional, national and international communities.

Arts Strategy 2004-2007, p.10.

3.2 Priorities and commitments 2004-2007

The university contributors consulted were not able to offer specific comments on these priorities.

3.3 Comments on performance

Melbourne has a very active cultural life, although probably most of the cultural activities are of regional or national significance. The Council itself presents, in the musical sphere for example, just a few organ recitals and subsidised concerts by the Royal Melbourne Choral Society and others.

A key role of the Council not often mentioned in this report is its ‘host capital city’ role to the rest of metropolitan Melbourne and to Victoria. Significant synergies and efficiencies could be achieved through greater collaboration between the city’s major and nationally significant cultural institutions.

3.4 The next ten years

The new strategy might:

Explore regional and national partnerships

It would be useful to explore, through the regional and national touring programs of the Australia Council, whether there are programs in which the City of Melbourne could partner.

Create synergies and efficiencies through collaboration

The Council might seek to form partnerships with and to foster collaboration and shared infrastructure between the city’s nationally significant cultural institutions.’ These concepts are picked up to a degree in the last theme ‘Investing in the Arts’.

4 Theme 3 – Engaging communities and cultural development

4.1 Overview of the theme

Melbourne celebrates its diverse community and recognises that cultural differences are fundamental to the identity of the city. Council's arts and cultural development programs strengthen relationships between and within communities by encouraging active participation in the design and implementation of creative projects.

Council's primary purpose is to strengthen social inclusion and community building through arts practice and community cultural development. This means engagement with the community in the broadest sense, while noting the particular relevance of community cultural development for marginal and high needs groups.

Arts Strategy 2004-2007, p. 12.

4.2 Priorities and commitments 2004-2007

While applauding the direction of the priorities for 2004-2007 they appear outmoded in the light of the very real achievements that many organisations have made in actively engaging young people through arts-based activities. This theme is crucial to creating an engaged and inclusive culture for young people within the City of Melbourne.

The current statements do not actually mention young people; they refer only to children. This is an oversight that must be addressed if the Council is serious about implementing its arts strategy to strengthen cultural inclusion and civic engagement. Given the attraction of the city to young people, and the very real issues around cultural differences, marginalisation and disengagement that are often associated with youth, the Council has an obligation to take young people more seriously in a revised and more contemporary approach to cultural development.

4.3 Comments on performance

These were appropriate broad priorities for the Council over the last four years, but whether the commitments were sufficient to actively engage young people is another question. One perception is that the Council has only tentatively taken up the issue of engaging young people in the cultural life of the city.

4.4 The next ten years

The arts provide a relevant, contemporary and powerful mechanism for engaging young people. There is a comprehensive research literature which documents the benefits of engaging young people in civic participation through the arts.³

Over the last ten years organisations such as the Foundation for Young Australians have significantly re-positioned what it looks like to engage young people. There is now a strong research base on which to build more active civic engagement, including the Holdsworth et al. report commissioned by the Council.⁴ This report examines recent national and international literature on young people's civic engagement, citizenship and participation and explores practices in several Victorian local government areas. The report concludes that young people themselves must play a central role in determining the nature of approaches and structures around civic engagement. The

diversity of young people's needs and backgrounds means that a flexible approach is needed—one size does not fit all.

There are also a wide range of excellent examples of the arts as a strategy for the cultural inclusion and civic engagement and development of young people in Australian communities:

- Disability in the Arts Disadvantage in the Arts based in Fremantle
www.dadaawa.org.au/front-page
- Creative Riverina Youth Team, who put on workshops, courses, exhibitions and gigs directed by young people and funded by the Foundation for Young Australians
www.cryt.com.au/site/
- The Loft - Newcastle City Council youth venue, zine making, music and art workshops
www.ncc.nsw.gov.au/my_community/youth_services/youth_venues
- YGLAM - Moreland Queer Youth Theatre Project
<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendID=94327130>

In order to develop the Council's approach to engagement in arts and cultural development, the new strategy might:

Actively engage young people in decision-making

Young people should be involved directly in decision-making about the arts-based strategies and cultural development. For example, young people should be represented on any advisory panel or committee that is established to develop this strategy.

Recognise young people beyond their role as students

The Council has an opportunity to build links with young people beyond their role as students in schools. Indeed, simply seeing young people as students is a highly restrictive approach. Young people can be engaged through linking with organisations and services that meet their needs and through organisations that represent young people, for example, the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria.

Promote young people's art in city spaces

The Council could do more to demonstrate the priority it places on including young people by promoting young people's art in city spaces. While young people currently use the city for leisure and consumption, their presence in the spaces that the city offers is often regarded with suspicion. Young people are as likely to be in the City of Melbourne as workers as they are students. The strategy should recognise the potential to engage young workers in the city in cultural activities. The use that young Melburnians make of the City of Melbourne for leisure represents an untapped resource for young people's civic engagement and inclusion.

5 Theme 4 – Arts spaces and places

5.1 Overview of the theme

Melbourne's public places provide a unique and dynamic realm for the expression of its culture and identity. Venues, streets, laneways, buildings and parks provide a public domain where art can happen and people can participate and engage. Public spaces and places provide a gallery and stage for artistic expression.

Council's primary purpose is to provide the infrastructure to facilitate and support the development of arts programs in those spaces and places, encouraging residents, workers and visitors to explore, and feel part of, their city.

Arts Strategy 2004-2007, p. 14.

5.2 Priorities and commitments 2004-2007

Anything that leads to a sense of vibrancy in the urban environment—even to the extent of treating the whole as a potential space for the creation of public art—must be regarded as an appropriate activity for the Council to foster.

The arts grants program is well documented on the Council web site, and the criteria for assessment of applications are clearly set out. Given the aims set out in the strategy, these are clearly appropriate priorities and commitments for the Council over the past four years.

5.3 Comments on performance

Arts Strategy 2004-2007 clearly sets out specific programs and steps whereby the creation of art in public spaces is to be achieved. Much press coverage of the culture of the inner city area would seem to bear out the results leading from these programs. Not all art created for urban spaces under these programs is of equal merit (or equally comprehensible to hasty or uninformed observers), but this doesn't discredit the essential aims of the programs.

Clearly a wide range of activities have been fostered within the classification of 'Art Spaces and Places', evidenced by the growth in street performance and the increasing interest of the visual environment.

The Laneway Commission program capitalises on a characteristic element of the city's urban fabric, the laneway. At the same time it connects with a distinctive creative trajectory: the artist-run space, the back alley bohemianism of Melbourne's night life. This is propelled by a conventional support model which provides cash support to individual artists that subtly encourages artists to stretch their vision and explore new territories. The strength of the program lies in a combination of the ideal (enlightened public patronage) with the mythological (bohemianism), the historical (Melbourne's arcade and lane tradition) and the instrumental (the economies of the hospitality industry and tourism).

However, the broader priorities and commitments in the Arts Spaces and Places theme have barely been delivered. A register of 'creative spaces' has recently come online but it is thin. The objectives to 'implement mechanisms to ensure artists live, develop and present their work in the city', 'provide opportunities for artists and the

development of arts spaces with commercial developments' and 'provide multi-use, well resourced and affordable spaces for arts and community use' simply haven't been delivered. These are vital to the other objectives in this very well-articulated theme, such as developing and implementing a strategy that 'promotes Melbourne's public space as a living, ever-changing museum/gallery encouraging exploration and accessibility'.

The authors of the *Arts Strategy 2004-2007* are clearly well aware that many of their priorities are out of the hands of the Arts and Culture Branch. The objective to 'encourage Council to use its approval and regulatory powers' is perfectly positioned. If the Council is to succeed in implementing this strategy, it must provide support from elsewhere that is currently lacking.

One recent case illustrates this point. Colonial First State, which has bought the Little Bourke Street frontages of Myer Melbourne and David Jones, has proposed a redevelopment of the precinct between Swanston and Elizabeth Streets into a new retail centre, involving the refurbishment of the laneways in the area. Caledonian Lane, which is in the heart of this area, is precisely the kind of hidden laneway the city celebrates. Its street art is as significant as that in Hosier Lane, another of the few remaining 'unrefurbished' lanes in the city. In Caledonian Lane is a small bar called St Jerome's—an exemplar of the kinds of place on which Melbourne's international reputation is based, and that the city's arts strategy explicitly encourages. The redevelopment proposal would convert this bar to the entrance to this 'very Melbourne boutique shopping idea'. The proposal was greeted by Council's planning chairwoman as 'fantastic news for Melbourne'. 5

Clearly this is a case of different departments having different objectives. These tensions need to be reconciled in the context of the arts strategy if the strategy is to have any real effect. The Arts and Culture Branch's intent to work with other areas of Council needs serious and coordinated resourcing.

5.4 The next ten years

The new strategy should:

Set explicit, measurable targets

There is a far greater need for explicit targets, resources and challenges. For example, when the strategy says, in relation to Indigenous Arts and Culture on p.8, that a major public art commission will take place as part of the Commonwealth Games, this is SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely). However, in relation to Arts Spaces and Places on p. 14, the strategy says the Council will 'implement mechanisms to ensure artists live, develop, and present their work in the city'. How will this worthy direction be supported and how will progress be measured?.

Empower children

The City of Melbourne is working towards accreditation as a Child Friendly City. ArtPlay could be utilised to 'find ways of empowering children and making them better future citizens' in very specific ways—consulting on future changes to Southbank or Docklands, for example. Some specific goals and programs related to making Art Spaces and Places more relevant to youth aged 14-24 would be useful as well, as would imaginative thinking on how to include international students, whether resident in the city or not.

6 Theme 5 – Art, heritage and history

6.1 Overview of the theme

Melbourne has a unique, highly developed sense of historical identity, which is enhanced and expressed through the conservation, collection and display of significant artworks and artefacts. Council acknowledges, records and promotes the breadth of Melbourne's contemporary artistic endeavours and social changes.

Council's primary purpose is to preserve, and make accessible, its collections and major arts assets.

Arts Strategy 2004-2007, p. 16.

6.2 Priorities and commitments 2004-2007

While most of the arts strategy adopts a forward-looking stance, this theme aims to preserve the foundations of the city's arts legacy.

6.3 Comments on performance

The Art and Heritage Collection remains little known or used. It has no online presence, and until it does so will remain unknown to researchers, students and curators. For students in particular, a Google search is often the first step in any project. A strong online presence is therefore essential.

The City Gallery's profile still needs to be raised. Its presence on the Council's web site is minimal, and appears to be restricted to a brief listing of current and forthcoming exhibitions. Exhibitions at the Gallery are well received by those who visit them, but the Gallery relies to a large extent on 'passing trade'; moreover, its identity is confused. The inclusion of works by contemporary Melbourne artists sits uncomfortably with the program of heritage and history collections.

The organ in the Town Hall holds a unique place among the larger instruments in Melbourne, as it is one of only a handful that are not in churches or religious buildings. As the largest such instrument in the city, its maintenance and promotion rightly has its own priority. The Council is to be congratulated on its promotion of the instrument since it was renewed by the Schantz Company in 2001, especially its efforts to see that the instrument is played by eminent organists and that the concerts have been well advertised. In setting up the organ museum and conducting tours through the organ chamber, the City has done much to raise an awareness of the instrument to a wider range of people. However, its artistic potential is unrealised.

6.4 The next ten years

Heritage must be visible and accessible in order to contribute to the development of the city's arts culture. The new strategy might:

Facilitate the telling of 'the Melbourne story'

A key 'host capital city' role for the Council is to foster, facilitate and encourage the telling and documenting of Melbourne's diverse stories, which taken together become 'the Melbourne story'.

Develop online exhibitions to coincide with the physical exhibitions at the City Gallery

At present, City Gallery exhibitions are accessible only to people who visit the space. They are also necessarily short-lived. By contrast, the City of Sydney currently has five online exhibitions on its web site.⁶ These exhibitions are based in large part on the City of Sydney's own collections, supplemented where necessary by material from other collections. The City of London web site likewise allows searching of its image collection, and includes a series of 'virtual exhibitions'.⁷ One would expect a city of 'cultural complexity' to have a much richer web presence, introducing not just Melburnians, but also potential visitors and researchers to its history.

Fully catalogue the Art and Heritage Collection and make the catalogue available online

An online catalogue, including images of items where possible, would facilitate broader access to the collection. In the City Gallery, while there is some interesting material in the collection, the standard and level of cataloguing could be improved. Again, the City of Sydney allows online searching of its archives, as well as of its image collection.

Develop history kits

Targeted at school students and their teachers, such kits would introduce different aspects of Melbourne's history and the city's heritage collections.

Develop joint projects with the University of Melbourne

Many of the collections held at the University of Melbourne archives and special collections complement items held in the City of Melbourne's Art and Heritage Collection. Joint projects— such as publications and physical or online exhibitions— would only enrich the identity and status of these collections.

Make the Town Hall organ available to young local musicians

There are a large number of organists in Melbourne, many of whom would welcome the opportunity to explore the resources of the instrument in the Town Hall at first hand. Engaging overseas or interstate organists sometimes comes at the expense of local players, especially in the younger generation, who are capable of performing at a comparable level, but lack encouragement and/or opportunities. Encourage young people with keyboard skills to play the organ to ensure another generation of organists is being nurtured.

Extend the organ's 'repertoire'

The organ should be promoted in a wide variety of contexts; not just performing the instrument's traditional repertoire, but with other instruments, choral groups and in a wide variety of styles such as jazz and popular music. An organ festival would bring different performance styles to audiences and allow this type of exploration.

Appoint an organist curator

Major halls with organs elsewhere in the world have either a full-time curator, or a resident organist. By contrast, the last Melbourne City Organist was Sir William McKie, who left the post in 1936. It would be desirable to appoint a curator (honorary or stipendiary) to the instrument who is actually an organist. Perhaps it would be worth extending the artist-in-residence program to include the Town Hall organ to facilitate this.

7 Theme 6 - Investing in the arts

7.1 Overview of the theme

Investment in the arts is central to the vitality, liveability and growth of a city. Council plays an important role in fostering and sustaining the creative life of the city through provision of venues, use of public places for arts activities and events, development of partnerships, provision of grants, mentoring, training and the delivery of a wide range of arts programs.

Council's primary purpose is to encourage and support arts activities that relate to its agreed priorities, particularly the creative life of the city. A key aim of Council is to provide incentives for new ideas and achieve maximum value from arts activities through the prudent use of public money.

Arts Strategy 2004-2007, p. 18.

7.2 Priorities and commitments 2004-2007

Statements on page 6 of the Strategy acknowledge that the arts and creativity make a crucial contribution to Melbourne's long-term sustainability and economic vitality. There needs to be a clearer statement of objective and strategy for this theme.

7.3 Comments on performance

The university contributors consulted were not able to offer specific comments on performance.

7.4 The next ten years

The arts need to reassert themselves as a source of innovation and vision. In recent decades the arts have been edged out of this territory by innovative technology companies in fields such as IT and mobile telephony. Where arts-business partnerships exist, they have mainly taken the form of marketing and sponsorship exercises. There is, however, great potential for shared product development initiatives between the arts and business, particularly in the area of IT and mobile telephony. This is an area in which the Council could establish a clear lead over other cities and position itself as a major centre for the next stage in the innovation/knowledge society.

The new strategy might:

Commit to innovative arts-business partnerships

The Council should commit to fostering cutting-edge, research-based partnerships between arts organisations and innovative businesses in the City of Melbourne.

Ensure funding is better targeted

Some consideration must be given to ways in which arts funding could be better targeted to ensure that a greater percentage of the money available reaches artists and performers, as distinct from the administrators of arts organisations. The Council's current priorities call for a 'streamlining' of processes. This presumably applies to the grant submission and approval process.

Provide development funding for new projects

The Melbourne Docklands commitment of one per cent of Docklands' development costs towards urban art has seen a welcome flourishing of public art in this new precinct and this could be extended as part of the Council's arts strategy. The planning approval process for large-scale projects within the city should include a requirement for a set amount of at least one per cent of the total development costs to be allocated to site-specific commissioned public art.

Build bridges with arts education institutions

The Council's existing commitment to the investigation of cluster and incubator models is commended, but in the past such initiatives have often overlooked Melbourne's outstanding arts training and education institutions. Institutions such as the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne (Music) and RMIT (Art and Design) provide people in public venues not only with performances, exhibitions and screenings and a taste of the emerging next generation of artists, but also with the opportunity to experience repertoire and art forms that the mainstream arts organisations cannot tackle because of commercial pressures.

8 THEME 7 – IDEAS, DISCUSSION AND CRITICAL DEBATE

8.1 Overview of the theme

Melbourne engages its citizens with a plethora of ideas, opinions and aspirations that are central to the way a diverse community understands its culture, people, and organisations. A measure of the maturity and depth of a city is often found in the 'voices' or creative expression of its people.

Council's primary purpose is the development of a tolerant, inclusive and knowledgeable civic culture through the expression of ideas, discussion and critical debate.

Arts Strategy 2004-2007, p. 20.

8.2 Priorities and commitments 2004-2007

This theme is marked by two problems. The first is the difficulty of conceptualising what is particular and specific about the roles that the Council can and does play in the domains relevant to 'ideas, discussion and critical debate'. A large number of institutions, companies and organisations have a significant stake in 'ideas, discussion and critical debate'. How might or should the Council position its initiatives in relation to talk-back radio, libraries, universities, publishers, galleries, festivals and the myriad of other 'spaces' within which 'ideas' circulate in Melbourne? The second is that some priorities such as 'Facilitate discussion and debate focusing on the past, present and future life of Melbourne' are so broad as to be little more than general rubrics.

It is a significant omission that the strategy is silent on these questions.

8.3 Comments on performance

Discourse around culture, especially in the visual arts, is the missing ingredient in Melbourne. While far from absent, its scale lags well behind that of infrastructure, education, promotion and cultural practice in general. That is to say, there is ample cultural output and ample attendance, but far less reflection and critique. These are essential as a record of achievement, a focus for ideas and values, and as the fertiliser for future growth.

The Melbourne Conversations program is one exception. Topics and speakers are carefully chosen to reflect the mood of the community, events are meticulously planned and sensitively curated, and cleverly scheduled in excellent CBD venues at the end of business hours leading to good attendance and genuine dialogue with the public. Good media coverage broadens the impact of these events, though this effect could be increased through more broadcasting, webcasting and podcasting, helping to reach all cultures and age groups.

8.4 The next ten years

The best arts strategy in the world will fail in the face of cultural amnesia. Creative momentum is harnessed, amplified and given direction if it is seen as a linked succession of practices rather than as an atomised accumulation of outputs.

The new strategy might:

Build discourse

The ideas, reflection and debate inherent in artistic practice should be captured, recorded and redistributed as more effectively than they are currently. If you were present at the exhibition or the forum, the ideas were encountered. But what about their afterlife? The Council should support words more: forums, publications, debates. A greater number of platforms for formal critical debate should be established, whether in the form of catalogues, journals, blogs or other electronic publications.

Engage international talent in dialogue

Another role for the Council is to consider how it might facilitate dialogue on a raft of issues using the parade of outstanding international talent that passes through our city each week at major conferences. This would mean liaison with the Melbourne Convention and Visitors Bureau (the largest venue), the Melbourne Exhibition and Convention Centre, and the organisers of individual conferences. It may mean forming strategic partnerships with sections of the media and the state government. It may mean exploring the use of modern technologies like podcasting and webcasting. It will require a lot of advance planning. However, if we are to be a thinking capital, a cultural capital, then we cannot allow such opportunities pass us by.

Integrate these priorities into other themes

Some of the difficulties posed by this theme arise from the fact that it is fundamentally different from the other themes. This could be remedied by integrating the priorities around 'Ideas, Discussion and Critical Debate' into other existing or new themes, for example, 'Arts, Spaces and Places' would include inviting artists to 'share ideas and knowledge'. Such a perspective would regard 'Ideas' as central to all elements of the strategy.

Sponsor debate

Another, and not mutually exclusive, approach might be for the Council to have a particular, perhaps annual, theme around which it might concentrate the initiation of discussion and debate. Or the Council might sponsor or initiate particular kinds or forms of discussions and debate which are not currently produced by other entities.

NOTES

- 1 Strategies to provide cheap living and working spaces for artists are discussed in:
L Gibson and D Stevenson, 'Urban Space and the Uses of Culture', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2004, pp. 1-4.
D Ley, 'Artists, Aestheticisation and the Field of Gentrification', *Urban Studies*, vol. 40, no. 12, 2003, pp. 2527-2544.
Studio urban catalyst, *Urban catalyst: analysis report berlin study*, Technische Universitat Berlin, draft, November 2001.
L Vicario and P Manuel Martinez Monje, 'Another 'Guggenheim effect? Central city projects and gentrification in Bilbao', *Gentrification in a Global Context: the new urban colonialism*, eds R Atkinson and G Bridge, Routledge, London, 2005.
S Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities*, Blackwell, Cambridge MA, 1995.
- 2 Shaw gives a detailed account of the Breeding Places program. See K Shaw, 'The place of alternative culture and the politics of its protection in Berlin, Amsterdam and Melbourne', *Planning Theory and Practice*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2005, pp 151-170.
- 3 Engaging young people in civic participation through arts is discussed in:
R Holdsworth, 'Schools That Create real Roles of Value for Young People', *Prospects*, vol. 30, no. 3, September 2000, pp. 349-362.
S Miles, 'The art of learning: empowerment through performing arts', *Young People and Contradictions of Inclusion: Towards Integrated Transition Policies in Europe*, eds A Blasco, W McNeish and A Walther, The Policy Press, Bristol, 2003, pp. 163-180.
J O'Toole, 'Drama the Productive Pedagogy', *Melbourne Studies in Education*, vol. 43 no.2, 2002.
H Stokes, *Engaging Young People in School Through the Arts*, Australian Youth Research Centre, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 2003.
L Waldorf, *The Professional Artist as Public School Educator: A research report of the Chicago Arts Partnership in Education*, UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, 2002.
- 4 R Holdsworth, H Stokes, M Blanchard, N Mohamed, *Civic Engagement and Young People: A Report Commissioned by the City of Melbourne*, Australian Youth Research Centre, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 2008.
The full report is available from the Australian Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne. See www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/yrcc/
- 5 C Lucas and S Collins, "'Very Melbourne' kind of shopping idea in the works", *The Age*, 21 November 2007.
- 6 The City of Sydney's online exhibitions are available at:
www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/AboutSydney/HistoryAndArchives/OnlineExhibitions.asp
- 7 The City of London's web site is available at:
<http://collage.cityoflondon.gov.uk/collage/app>.

CONTRIBUTORS

Professor Warren Bebbington

Pro Vice-Chancellor (University Relations) and Ormond Professor of Music, Professor Bebbington graduated from the University of Melbourne in 1978 with a Master of Music before pursuing graduate studies at Queens College, New York, and the City University of New York. With a distinguished teaching career at the Universities of Melbourne and Queensland and ANU, he won the University of Melbourne Award for Excellence in Teaching in 2005. He has conducted opera companies, youth orchestras and choirs around Australia. Professor Bebbington's publications include the *Oxford Companion to Australian Music*, the *Dictionary of Australian Music*, and editions of works by Haydn and Graun. For some years he was music member of the International Board of Advisers for *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and served on the boards of cultural and community organisations, including the Australia Council.

Associate Professor Phillip Batterham

Associate Professor Batterham works with the University of Melbourne's Department of Genetics. His research expertise and interests lie in insect pest control, insecticide, resistance. He has a Bachelor of Science (Honours) from La Trobe University and a PhD from Monash University. In 1996, he became a member of the Genetics Society of Australasia and in 2003 a member of the International Genetic Federation. In 2006 Phillip received two awards, one for research and higher degree supervision from the University of Melbourne and the other for research and higher degree supervision and mentoring from Carrick Institute. In 2004 the City of Melbourne recognised Associate Professor Batterham for his business services, and Meetings and Events Australia awarded him the Victorian Conference of the Year Award.

Professor Mark Considine

Professor Considine is Dean of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Melbourne. His research areas include governance studies, comparative social policy, employment services, public sector reform, local development, and organisational sociology. Professor Considine has worked with governments and the community sector on local partnership and community strengthening strategies, and organisational reviews. A graduate of the University of Melbourne, Professor Considine is an Australian Research Council Professorial Fellow and a Fellow of the Institute of Public Administration Australia (Victoria) and the Australian Academy of Social Sciences. In 2000, Professor Considine and co-author of his most recent book, Jenny Lewis, received the American Society for Public Administration's Marshall E. Dimmock Award for the best lead article in *Public Administration Review*. In 2001, he received the American Educational Research Association's Outstanding Publication Award for *The Enterprise University: Power, Governance and Reinvention in Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Mr Kieran Crichton

Mr Crichton is currently undertaking a PhD at the University of Melbourne under the supervision of Warren Bebbington and Kate Darian-Smith. His thesis examines the development of music courses there between 1891 and 1927. He is also interested in the role of Dame Nellie Melba as an art patron, and the work of two prominent Melbourne artists, Christian and Napier Waller. He is active as a church musician and recitalist, playing the organ, harpsichord and piano. A keen cyclist, swimmer and gym-goer, when not occupied by any of these things, he enjoys good coffee and lively philosophical discourse with the cat.

Dr Christopher Healy

Dr Healy is a Senior Lecturer with the School of Culture and Communication of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne. His research expertise and interests lie in topics such as, remembering Aboriginality, Pacific museums, postcolonial cultural memory, TV and popular memory, and cultural theory. A graduate of the University of Melbourne, Dr Healy studied at the University of Birmingham, and completed his PhD at the University of Melbourne.

Associate Professor Ian Holtham

Assoc Prof Holtham is Head of Keyboard and Head of Practical Studies at the Faculty of Music, University of Melbourne. In his teens, he won a scholarship to study music in Europe and made his South Bank and Wigmore Hall debuts before he was twenty. Since then he has performed throughout Australia and in Europe, Hong Kong, Thailand and Korea, and released a number of solo CDs. Assoc. Prof. Holtham studied composition and conducting at the Guildhall School of Music, holds honours degrees in Music from Durham University, and Arts and a PhD from the University of Melbourne. He is Chair of the Council of Directors of the Australian Music Examinations Board in Victoria, Federal Chair of the Piano Specialist Panel, and has adjudicated many awards in Australia and abroad.

Professor Marcia Langton

Professor Langton is the Foundation Professor of Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne. She has worked many years as an anthropologist in Indigenous affairs in Australia and internationally, most recently in East Timor. A past member of the Centre for Aboriginal Reconciliation, serving on the Legal and Cultural Issues Sub-Committee, Prof. Langton has also been Director of the Centre for Indigenous Natural and Cultural Resource Management, and a consultant to the Northern Land Council and the Australian Film Commission. Her work was recognised in 1993 when she was made a member of the Order of Australia. Joint winner of the inaugural Neville Bonner Award for Indigenous Teacher of the Year in 2002, she became a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia in 2001.

Dr Christopher Macauliffe

Dr Macauliffe is the Director of the Ian Potter Museum of Arts. His expertise and research interests lie in art history. A graduate of the University of Melbourne, Dr Macauliffe completed his PhD at Harvard University.

Mr John Maidment

Mr John Maidment is chairman and co-founder of the Organ Historical Trust of Australia. Before his retirement, he was Architecture and Planning Librarian at the

University of Melbourne before his retirement. He is the author of many book chapters and papers on the history of organ building in Australia and has acted as an advisor for the construction and restoration of a number of significant pipe organs in Australia and New Zealand. Chairman of the Melbourne International Festival of Organ and Harpsichord in the 1970s and 1980s, he was awarded the OAM in 1999 for his services to organ conservation in Australia.

Ms Winsome McCaughey

Winsome is Senior Strategic Advisor (Partnerships) in the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Innovation & Development), University of Melbourne.

Over nearly four decades in the workforce she has been involved with a wide a range of sectors encompassing many different roles, including heading up six major organizations, including the Australia Business Arts Foundation (1998-2005), Lord Mayor - City of Melbourne (1988-89) & Melbourne City Councillor (1982-89)

Over the years Winsome has helped establish and run various community organizations on a voluntary basis. She was a founding member the Women's Electoral Lobby in the 1970s and started & ran Melbourne Voters Action in the early 1980s. This group attracted 2000 members who successfully restored a democratically elected city council for inner Melbourne after it had been wound up by the state government.

Underpinning all Winsome's activities is a deep commitment to strengthening the economic, social, cultural and environmental fabric of communities. She has a firm belief in what can be achieved when different disciplines and sectors pool their knowledge and cooperate on shared objectives.

Mr Philip Morrissey

Mr Morrissey is the Academic Coordinator of the Faculty of Arts Australian Indigenous Studies program at the University of Melbourne. He lectures in Aboriginal cultural studies and Aboriginal writing. His principal research interest is Aboriginal urban culture. Mr Morrissey holds a Master of Arts from the University of Technology, Sydney, and has published on Aboriginal fine arts, film, literature, governance, sport and the public sphere.

Dr Kate Shaw

Dr Shaw is a Research Fellow in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne. Her research expertise and interests lie in the cultures of cities, politics of place, gentrification, cultural diversity, housing, student housing and transnational students. Dr Shaw holds a Graduate Diploma in Urban Policy and Planning, and a Master of Social Science from the RMIT University, and a PhD from the University of Melbourne. In 2001 Dr Shaw was awarded the Stegley Foundation Award for Social Justice in Postgraduate Research, and in 2006 the Association of European Schools of Planning award for best published paper in the English-speaking world in 2005.

Dr Carolyn Whitzman

Dr. Whitzman is Senior Lecturer in Urban Planning at the University of Melbourne. Previously, she worked for the City of Toronto on healthy city initiatives. Dr. Whitzman

has an international reputation for her work on the prevention of violence. Current research interests include the development of integrated violence prevention initiatives at the local government level, increasing independent mobility for children, and the policy implications of planning for healthy cities. She is a Board Member of Women in Cities International (www.womenincities.org) and was Chair of the Planning for Health and Well-being Project at the Planning Institute of Australia Victoria (www.planning.org.au/vic/) from 2004 to 2006.

Professor Johanna Wyn

Professor Wyn is Director of the Australian Youth Research Centre in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, with research interests in the sociology of education, youth transitions to work and further education, and youth agency/life partners. She is professionally linked to many esteemed universities throughout the world, including the Universities of London, Otago, Milan, Canterbury, Glasgow and British Columbia. Professor Wyn holds a Bachelor of Arts from Victoria University of Wellington, a Master of Arts from New England and completed her PhD at Monash University.