

GALLERIESWEST

Colin Walker
Executive Director
Culture and the Arts (WA)
Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries
PO Box 8349
Perth Business Centre WA 6849

Dear Colin

Re: Draft WA Cultural Infrastructure Strategy

As the peak body for WA's public art galleries GalleriesWest welcomes the recent release of the Draft WA Cultural Infrastructure Strategy. GalleriesWest applauds the work done to demonstrate the rationale, priorities and framework for the strategy and especially the long overdue emphasis given to Aboriginal art and culture in the State.

The draft strategy project however provides a larger opportunity to reconsider conventional, limiting ideas about the ways in which identity, meaning and place are generated through culture and the arts. These are the mechanisms through which our stories are generated and it is through stories that we all seek to find meaning, no matter if we are community members or visitors. It is cultural infrastructure that provides the tools to tell those stories.

The draft strategy utilises "...a layered approach to cultural infrastructure planning...". As they are currently expressed the hierarchy of the six strategy layers reflect disappointingly conventional ideas about arts and cultural networks and ecologies.

Although section six is prefaced with a broad assertion about "horizontal and vertical strategic cultural infrastructure prioritisation and programming" it is immediately evident that five of the six layers are quite specifically and exclusively focussed on Perth.

GalleriesWest acknowledges that Perth as the State Capital must have appropriate arts and cultural infrastructure to service residents, attract visitors and facilitate its role as the gateway to other WA destinations. However, rather than applying a conventional top-down hierarchy placing the capital city at the peak and assuming that culture emanates out from the centre, we propose a layering that begins with the state's fundamental nature and identity and feeds upwards.

Layer one is the land, the terrain and the natural environment which makes up the unique and ancient physical characteristics of our great State and in many ways is the primary foundation of all culture and art making.

Layer two is the deep-time history and tjukurpa/cosmology of Aboriginal culture overlaid on layer one to create an extraordinary richness of story, place and meaning. The spectacular combination of these first two layers cannot be found anywhere in the world except WA and offers authentic and profound experiences.

Layer three is the pattern of our WA regions and the many and varied places (rural, urban and regional, cities, towns and suburbs) where Western Australians live, each place having its own distinct cultural identity. Outdated, paternalistic assumptions that capital city cultural production is superior to that of the regions, and is consequently deserving of exponentially greater infrastructure investment, is being increasingly challenged.

Layer four is people and their capabilities, the soft infrastructure essential to operate, maintain and develop arts and cultural facilities. The people, the skills, the experience and the training necessary to provide a specialist workforce to deliver the best arts and cultural programs. Public galleries generate regional jobs vital for the growth of regional communities.

Layer five is contemporary digital culture which extends across the State and beyond, linking places to each other and WA to global cultures, ideas and audiences. The same applies in reverse, enabling WA artists to become nationally and Internationally known.

Layer six is the inner capital city cultural mix integrating with, and supporting layer seven by providing a uniquely WA contemporary inner city arts ecology and atmosphere especially for major events and experiences.

Layer seven is the Perth Cultural Centre where venues of the highest international standard are located to provide access to cultural production from around Australia and around the world. Importantly the centre is also a conduit for, and gateway to, vital cultural expression from regional WA.

Beyond these proposed layers there are further considerations essential for a healthy arts and cultural environment. The National Association for the Visual Arts NAVA is currently undertaking a major review of its code-of-practice which sets the benchmarks for fair pay, standards of work and career pathways for visual artists. There is urgent need for such benchmarks across all art forms and practices so that the essential role of artists is recognised and honoured with tangible rewards.

In terms of GalleriesWest's remit we are currently working with Art on the Move and WALGA through the Regional Exhibition Touring Boost on the Map and Gap project

aimed at gaining a comprehensive overview of WA public galleries for the first time. This information will be available early in the new year and we propose that it should inform the Draft WA Cultural Infrastructure Strategy and facilitate a strategy for future development of the WA public galleries network.

GalleriesWest is also particularly concerned that local governments, which own and manage the majority of public galleries in WA, need to gain a better understanding of both the potential and the needs of the sector so that infrastructure is utilised to maximum effect. Over recent years we have seen an erosion of the specialist, professional skills and knowledge needed to operate effective, well-functioning public galleries as gallery staff are shoe-horned into inflexible local government structures. This often results in reduction of salary grades and an increase in workloads which typically include broader cultural development functions. This reduces the capacity of galleries to program and deliver diverse, high quality exhibitions and related programs.

GalleriesWest endorses the proposal for “...an accord with local government for improved arts and cultural services and facilities...” as identified in the draft strategy but with the important proviso that specialist arts jobs are recognised as essential and are not relegated in favour of rigid management structures.

A further area of concern which is related directly to infrastructure needs is regional collections and the need for appropriate storage and exhibition facilities combined with the expertise needed to manage, conserve and interpret them. It is our contention that all of these collections combine to make up the greater State Collection and it is essential that they are fostered and encouraged by means appropriate policies, facilities and expertise to ensure that they are sustained into the future.

Layer six of the draft strategy “Connected State” proposes a set of “Regional Cultural Centres” which implies an emphasis on those places when considering development of arts and cultural infrastructure. GalleriesWest asserts that although centres of population are most likely to have existing infrastructure they are not necessarily where the most vital and energetic expressions of culture take place. Consistent with our assertion that traditional centres should not dominate cultural expression we contend that culture is always an exchange, that energy and stories and understanding moves in many directions, not always from the centre out, but very often from the periphery in. Recognition of this more sophisticated understanding is essential when considering future infrastructure development.

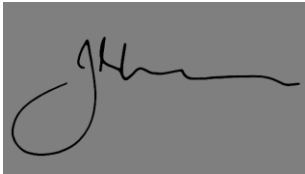
The Regional Cultural Centres that are identified in the draft strategy include some curious groupings such as the combination of Merredin, York and Northam and Bunbury and Busselton. Regional proximity is by no means an indicator of similar

cultural identity or creative expression and care needs to be taken when proposing such summary identification.

Finally audiences must be located squarely at the centre of the Draft WA Cultural Infrastructure Strategy, not simply as supporters and statistics but in partnership with venues so that they reflect distinctive local voices. Voices that express regional culture and the ways in which it is interwoven through artistic practices and activities to create meaning and contextualise global themes.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Draft WA Cultural Infrastructure Strategy and we look forward to further opportunities to advocate for the public galleries sector.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink on a grey rectangular background. The signature is stylized, starting with a large 'J' and ending with a long horizontal stroke.

Julian Bowron
Chair