

The Importance of Cultural Hubs in Regional Centres: Armidale Regional Performing Art Centre Initial Research Paper by Arts North West

ARPAC's business plan nominates earnings of over \$1.5 million in the first five years. The council has provided support in terms of its \$20,000 feasibility study as well as offering the site location.

Arts North West, based on previous research (see below) envisages that the feasibility study will show that the proposed centre would enhance the livability of Armidale and the New England North West region in several ways:

National and international research has demonstrated the contribution that arts and culture provides to the economic and social fabric of a community. The establishment of the cultural services makes a clear statement that will add social capital to any provincial region and stimulates economic growth. Cultural activity forms a significant component in the decision by metropolitan based people to move to provincial areas. In addition these facilities serve a vital role for the existing community in building social capital and providing social experiences.

*The building of social infrastructure of this nature in key regional centres will provide future alternative revenue streams and job creation through the continued attraction of a variety of conferences, performances and events.*¹

The Standing Committee of the Department Infrastructure Transport Regional Development and Local Government Inquiry Report into the impact of the global financial crisis on regional Australia found that Wodonga, for example, was unable to earn the estimated \$24 million per annum that a dedicated Performing Arts Centre venue would have provided.

Furthermore, the report (and other research supports these statements) proposes that:

Enhanced cultural facilities such as Performing Arts Centre or Arts Space will:

1. *offer a point of difference from other venues where flat floor, break out and workshop spaces are limited*
2. *be a venue that accommodates large audience numbers*
3. *provide service to the community through accommodating the development and presentation of diverse cultural product and activities*
4. *have a strong focus on development of emerging and community arts initiatives*
5. *operate on a multipurpose level, enabling the community to conduct:*
 - *Performances*
 - *Concerts*
 - *Recitals*
 - *Community celebrations*
 - *Emerging arts activities (workshops, student concerts, schools arts festivals)*
 - *Community and professional workshops*
 - *Conferences, forums and seminars*
 - *Balls, dance competitions*
 - *Exhibitions*
 - *Educational activities (including exams)*
6. *compliment existing resources in the region and strengthen a provincial areas position as an attractive place for external presenters to present and host product*

¹ City of Wodonga, [Inquiry into the Impact of the Global Financial Crisis on Regional Australia](#). (Wodonga, Victoria, 2009).

7. *lure activity to the region, as present venues are often at capacity or unable to accommodate due to size restrictions or technical requirements*
8. *deliver a performing arts program through a range of genres that aim to provide the populace with exposure to diverse, challenging and new art and cultural experiences*
9. *better service existing audiences of the venue and strengthen the region as a whole then secondly look at the introduction of new audiences within the region and attraction of audiences to the region*

Social Return

Cultural facilities will:

1. *Provide a social hub for the community*
2. *Build the communities capacity in developing and delivering their own events, performances, activities*
3. *Inject visitation and time spent in the city or town*
4. *Offer a unique venue within the region for diverse community needs*
5. *Foster creative community processes and product development in a safe and nurturing environment.*²

In the case of the proposed Armidale Performing Arts Centre, the feasibility study will be crucial in determining and providing 'a better informed understanding of the public value of investment in arts and culture' and of the relevance of cultural hubs through three main themes:

1. *economic development*
2. *cultural value*
3. *engagement and social impact.*

*These themes capture the key dimensions of artistic production and consumption, the personal and public benefits that result from arts experiences, and the balance of intrinsic and instrumental value that the cultural sector delivers*³.

This feasibility study will need also to take on board that cultural sectors thrive from a central and well-resourced hub within a supportive and networked community. Entire new 'villages' or 'precincts' (e.g. Kelvin Grove Urban Village or Creative Industries Precinct <http://www.kgurbanvillage.com.au/vision/>) have been developed around this 'creative communities'⁴ model and are thriving. These are not particularly new concepts but as regional NSW continues to experience shifts in population and economies, it is important for government and industry to include strong cultural resources in any future planning and development.

In 2009 the Australian Performing Arts Centres Association (APACA) recommended to the National Cultural Policy Consultation 'that a strategic approach to funding maximise regional, infrastructure and arts funding to create regional cultural hubs based around performing arts centres'⁵. Both ARPACA and Arts on Tour are excellent sources of information on regional arts centres and performing arts product. Other important sources include the Australia Council for the Arts and their Research Hub, Arts NSW, Regional Arts NSW and, of course, Arts North West (the regional arts board for the New England North West).

² City of Wodonga, [Inquiry into the Impact of the Global Financial Crisis on Regional Australia](#).

³ Cultural Ministers Council Statistics Working Group, "Vital Signs: Cultural Indicators for Australia," First Edition for Consultation (n.a.).

⁴ Richard L. Florida, [The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life](#) (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2004), Richard L. Florida, [Who's Your City?: How the Creative Economy Is Making Where to Live the Most Important Decision of Your Life](#) (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2008).

⁵ Australian Performing Arts Centres Association (APACA), "Submission to the National Cultural Policy Consultation," [National Cultural Policy Consultation](#) (2009), vol.

In its submission, APACA gives extremely good examples of how Arts Centres can be used to maximise investment:

Unlike capital cities, the role of the performing arts centre in a regional context is one of cultural engagement in a community that has a broader focus than simply the arts. In addition, the use of performing arts centres for all sorts of cultural purposes – meetings, celebrations, drinking coffee in the café, etc also functions to reduce some of the common barriers to attendances for arts audiences. Familiarity with the venue and a sense of community ownership deliver a greater sense of community engagement with the venue and with the participatory and professional events they hold.

With the demise of many regional performing arts companies, performing arts centres have taken on a much wider role as not only platforms for creativity, but active facilitators and producers of creative activity. Performing arts centres facilitate and co-produce work with community members to reflect their stories and celebrate their talents, with local professional arts workers and co-produce at a national level. Funding programs such as Local Stages and the "Make It New" funding strategies from the Australia Council are slowly acknowledging the untapped potential of performing arts centres, however these centres could be optimised further.

Since performing arts centres already provide a focal point for cultural activity, it makes sense to maximise the cultural and economic asset by focussing other disparate cultural programs and infrastructure around the existing centres to create hubs of activity, thus placing existing cultural infrastructure at the heart of future cultural investment.

The clustering of creative activity and the idea of creative hubs is not new, but a whole of government approach to the concept may provide greater return on cultural investment. A cultural policy that harnessed regional, infrastructure and arts funding could create far more effective regional and metropolitan cultural hubs that deliver a range of arts creation, cultural services and cultural experiences more efficiently.

In Victoria, the concept of positioning key, strategically placed performing arts centres as cultural hubs to mentor and support groups in nearby smaller communities is being piloted. It facilitates the presentation and production of cultural activities without major infrastructure expenditure. It simply requires the hubs themselves to be adequately resourced. The benefits of vibrant cultural hubs are particularly pertinent to regional communities in terms of improving social cohesion, positive economic impacts, better health outcomes and reduced crime.⁶

No one is denying that the proposed Armidale Regional Performing Arts Centre will not be a costly investment. ARPAC's business plan clearly outlines that although the initial construction and fit-out of a Performing Arts Centre is beyond their means and that of the Armidale-Dumaresq Council, they are working towards a self-sustaining model that provides a 'return on investment' rather than being wholly reliant on funding⁷. 'Whatever mechanism is employed, it is imperative that we commit to engaging with our various communities and allowing our potential audience to be passionate and proud of the art we are making'⁸ and of course the communities and venues that such art is made and experienced in. Armidale-Dumaresq Council, ARPAC and the Armidale community will need to partner together to develop the capital funding (either through government

⁶ Australian Performing Arts Centres Association (APACA), "Submission to the National Cultural Policy Consultation," vol.

⁷ Lyndon Terracini, *A Regional State of Mind: Making Art Outside Metropolitan Australia*, Platform Papers: Quarterly Essays on the Performing Arts, ed. Dr John Golder, vol. 11 (Sydney: Currency House, 2007).

⁸ Terracini, *A Regional State of Mind: Making Art Outside Metropolitan Australia*.

grants, philanthropic funds, and/or business partnerships) and dedicate considerable resources to the venture. However, the benefits of a dedicated and professional cultural centre work across economic, social and cultural platforms and, if managed properly have the potential to provide such benefits well into Armidale's future.

As Kim Dunphy summarises in her report on Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities Through Arts and Creativity:

'A search of the Australian literature indicates that arts and creative initiatives are significant for the development of rural and remote communities in the economic, environmental, social, and cultural domains.

The "creative industry" model is particularly dominant in research investigating economic impacts of arts and creative initiatives, while a community cultural development approach is reflected in literature and activity that seeks or values social outcomes, including health and well being, social inclusion, and educational achievements. Also examined are arguments that ascribe value to the cultural dimension in its own right, in which the intrinsic value of arts and creativity for rural and remote communities is recognized.⁹

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⁹ Kim Dunphy, "Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities through Arts and Creativity," Creative City Network of Canada (Cultural Development Network Victoria, Australia, 2009), vol.