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‘The problem with permanence is that you’re stuck with it’: the public arts centre building in the twenty-first century

Hilary Glowa and Katya Johanson

ABSTRACT

Dedicated arts centres were a common outcome of the great expansion of the public sphere in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the early twenty-first century, however, many of our arts centres present a challenge to cultural policy-making. Expensive to maintain and operate, they are often ill-equipped to host the increasingly diverse range of communities and arts practices that have emerged with each generation. The article outlines the difficulties that the presence of such arts centres present to cultural policymakers, using case studies of four Australian centres. It argues that the ‘mobilities turn’ in sociology provides a useful framework for considering the challenges posed by a static building and its array of highly mobile stakeholders. The study focuses on the perceptions of arts centre managers as cultural intermediaries – giving voice to the opportunities and constraints for the arts centre building and to the needs and interests of public policymakers, artists and audiences, and juggling the tensions between the ideological, political, demographic and cultural forces that define the field in which they routinely operate. The managers negotiate distinctive challenges that arts centres face within the context of decentralised and fluid understandings of creative spaces for contemporary leisure practices.

Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the newly created Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) published a guide for local government authorities establishing arts centres. It proclaimed that purpose-built arts centres were required for the production of art as much as were ‘music, scenery and costumes, or paint, canvas and brushes’, but that the war had left a ‘crying dearth of suitable buildings in most of our cities, towns and villages’:

[S]o every kind of improvisation had to be made, and concerts, plays, ballets, exhibitions had to be given in cathedrals and churches, hotels and restaurants, shops and commercial showrooms, town halls and country houses, hostels and camps – in fact, in almost every kind of building except one properly designed, adequately equipped and harmoniously decorated for the purpose. (Arts Council of Great Britain 1945, 5–6)

In response to Keynesian predictions that industrialisation would lead to greater leisure time, local arts centres became a common feature of post-war urban planning in Britain and Commonwealth countries. Keynes (1930, reprinted 1963) himself wrote that ‘for the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem – how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for him, to live
wisely and agreeably and well’ (367), and his initiatives to publicly fund the arts were partially shaped by this expectation.

Contrast this goal of the ACGB with a statement – more than sixty years later and on the other side of the world – by Ricky Bryan, the Director of the Canberra Theatre Centre, Australia. Bryan argued that Australian arts centres ‘have almost universally failed in our mission to be centres of creativity and culture for our respective communities’ (Bryan 2013). Instead, such centres have become merely halls for hire where ‘we sell our venues out to anyone who wants to rent them and [they] swing through town and take our money and leave … but there is no engagement, no lasting legacy’ (Bryan 2013). According to Bryan, arts centres are not doing the important, culturally enriching work of both shaping and meeting expectations of their cultural consumption activities, such as by ‘commissioning local works, education programs, [and] community out-reach’ (Bryan 2013).

These two quotes each capture a picture of the arts centre in a vastly different era. In the first, the ACGB expresses a belief in the obligation of government to service the perceived needs of the public with a professionalised arts sector. Those perceived needs include a sense of industrial and social peace, stability and belonging following the turmoil of war, providing a cultural anchor for the return of displaced and vulnerable British people. The ACGB’s vision for an arts centre is bound up with a larger vision of a stable and homogeneous nation. In the second quote, Bryan witnesses with frustration a manifestation of a contemporary phenomenon: the profoundly disruptive impact of mobility on the ability of the arts centre to provide the kind of cultural anchor the ACGB envisaged. Depleted of local content, the work of one arts centre often simply replicates that of another, without (according to Bryan) attempting to understand and engage its residents.

This article seeks to provide a more complex picture of the arts centre than we see in either of these accounts. It does so by investigating how the mobility that characterises the early twenty-first century – of arts companies, artists and audiences – disrupts the traditional business of the arts centre. It examines the challenge to managers at four Australian arts centres, who attempt to adapt the built structure of the centre to rapidly changing demographics, political imperatives and audience expectations and capacities; one of our interviewees described this challenge: ‘the problem with permanence is that you’re stuck with it’ (Darebin Manager of Creative Culture, March 2014). The rationale for placing the perspectives of arts centre managers into this critical literature lies in the fact that such managers are usually responsible for negotiating the tension caused by their ever-more-mobile stakeholders – audiences, residents, artists and local government – and the permanence of the built structure.

The article sets the experiences of these managers in the context of the current ‘mobilities turn’ in the social sciences, which examines the implication of increased but uneven human mobility for contemporary life, and aims to ‘shift the focus from stasis, structure and boundaries to movement and mobility’ (Costas 2013; 1467; see also Urry 2010). Urry (2010) described the late twentieth century as giving rise to an increased flow of peoples and objects ‘across carefully constructed borders’ (349), leaving societies weak in the face of ‘fluid and mobile processes of globalization’ (352). Yet despite its disruptive character, mobility is an inherent value of contemporary society, Urry argues. While much of the mobilities literature looks at the large-scale movement of people (such as the displacement of national populations) or resources (such as international trade in oil), mobility on a smaller scale provides a lens for considering the challenges to our social and cultural institutions, including the arts centre. The article argues that the relationship between mobility and the built structure of the arts centres is central to the challenges their managers face, and appreciating this relationship will be key to the success of the arts centre as the century continues.

**Tensions around the arts centre**

The arts centre in western societies may be regarded as a legacy of the nineteenth-century view of leisure as consumption, which was later accentuated in the mid-twentieth century with the growing responsibilities of the social-democratic state. Borgmann (1992) describes the nineteenth century as a time when department stores, libraries and opera houses were erected as magnificent settings in which
the public could gather and enjoy itself’ (41). Public arts centre buildings continued to be invested with
the political motives of successive eras. The stabilising and professionalising role that the ACGB saw the
arts centre as playing after the Second World War also dominated discussions about the role of public
cultural infrastructure in Australia’s Department of Post-War Reconstruction, which vacillated between
a national theatre as a permanent building in the capital city, or a touring company. Over the following
half-century, a large number of arts centres were built in cities and towns throughout the country, all
of them aiming to provide for the cultural needs of their residents and, later, to attract audiences from
beyond their municipality. In describing the place of the arts centre in the United States in the late
twentieth century, Wolff (2011) identifies four stages in the changing role of the performing arts centre,
as: showcases for ‘excellence’ in traditional performing arts for the benefit of a social elite (1960s); part
of urban revitalisation and gentrification programs (from the mid 1970s); places for established ‘out of
town’ touring companies and family-oriented programing (1990s); and in the final and current phase,
Wolff argues, as places for innovation (in both content and delivery), focused on diverse audiences (1–4).
Wolff’s analysis encapsulates the evolving understanding of the political, cultural and social purposes
of the performing arts centre, over 5 decades, in responding to the changing expectations and demo-
raphics of the communities it serves.

But as the trends of the past two decades, such as migration and universal education, have increased
the diversity of potential audiences, dedicated arts centres are regarded as less accessible to and pop-
ular than temporary, incidental and multi-purpose spaces. In their study of residents in the town of
Wollongong, for example, Gibson et al. (2012) found a complexity of ‘affective links to place’ and that:
‘Theories of creative cities and industries that emphasize cultural milieu or cluster effects only capture
one possible form of affective urbanity’ (299). They argued that local governments, influenced by crea-
tive industries discourses, have been focused on infrastructure provision and spending on flagship arts
centres and institutions. However, decentralized, small-scale cultural infrastructure – the ‘unheralded
and prosaic sites of suburban creativity’ such as community halls, writers’ centres, youth music studios,
art spaces – are highly valued by the public and perform an important function in encouraging vitality
identify that temporary venues – ‘festivals, parades, arts markets, and even farmers’ markets … play
important roles in both sustaining and advancing ethnic-specific artistic practices’ (14), and are also
often less costly than their permanent counterparts (see e.g. Eltham 2012).

In response, Elmquist (2012) argues that ‘cultural leaders must stop the desire to enshrine an organi-
zation[‘]s history in a space but rather allow the organization to remain nimble, vibrant, creative, and
nomadic and even allow organizations to dissolve if they cannot meet their financial needs’ (202). There
are notable examples of such practices. The National Theatre of Scotland (NTS) operates without theatres
or public buildings of its own. The NTS sees its goal as to ‘transform the meaning of national theatre on
a global scale by creating a truly innovative structure, free of bricks and mortar institutionalism, which
will be alert, flexible and radical’ (emphasis added, NTS Business Plan, 2015, 4). As a national touring
company, the NTS has produced work in arts centres, but also in forests and drill halls, on ferries, in shop
windows, and tenement flats, often using existing public infrastructure to provide flexible and collab-
orative theatre experiences. Walmsley (2010) notes that ‘because it is unencumbered by a space of its
own, the organisation is forced into finding creative and appropriate spaces for every new production’
(112). This approach enables the company to ‘forge a special relationship with the places it performs
in and, through the magic of these places, connect with its audiences on their home ground’ (115).

Despite growing recognition of the benefits of flexibility, fluidity and decentralisation in spaces for
the arts, faith in the power of the dedicated arts centre to advance socio-political goals in the twenty-first
century continues to dominate many cultural policies. At the time of writing this article, a nine-year long
territorial struggle persists in the La Trobe Valley, in Australia’s east. In 2007, the local arts community
declared the existing theatre insufficient for its purposes, prompting the La Trobe Valley Council to
commission a feasibility study into the establishment of a new, state-of-the-art performing arts centre.
The study report recommended either a site in Traralgon or the neighbouring town of Morwell, and
in so doing it unleashed a contest between the councillors of those two towns that has persisted ever
The adjective ‘state-of-the-art’ used in relation to the proposed arts centre may well be a problem, because it signals a technically sophisticated and therefore static, expensive and quickly dated focus on a specific kind of arts presentation, rather than on mutability.

This is arguably symptomatic of a form of competition between geographic areas as economic market players in an era of high consumer and business mobility. Jakob (2013) comments about the relationship between public management and the arts centre: ‘The transformation of urban governance from managerialism to entrepreneurialism … has fostered a system of economic competition that pits not only national economies and cities but also, increasingly, neighbourhoods against each other … They compete to attract investment, jobs, well-paid and highly educated residents, and tourists’ (450). This has led towns to invest in arts centres and other ‘lifestyle amenities’ to magnetize their “talent” elite (Jakob 2013, 450). Rosewall (2006) demonstrates this cultivation of spatial competition using a case study in Wisconsin, where established arts centres find themselves challenged in recruiting audiences. Rosewall found that smaller communities may lack a population large enough to support several activities per year, and so market to neighbouring communities, many of which have their own cultural facility and a similarly limited population (Rosewall 2006, 218).

The predicament of the arts centre has sometimes been attributed to competing political ideologies. Gibson et al. (2012), for example, identify a tension between neoliberalist creative industries-thinking with its emphasis on the commercial potential of creative inner city clusters, and the limited capacity of small, suburban and remote centres to deliver commercial innovation (288). The authors see ‘a fundamentally geographical problem’ in which ‘the circle closes around circumscribed notions of “creativity” as commercial innovation … and around the inner city/creativity nexus’ (Gibson et al. 2012, 288). This has led cultural planners in suburban, outer urban and remote places to adopt creative industries approaches to arts centres that ‘glorify metropolitan, inner city variants on creativity, eschewing the local people’s talents and potential’ (Gibson et al. 2012, 289). Following Florida’s (2002) creative cities analysis, cultural policies are widely seen as a mechanism to encourage gentrification in the interests of economic improvement (Johanson, Kershaw, and Glow 2014). Gentrification brings with it increasing numbers of creative entrepreneurs (people and businesses) who ‘are said to prefer … old buildings and cultural environments that pique their innovative streak and aesthetic curiosity’ (Chang 2016, 3). While creative spaces and cultural quarters have been a feature of urban policy, their development has led to critiques of increasing inequality within urban spaces (Evans 2004; Jayne 2004; O’Connor 2004). In fact, as Rosewall (2006) suggests, suburban, outer urban and remote areas may not benefit from the commercialisation of their performing arts venues and are better placed focusing on creativity within their local communities.

The coupling of commerce and culture must be mediated and negotiated by those responsible for street-level interaction with the public; in this case the managers of arts centres who, we argue, wrestle with competing agendas and ‘new demands on the nature, use and meaning of urban public space for “everyday” people and practices’ (Mordue 2007, 448). The arts centre managers are cultural intermediaries, as defined by Bourdieu (1984), in the sense that they are professionals involved in producing and circulating symbolic goods and services. The notion of cultural intermediation has been developed (Caves 2000; Hesmondhalgh 2006; Maguire and Matthews 2010), and has come to be widely understood as a process of professionals and institutions in charge of several functions (selecting, distributing, promoting, prescribing etc.) between the stage of artistic creation and its consumption by the audience, some of them intervening at one or the other end of the process’ Wenceslas (2016, 36). Wenceslas seeks to further refine this definition by focusing on types of intermediating ‘labour’ and provides a typology; a categorisation based on the primary functional role of professionals who work along the spectrum between cultural creation and consumption, from: mediating, appraising, management, distribution, production and the intermediation of artistic work (2016, 37). The managers of arts centres, according to Wenceslas’ typology, sit across two categories: mediation and management. Mediation refers to the public facing role of ‘guiding the audience through its relationship with the artworks’ and the management role involves the management of staff of cultural institutions (2016, 37). Arts centre managers are caught between the permanence of their buildings and the fluidity and
changeable nature of the demands made upon those buildings. The perspective of these managers on their role in the production and circulation of symbolic goods is little understood and this research seeks to fill that gap.

Arden (2014) argues that bureaucratic discourse is dominated by conceptualisations of the public as ‘orderly and knowable’ (113). The experience of arts centre managers is notable in this context; they are part of the bureaucratic processes of government, the public spaces they manage have increasingly been co-opted by the marketplace and yet members of the public are proving themselves to be, as Arden describes, ‘radically unknowable’ – that is, elusive and ephemeral (113). The work of the arts centre manager exists in a tension between the fixity of the space they manage and a public which must be, in Bruno Latour’s (2005) term, ‘ceaselessly renegotiated’ (66) since there is no one public and no ‘undifferentiated “public good” that can be applied equally to all urban dwellers’ (Mordue 2007, 460). If, as suggested by the critiques above, regeneration and cultural quarters deliver economic benefits but also exacerbate existing social inequalities, what role is played by the managers of arts centres as they attempt to facilitate a positive impact for their neighbourhoods?

Four Australian arts centres

The following discussion draws from interviews with the managers of four arts centres: the Northcote Town Hall, the Darebin Arts and Entertainment Centre (hereafter Darebin Arts Centre), the Dandenong Drum Theatre and the Geelong Performing Arts Centre (GPAC). Centre managers describe the principal roles of their organisations as programming and presenting both commercial and community-based productions with the goal of building local audiences and community engagement, whilst also ensuring financial viability. Three of the four centres are the responsibility of local governments, so the venue managers are local government employees; the fourth, GPAC, is the responsibility of state government. Blomkamp (2011) and Johanson, Kershaw, and Glow (2014) argue that local government has a distinctive and increasingly important role as a producer of arts and cultural policies that contribute to the strength and social relevance of the arts sector, providing direct services to meet the cultural needs of constituents. This local government responsibility has increased over the past decade or more because such governments have experienced a shift away from limited, bureaucratic responsibilities and towards both wider powers and stricter requirements to engage with communities, develop strategic plans and report on outcome achievement’ (Blomkamp 2011, 3). Such governance is complex, ‘characterised by uncertain and intangible outcomes, diverse institutional structures, dynamic relationships, ambiguous data, and multiple subjectivities’ (Blomkamp 2011, 1). The managers of local arts centres are embedded in their communities; they see themselves as having an intimate knowledge of the community and are usually highly present at cultural events such as festivals, exhibition openings and event launches.

A case study approach has been taken here to investigate the perceptions and experiences of arts managers as they manage the arts centres under their care, particularly in suburban fringes of a large city experiencing rapid social change. A case study approach is an effective way of looking at individual programs of activity and the perceptions and decisions of the individuals involved (Yin 2009). In this instance, the case study approach elucidates the character of the context – physical, geographical, demographic, economic and managerial – in which the arts centre managers are working. We conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with the managers of the four arts centres to gauge their perceptions of particular aspects of the cases and their contexts and analysed public documents relating to the history and current management and operation of the venues.

Two of these buildings are repurposed nineteenth-century town halls. The Northcote Town Hall was refurbished as a cultural activities centre after the amalgamation of local government councils in the mid-1990s. It is located in a municipality that has another, more modern centre: the Darebin Arts Centre, which was built in 1994 and holds a 300-seat proscenium arch theatre, exhibition space and five multifunction rooms. While the Darebin Arts Centre is part performance space, part convention centre for hire, the Northcote Town Hall is an incubator space geared towards the development of new artistic work, with small performance spaces. At the time of our interview, the manager of both
venues regarded them as working together, but commented that ‘it is difficult to build two new programs in two new venues at the same pace at the same time, so we thought, “Northcote is ready to go off so we will make a big splash there and get that happening”’ (Darebin Manager interview, March 2014). The Drum Theatre, another repurposed nineteenth-century town hall, is located 34 kilometres from Melbourne’s central district in the City of Greater Dandenong, and is a 520-seat theatre venue which opened in 2006. The population of Dandenong is growing quickly: in 2011 it had an estimated population of 139,729, expected to grow to 155,528 by 2021. It is also the most ethnically diverse population in greater Melbourne, with residents from 151 nations, half of whom were born overseas (City of Dandenong 2014).

The Geelong Performing Arts Centre was built in the late 1970s in Victoria’s second-largest city, Geelong, 100 kilometres from the Melbourne. It has a 790-seat proscenium arch theatre, a 320-seat studio-style theatre and assorted smaller venues. Like Dandenong, Geelong is a town experiencing rapid growth, from a population of 140,000 at the opening of the centre it now has over 300,000, and its proximity to Melbourne makes it a growing commuter destination.

When in 2014, the managers of these centres were asked to describe the challenges they experienced in their roles, their collective reflections fell into three broad themes: the challenge of the growth in and complexity of diversity that results from international migration; the challenge of the everyday mobility of residents and audiences; and the challenge of negotiating the interests in demand for dominant or transcultural arts production companies, or ‘global networks’, and local productions. The ‘mobilities paradigm’ is useful for reviewing the impact all of these challenges, because it highlights the fact that managers are ever less able to predict audience behaviour and to align the behaviour of audiences, arts companies and the political motivations that drive the establishment and maintenance of arts centres.

**The challenge of migration and cultural diversity**

All three municipalities – Geelong, Darebin and Dandenong – carry a substantial proportion of Victoria’s recent waves of migrants. This population growth is especially difficult because the cultural needs and interests of new residents are dissimilar to the needs and interests of more established residents and the assumptions of the policy-makers and planners who established the centres. This is evident in regard to the ethnic diversity in Dandenong’s resident population, where many residents are ‘are not necessarily familiar with the Western idea of theatre, of coming to a theatre to see other people perform’:

> There’s a lot of active cultures in Dandenong that continue to celebrate their own cultures in their own ways and that might mean that a large group of the community come together in someone’s backyard and sing and dance and perform in a shed because that’s the way those communities come together. … The community in Dandenong is probably one of the toughest communities in metropolitan Melbourne, because there is no readymade theatre-going public. (Dandenong Manager interview 2014)

It is not just the form of the theatre that is challenged by the changing ethnic composition of the area, but also the content. The manager described commissioning a production with Indigenous themes (*Namatjira*), and its surprise reception by an Indian businessman, who said: ‘That’s really great, that’s the sort of show I want to see. What is often not realised is we’re new to this country and we want to understand the history. We don’t want to see Indian drumming ensembles because that’s where we’ve come from.’ Surprised by this comment, the manager saw it as an interest based partly on the fact that, in depicting the way ‘white society treated its Indigenous citizens, *Namatjira* echoes in the way that current society treats new arrivals’ (Dandenong Manager interview 2014).

In Geelong, the traditional mining and manufacturing industries of the area are being replaced by services industries, which has also contributed to a changing demographic and new challenges:

> If we’re going to redevelop the centre, we can’t just keep talking to the same audience … If you look at what the core businesses have been for Geelong, like Alcoa [mining] and Ford [vehicle production], people will come for comedy and contemporary music and the local musicals. But [industrial change in Geelong] means we need to be looking for other audiences. And if you look at the new businesses that are coming into Geelong, primarily health and services-related, research and innovation, then that’s a different mind-set. (Geelong Manager interview 2014)
In Darebin, also experiencing rapid demographic change, the manager described the arts centre's aim as ‘less about convincing the diehard arts community to come to it and more about building the community in this area: us presenting work that is directly attractive to the diverse groups who live in this area’ (Darebin Manager interview, March 2014). The managers’ reflections on how they grapple with changing demographics in a period of high migration illustrates how ‘the places of the city are constituted by flows and movements as much as by their morphological properties’ (Jensen 2013, 108).

**The challenge of everyday mobility**

‘Everyday mobility’ is used in this context to describe the regular comings and goings of residents in or around the municipalities, as opposed to the long-term and long-distance migration described above. Everyday mobility in relation to the arts centres is influenced by perceptions of the buildings and the municipalities in which they are based, and in turn such mobility mediate and construct the arts centres as places (Sen and Johung 2013, 7). In mobilities literature, ‘global fluids’ are the ‘heterogeneous, uneven and unpredictable mobilities of people, information, objects, money and risks, that move chaotically across regions in strikingly faster and unpredictable shapes’ (Urry 2010, 356). While real or prospective audiences at the arts centres are not necessarily moving ‘strikingly fast’, they do defeat efforts to predict their behaviour, and often as a consequence of a substantial capacity for regular and independent mobility.

The manager of Dandenong's Drum Theatre also compared his own early sense of the apparent possibilities the Drum offered in the context of audience mobility with his subsequent, somewhat disappointing, experience:

> When I first got here I saw the future of this place as being one that would draw more people from outside. I saw the revitalisation and the rejuvenation of Dandenong to be part of this … part of the new future was about letting people know about Dandenong. … I felt it really important that we program to attract people from other places. I looked at doing some exclusives as well but found pretty quickly that people were loathe to travel or had a [negative] perception about going to Dandenong. (Dandenong Manager interview 2014)

In Baumann’s terms, this manager’s experience represents a failure for the model of a ‘gardening state’, in which agents of government are concerned with ‘what is growing and what should be weeded out’ (as discussed by Urry 2010, 348). In this case, the ‘careful husbanding’ of proffered arts activities failed to attract audiences. Furthermore, the manager found the arts centre competing with those of neighbouring municipalities in the manner in which Jakob (2013) and Rosewall (2006) might predict. He reported: ‘local communities began to say, “That's a nice show but it’s not the sort of thing I want our theatre to be showing. I can go to Melbourne if I want to see that show”’ (Dandenong Manager interview 2014).

That buildings and people are relational is evident in the statement by the manager of the Drum Theatre when he identified the difficulties posed by the physical character of the nineteenth-century town hall building, supporting Chang’s (2016) observations about the role of gentrification in shaping the ‘mutually reinforcing relationships between historic buildings and emerging activities in cities’ (1). While the Dandenong and Northcote town halls are both nineteenth-century buildings, the managers’ experiences of these buildings are very different. The Drum Theatre is one of the Greater Dandenong Council’s most important assets, serving Council purposes partly because it has prestige but also because: ‘we’ve got nice meeting rooms so we work proactively with business to utilise that facility … Council really likes the fact it has a facility that can accommodate that’ (Dandenong Manager interview 2014). As a business centre then, the Drum Theatre is successful. It is also successful as a theatre venue in the sense that it allows for the touring of large-scale performances: ‘the Australian Opera, Australian Ballet wouldn't come here unless this facility was here’ (Dandenong Manager interview 2014). As a hall for hire, the Drum is heavily booked from October to December by schools and clubs for performances and awards nights.

However, the front town hall façade was retained for its heritage value, and this appearance constrains its appeal as an arts venue, giving the impression that it is ‘a bank or a government building with big, thick walls and great glass windows that don’t give people the sense that they’re welcome’.
The manager described the irony of these conflicting impressions: while the refurbished building won several architectural awards, it does not appear accessible to its residents, nor to ‘welcome people in’ (Dandenong Manager interview 2014). The performance space also presents problems:

“We've got a theatre that is a Western-style theatre looking to serve its community in a way that's going to be effective and engaging and be a really vital place within its community. … We have a challenge there in terms of how you take a Western theatre that is well-suited to ballet and opera and integrate it into a community that's evolving and emerging and changing.” (Dandenong Manager interview 2014)

With 520 seats, the theatre space is ‘probably not the best configuration for this sort of community’ (Dandenong Manager interview 2014). Given the opportunity to plan a theatre space for Dandenong again, the manager argued that he would ‘advocate for knocking the whole building down’ and designing a facility that ‘has a soft interface’, with a foyer that could be used as a ‘community space, almost like a performance space, a meeting space, a comfortable and welcoming space … so that the boundaries are more blurred’ (Dandenong Manager interview 2014).

Although the Drum’s manager regards this alienating impact of the building as a problem at least partially associated with its intractable façade, in Northcote it is the nineteenth-century town hall that is more effective in capturing a sense of community ownership than the purpose-built Darebin Arts Centre. The local council’s Manager of Creative Culture describes how the Northcote Town Hall has ‘really taken off,’ due to its High Street location and proximity to local music venues and cafes (Darebin Manager interview, March 2014). While the Northcote Town Hall is perceived as highly successful, at the Drum Theatre accessibility is regarded as a problem for potential audiences. How might we explain the difference between the attractions of the two repurposed town halls – both built in the late nineteenth century in a similar style – to their residents?

In part, the different responses reflect the different demographic base of the two municipalities as well as the forms the two spaces take. In contrast to Dandenong, the Northcote Town Hall is situated in the Darebin suburb with perhaps the most ethnically homogeneous, Anglo-Australian base, whose residents’ western cultural capital and resulting familiarity and ease with formidable public buildings is likely to be greater than that of Dandenong. But the difference may also reflect the different forms that the refurbishment has taken: a dedicated theatre at Dandenong; a cluster of small, multi-purpose incubator work spaces in Northcote, surrounded by small commercial music venues that play a prominent role in attracting artists and audiences to the area and lend a porousness to the centre that is attractive to mobility-valuing audiences who enjoy a sense of being able to come and go easily and often.

In contrast, it is the more modern Darebin Arts Centre in the same municipality as the Northcote Town Hall that represents a challenge to the manager. An annual survey of residents finds that it is often misidentified as an indoor swimming pool because of its hard, glass exterior and bright lighting. ‘So there’s a real sense of people not knowing what it is’ (Darebin Manager interview, March 2014). At the time of writing this article, the Darebin Arts Centre is under review. The mayor, Gaetano Greco, called the Centre ‘out of date’ and said it ‘no longer seems to meet the required needs’ of the city’s growing population and changing demographics, particularly its growing artist population (Hoffman 2014). Both the Darebin Arts Centre and the Dandenong Drum are misidentified by their public due to the symbolic associations with their architecture, despite the very different architectural styles they hold.

The fact that the experience of one arts centre manager differs so markedly from that of another lends weight to the ‘unpredictable’ character of potential audiences in an era of easy mobility. But the example also demonstrates how the flow of people – or in this case a non-flow – is constitutive of a place: the Drum Theatre is not, no matter its programming, the stately and broadly attractive cultural centre of the manager’s imagination because the municipality appears to deter the people of the surrounding neighbourhoods. In Jensen’s terms it is a ‘sociopetal’ place, repelling rather than attracting people. At the same time, the resistance of people from outside Dandenong to the attractions of the Drum shape the kind of institution the Drum is – necessarily restricted to the cultural tastes of local audiences. In Jensen’s terms again, ‘how it materialises’ is essential to ‘how it works and feels; and mobility is not a side effect of urban planning but in fact constitutes it (2013, 26).
In Geelong, the manager also observed the mobility behaviour of the GPAC’s audiences, but in this case, the centre was if not ‘sociofugal’ in the sense of attracting people (Jensen 2013), then certainly neutral: ‘Geelong people go to Melbourne for the major musicals, but they rarely travel up for the annual program of Melbourne Theatre Company or the Malthouse [Theatre]. And if a show goes gang-busters in Melbourne, then those who missed out will make the effort to come to Geelong to see it’ (Geelong Manager interview 2014). Despite being of a similar architectural era to the Darebin Arts Centre, with its doubtful future, GPAC’s demographic base and distance from competitor centres make it more sustainable in terms of audience numbers.

The challenge of ‘global networks’

In another example of arts centre management failing as a ‘gardening state’, efforts by managers to program high-quality productions by local companies are resisted by audiences, and it is here that we find resonances of Bryan’s complaint with which this article began.

Telecommunications-driven marketing increases the familiarity and attractions of large-scale, commercial productions over those of smaller and locally produced productions, cancelling out the management team’s efforts to stoke the success of the latter productions. The manager describes the impact of marketing on demand for children’s shows The Wiggles and Peppa Pig, both of which originated in children’s television, as compared to productions by a dedicated Australian children’s theatre company, Patch:

It’s dispiriting when you bring Patch Theatre which is an award-winning company from South Australia who go to New York and children’s festivals around the world and are lauded for the amazing work they do, and we struggle to get people engaged with that … We keep the ticket prices low and people still tell us at $15 that it’s too much to come to the theatre, yet $35 a ticket for The Wiggles is absolutely fine. (Dandenong Manager interview 2014)

The difficulty in sustaining audience development for new products is also related to the cost of programming. At the Drum Theatre, the manager identified that without a strong sense of confidence that the theatre could sustain large audiences, many shows were scheduled for only one night. This presents a drawback because the centre would be strengthened by artists being ‘part of the fabric of what we’re presenting’ in a manner that is ‘more organic’ and long term than programming will allow (Dandenong Manager interview 2014).

Useful here is Urry’s (2010) notion of ‘global networks’. Global networks represent the organising basis of multinational corporations that offer ‘predictable, calculable, routinized’ products across the world. In a sense they provide a foil to the vagaries of individuals and communities. Global networks underpin corporations such as American Express, McDonalds and Coca Cola but, Urry argues, can equally be seen in ‘oppositional organizations’, such as Greenpeace, and, we might add, in commercial arts productions such as The Wiggles. What is interesting about the Dandenong manager’s description of the reception of The Wiggles and Patch theatre is that the status of the former as part of a global network places it not only in a transnational culture, but also in a different economy to the local productions: it holds higher value and enjoys longer runs than the local productions by virtue of its symbolic status. The tension between the aspirations of the manager, the behaviour of the centre’s audiences, and the companies who – in Ricky Bryan’s terms – ‘swing through town’ demonstrates a more complex relationship between people, companies and buildings than Bryan’s outburst suggests. If arts centre managers have failed, as he suggests, to root their program in their local community, it is at least partly due to the changeable composition and behaviour of that community.

Conclusion

This article has taken the relatively static shape of the arts centre, as viewed through the eyes of those in the relatively stable position of arts centre managers, to examine how the apparently chaotic and unpredictable nature of mobility shapes the role and status of those arts centres as cultural institutions in the twenty-first century. That public buildings represent a challenge to policy-makers with each new
trend in cultural taste and appetite and with each budget cut at council will be of little surprise, as scholars have observed these challenges for many years. This article has suggested that viewing arts centre managers as witnesses to, and intermediaries between, the various flows of mobility provides an additional level of complexity to the challenges of managing an arts centre.

All of the respondents interviewed here work as mediators and managers dealing with large-scale and everyday mobility and its consequences. Large-scale mobility, including the migration of residents into their municipalities from other, non-western cultures or as workers from different industries, disrupts the appeal of traditional arts centre programming. Everyday mobility – the consumption behaviour of audiences – is shaped by and shapes the associations the arts centre buildings hold and the value of those buildings in their communities. Also contributing to and influenced by this mobility is the movement of arts companies, which is marked by a ‘two speed economy’, with media-driven and smaller productions valued differently and moving through the arts centre at different rates.

The lesson to be learnt from these forms of mobility is that what works for one centre, one audience base, or one company will not necessarily work for another and indeed may not work in five years time. The very different associations of the refurbished Northcote Town Hall and Dandenong Drum are evidence of this, as are the different associations between GPAC and the Darebin Arts Centres despite their common architectural era. The different reception of local and media-driven children’s productions at the Drum, the unforeseen response of an Indian businessman to an Indigenous production, and the disinterest of some cultural groups to the arts centre as a cultural institution at all provide other examples. The challenge of the arts centre manager is to trace and work with their various streams of mobility, negotiating and mediating the impermanence of their publics with the permanence of the space they manage.

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