

ENTERTAINING OR CREATING?

Why do councils own and operate cultural facilities – theatres, galleries, museums and the like?

A rhetorical question you may say. The answer is obvious and multifaceted – for city pride, for cultural vitality, for tourism and the economy, or just because no one else will. As true and noble as these reasons are, a few factors can make management of cultural venues - within the family of council service departments - a matter of fitting square pegs into round holes. Or perhaps the other way round. Why should this be? This article looks at some influencing factors.

The cost of adoption

We'll start with a big one – cost. Theatres and performing arts centres (PACs) represent meaty lines in the council's operating budget. Income from ticket sales and hirers do not cover costs, and such facilities operate only because they are heavily subsidised.

Because the benefits of investing in a cultural venue are not as obvious or measurable as building a road or a child care centre, the use and renovation of venues for the performing arts, or the outright construction of a PAC, is justifiable only on philosophical and political grounds.

The business of selling

The financial modus operandi behind running a theatre is vastly different from that of running a council.

In most respects, venues which need to attract paying audiences also need to think like profit centred business entities, i.e. sales, promotions, contras, royalties and bums on seats. These aren't activities council services generally dabble in.

The mother council operates like a cost centre, where the fiscal management effort is largely about limiting expenditures to meet expenditure targets. The council budget is hardly influenced by short term fluctuations and uncertainties in income, e.g. from rates, fees and grants. Receipt of these moneys is planned well ahead and is highly predictable.



Angels Voices Band, photographer Damian Vincenzi, courtesy of Multicultural Arts Victoria, Emerge Cultural Hubs project.

In the theatre business you contain your costs of course, but a significant chunk of the operating budget must come from ticket sales, venue hire and other uses of the building.

What business am I in anyway?

Another factor is the industry that PACs and cultural facilities operate in. It's not really local government, is it?

They may be council facilities, but their managers and program creators may be professionally more interested in the arts industries, and less the local government sector as such.

One demonstration of this is in the complement of LGPro special interest groups, of which there are 34, none of which are about performing arts centres, theatres, galleries or museums. On the other hand, councils manage around 40 PACs across Victoria – almost 70% of the total.

Being no different from other local government professionals, those who run cultural facilities are specialised in terms of skills, expertise and indeed, attitude. So it's no surprise, but still a pity, that PAC managers and programmers don't add the local government professional's hat.

“This is the other side of the cultural venue coin – what can these venues and their expertise offer the community beyond entertainment, exhibitions and a venue for hire?”

Workplace cultures apart

Anecdotally, the council staff working in cultural facilities are not known well by the rest of the council workplace. A complaint I have often heard from the arts and culture people is that others think they do fun stuff, have a good time and meet interesting people. Not really like in core council services.

Another perception is that people just don't understand the complexity of it all. Having worked on marketing plans for council run cultural facilities and programs in the past, I have to say I agree. It is a highly complex business environment, made more problematic by operating within council systems and mindsets.

How community is your cultural?

I recently attended a seminar held by the University of Melbourne's Centre for Cultural Partnerships, titled "Building the Case for Culture and the Arts in Local Government". I thought there already was a case for this and wondered what the new perspective was.

Most interesting was to hear about the community development aspects of cultural services. This is the other side of the cultural venue coin – what can these venues and their expertise offer the community beyond entertainment, exhibitions and a venue for hire?

PAC community development

Performing arts centres are strange bedfellows with core council services. But they could be less strange if they took a community development approach.

One way would be to make a point of developing local talent, using all the expertise available within that theatre. Another would be to proactively partner with other council departments' community development activities – youth services, aged and disability services, organisational development, corporate planning, community planning and economic development come to mind.

Not just lines in a service plan, but project managed collaborations that offer skills, capacities and nurturing programs to people in the municipality.

The opportunity this approach has for multicultural engagement is just one outcome that reassessing the role of PACs in this way might bring.

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A SIX PACK TO GO

I took a trip to sunny Bayswater Park to chat with Richard Mitchell, Manager of Knox City Council's Community Arts Centre, and originator of 6PAC - an initiative that delivers a low cost non-funded touring model across smaller Victorian venues, with the aim of developing talent, not just presenting it.

He most enjoys the touring, advisory and mentoring aspects of driving 6PAC, and to date almost 30 6PAC productions have toured the circuit.

Formerly a cartoonist and multi-media creator, Richard is also on the board of VAPAC, the Victorian Association of Performing Arts Centres. He has a very community development view of what PACs are about, including 6PAC.

"I think that programming by council run PACs should be mostly for the community's benefit, not for status in the arts industry or impressing professional colleagues. Programming a centre is more than just presenting a season of shows.

Richard admits that "bums on seats" is important of course.

"But we should be more enablers of arts participation and engagement than just presenters of the arts. PACs have the opportunity to engage with the community and develop local talent, and bring them into the city's cultural makeup."

Within the council organisation Richard points out that, "many of the community development people use the arts for their purposes, but independently of the arts and culture unit."

What is Richard's solution? "Well, it's difficult to find a solution that will suit everyone, but using our professional and technical expertise to develop talent in the community is the approach I take."