

A perennial issue in this regional arts caper is that of developing cultural infrastructure – the bricks and mortar variety.

Jen Hunt, RADO for the South East region, discusses the options for solving the problem: to build, to refurbish ... or to think right outside the square.



by JENNIFER HUNT

IN RURAL NSW, LOCAL GOVERNMENT REGARDS CULTURAL infrastructure as generally the library, a regional gallery, perhaps a performing arts centre/theatre, possibly a regional museum ... and most councils retain some responsibility for local halls.

It can be useful to make further distinctions between regional, district and local facilities, usually based on travel times. Regional facilities tend to be initiated by the community, primarily funded and managed by local government, professionally staffed and, if lucky, may be housed in a purpose-built facility.

While the term 'regional' indicates the facility is servicing more than the immediate local government, in practice the financial responsibility tends to rest with the host Council (regional library services and regional arts boards are notable exceptions).

A rough tally for the regional areas of the state indicates approximately 28 regional galleries, 20 performing arts centres, 8 regional museums, and halls too numerous to mention (in the South East we have 58 managed by five councils). Within the district and local categories there is a host of permutations as to what serves as a cultural venue and how it is provided.

Buildings are important because communities and their artists need space – to create, to gather, to perform, to watch, to engage, to debate, to take risks, to make mess and to celebrate. Ideally, space that is appropriate to the activity, affordable, accessible and, hopefully, pleasant to be in.

In many respects, regional areas are blessed with an incredible array of such spaces and environments (even if a café latte may be hard to come by, sorry Adele*). Show me any type of former

public building no longer in use and I'll bet there's a cultural group if not already ensconced then actively scheming to get the keys, be it a hospital, warehouse, butter factory, railway station, court house, industrial complex, power station or retail space.

The key challenge is the level of amenity of these existing spaces and the serious difficulty in accessing resources for upgrading or refurbishment.

It is certainly romantic and it can be liberating to come up with a different venue for every event, taking a more site specific approach to programming – but it's a lot more work. You soon get tired of building raked seating banks on a per production basis or hefting the four rolls of tarket out of the ute one more time.

When presenting cultural programs and services, the level of venue amenity and capacity for presentation matter. Regional audiences are increasingly discerning For mine, venue develop-

To build or



Typical community halls in the South East region.
Above: Candelo Hall.
Right: Ando Public Hall.

ment is a driver for cultural industry development which is always unashamedly part of my agenda. Even artists in the bush want to eat.

A hall is a hall is a hall and thank God that most towns have at least one as they are crucial. Yet, a (regional or district) cultural facility with an ongoing program means paid staff in some capacity, developing audiences and increasing viability for artists, regional or not.

April – May

30 April
Annual Family Fun Day of Music
Music of Bellingen. **GLENIFFER** Hall. BYO
everything Tel 02 6655 1053

30 April
A Night of One Act Plays Matinee
by **INVERELL & NW** Theatre Co.
Tel 02 6721 2727

4 – 5 May
Hamlet and Associated actors
Workshop. **BATHURST** Memorial
Entertainment Centre Tel 02 6333 6161

5 – 13 May
One Act Plays **GLENN INNES**
Arts Council presents plays in the Chapel
Theatre. Tel 02 6733 3222

The main difficulty usually comes down to that four letter word, cost. Purpose-built, professionally managed cultural facilities are expensive to put in place and not cheap to run. Local governments (particularly in regional areas) are rate pegged and cost shifted out of a sufficient level of resources to undertake effective investment in such areas especially when there is very limited access to infrastructure funding from State or Federal sources – a finding strongly backed by RAA’s recent consultation (see p. 2).

There is also a real lack of freely available data on just what is required for the design, construction/makeover and operation of cultural facilities based on experience. Please, spare me one more dodgy feasibility study and let’s commission some research that crunches the numbers on regional venue management for the last five years. What is the level of subsidy per seat, what is a Council’s annual contribution as a percentage of income, what can a rate base of 30,000 sustain?

How do we move forward? While it’s not always easy to do, generating dialogue and informed discussion about an appropriate balance and mix of cultural facilities across a region has to be beneficial. Cultural planning at a Council and regional level is a valuable part of this process.

‘To build or not to build?’ Is that the first question? No.

If we had the time to rigorously look at the existing infrastructure, we’d all be surprised at just how much our small, cash strapped, over-volunteered communities already have. Any variety of halls, showgrounds, significant education facilities generally in use only thirty hours a week, outdoor spaces, national parks, town reserves, racetracks, sporting facilities, foreshores and botanical gardens just for starters.

Once we identify all of the spaces that exist, I am convinced that there must be opportunities to make better use of and improve the amenity of what we already have without taking on a crippling financial burden.

What I would give for compact, portable, lightweight, compliant staging, seating banks, heating, lighting, hanging systems that all packed onto a trailer pulled by the mobile library. I’m often reminded of the innovative seating & staging concepts that moved on railway gauge designed for Finley during the Creative Village program.

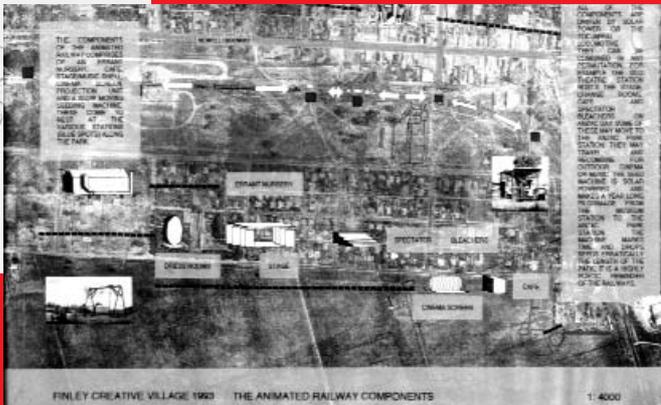
I’m not agin big, new, beautiful cultural venues, far from it, even though institutions bring their own challenges. Our region doesn’t have a single one and while it will eventually happen, given our influx of sea and tree changers, it won’t be soon. Perhaps for the interim, as I’ve suggested to my Board, instead of one Council trying to find \$12 million for a performing arts centre, our five Councils could contribute to a state of the art big top/tent. My Board is not convinced but maybe another region can run with it ... Roll up! Roll up! ■

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** A reference to an article by Adele Horin published in The Sydney Morning Herald on 18 February 2006 in which the author asserts that there is nowhere outside the big cities for ‘the creative class’ to go because there are “too few latte towns” in NSW (see p. 19)*

not to build?

Below and left: Concept design drawings and illustrations by landscape architect, Anton James, Finley Creative Village Design Team, 1993. Creative Village was a rural town and environment design program developed by the Arts Council of NSW to give rural communities access to design expertise for public art and town improvement.



Community expectations and closed thinking can also be a real impediment. Parochialism is alive and well in some areas, not only on a geographic basis but also in terms of interest groups intent on securing dedicated spaces for their own pursuits and then there are always some community groups who expect access to maintained venues but object to any hire charges.

May

6 May

 Gunnedah Circus School Performing at the Civic Centre, **GUNNEDAH**. Tel 02 6740 2266

6 – 7 May

 Nimbin Mardi Grass Cultural Festival and random events across **NIMBIN**. Tel 02 6689 1842

6 – 7 May

 2006 Hastings Choral Festival A weekend of song in **PORT MACQUARIE**. Tel 0407 007 993

6 – 28 May

 Feminine and Funky Works by Deb Stone and Anj Du Terreau. Regional Ceramic Gallery. **GULGONG** Tel 02 6374 1202