

New theatres for Perth...

An independent commentary that aims to inform the process of updating Perth's performing arts venue inventory.

by the Theatre Planning Committee of the Institute of Independent Arts Consultants

INTRODUCTION

The Institute of Independent Arts Consultants was established in 1999 to promote best practice in consultancy for the arts, and to facilitate an information centre for members and their clients.

The Theatre Planning Committee of the IIAC was formed to utilise the experience of its members to develop an informed and independent contribution into the planning, design and operation of performing arts facilities in the interest of arts development in our state. Members of the Theatre Planning Committee are John Toussaint (Chair) Kenneth Rayner and Graham Walne. The Committee can second other members of the IIAC and/or invite others with specialised knowledge to join it as required.

The Institute is able to bring a perspective that is independent of any individual artist or arts organisation; a perspective that is very broad and reflects the interests of a wide sector of the general community – or at least that part of the community who will potentially derive enrichment as audience members. The members of the committee understand the practical needs of performing arts presentation in great detail, and have the technical knowledge and appreciation of all of the operational issues to be able to interpret these needs and desires independently, and deliver a rational set of desirable characteristics to the planning process.

BACKGROUND

The Venues Masterplan

Today's diversity in both population and product can only be supported by diversity in venues. This diversity can only be achieved through a proper focus of resources provided as the result of an informed strategy. This process, and the design of the venues which results, needs to involve both artists and architects.

Time should be allowed for initial concepts to be explored and assessed and in this the independent and considered overview of independent consultants can help moderate the process. A balance is needed because venues outlive companies and *short or medium term tastes and fashions should not be satisfied at the expense of longer-term visions and stability.*

Each size and type of venue suits a particular size and type of work best and thus a region needs to identify its needs and relate them to what work should be presented where. This concept, called the 'Venues Masterplan' was first proposed in "Theatres for Perth – An Opportunity for the Arts" written for the (then) Ministry of Culture and the Arts in 1998. A development of this concept then formed the core of the "Capital Works: Capital Venues" study which formed part of the previous government's "Eight Year Strategy". This relates to the policy of the current government, in that the 'The Performing Arts Venue Masterplan' is contained within the 'Ten Year Capital Works Investment Plan' of the Department of Culture and the Arts 2003.

Therefore a single new theatre should not endeavour to accommodate a wide variety of work simply because existing venues have become inadequate: the Masterplan Strategy should ultimately provide for all types of work and physical formats in which to present them.

Immediate Needs

The first thing that becomes apparent both from the Masterplan and from an analysis of Perth's current needs is that possibly three different types of venue are needed. Another clear

feature is that none of these needs to be particularly large. There is a clear need for a theatre for the presentation of drama and contemporary dance with somewhere between 500 and 700 seats. There is also a need for a space for music performance/rehearsal to about 300 seats, and a third venue providing alternative configurations for smaller scale drama, dance, physical theatre, etc.

There is an opportunity to meet most of the pressing needs for housing performing arts in Perth in one Centre, by constructing a building that houses a number of venues under the one roof.

Breaking the Cycle

There have been several attempts over recent decades to provide Perth with a new theatre; none has been successful. Briefly these are:

1978 – this project was based on the specifications of the (then) National Theatre Company and was to be located at the Perth Cultural Centre. The venue was to incorporate a 500-600 seat theatre, a 200 seat 'experimental' theatre and 3 rehearsal rooms.

1988 – this project was instigated as a home for the WA Theatre Company in a Performance Centre at the QV1 Building and it was to contain a 650-750 seat theatre, a 200-300 seat studio and 1 rehearsal room.

1998 – The Perth Concert Hall Masterplan produced for the Perth Theatre Trust was intended to include a venue to replace the Playhouse. The Masterplan contained a Drama and Dance Lyric Theatre at 600 seats and a Recital Hall for WASO seating 300-400 (and also used for rehearsals).

1999 – The (then) State Government stated that one of its objectives for the proposed Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre was for a performance space that would be both viable

and flexible. A clear brief was prepared by an Arts Reference Group (which significantly did not include a theatre consultant) and several design teams responded to the brief in their tenders for the project as a whole. The successful tender does not include a flexible performance space as envisaged in the original brief.

2001 – Working with Woodside Australian Energy the Black Swan Theatre Company facilitated several focus groups aimed at developing a “world class theatre for Perth”. Whilst much of the debate focussed on a “new theatre built in Perth for Black Swan” some of the discussions also focussed on a lyric theatre to be built in 2029.

Given this history of attempts to acquire new performing arts facilities, and the clear and urgent needs for new venues, the Institute considers that the initiative of the current State Government should be supported with mature and helpful input.

CRITICAL TECHNICAL ELEMENTS OF THE DESIGN

To Look Forward First Look Back

“The single most important aspect of theatre design is the relationship between the performer and the audience, get that right and it almost doesn't matter what else is wrong: get that wrong, and it almost doesn't matter what else is right.”¹

This performer-audience relationship depends upon three integrated factors, the seating capacity, the auditorium/stage format, and, an understanding of the intrinsic character of the work to be mounted.

¹ Paper given by Graham Walne for the 2002 “Celestial Cities” Conference managed by the IAC from which this quotation is taken, the text that follows is an edited version of that paper.

For example, before the Twentieth Century the forestage of the *playhouse* slowly became the orchestra pit of the *opera* house and performers retreated behind the picture frame. Wagner's Opera House at Bayreuth took the rich out of the boxes and placed them in a single democratic block, anticipating cinema design and creating the blank sidewalls, which became a feature of theatres for almost a hundred years.

To house the increasing range of work in the Twentieth Century a greater range of venues was needed and alongside the Opera House and the Playhouse the Greek amphitheatre, the Elizabethan 'Wooden O' and the Courtyard were revived. A new venue - the multipurpose studio - was created and nurtured much new and experimental work.

Most of what is considered the best drama has been produced in small intimate spaces where the audience can participate in the emotions on stage and share this experience with their immediate neighbours.

Conversely music theatre presents spectacular pictures, which require the audience to be located at a suitable distance to better appreciate the composition.

Contemporary architecture can create buildings which are as attractive as what they are designed to contain. But whilst Icons Can Optimise Numbers, Icons Can Overtake Needs. Therefore theatres must be designed from the inside out, not the reverse. In earlier centuries most 'public' buildings were constructed on the classical theory of geometry and even today its application can highlight assets and liabilities in designs. Still today good proportions are a key element in good acoustics.

The design of the venues for Perth therefore needs a clear statement of what they are for, informed by an experienced perspective of what has worked in the past.

Location

There is a range of options with regard to the built environment context that will require consideration. Including:

- the Centre's relationship with existing cultural facilities;
- its relationships with other compatible activities;

- its relationship with parking and public transport;
- it's relationship to pedestrian traffic patterns;
- the profile of the Centre in the context of tourism.

Whilst the Centre will need to be integrated efficiently into the existing environment, nevertheless all of the above also lead to the opportunity or desirability for the centre to be an architectural icon

The Centre's content

There is a clear need for a theatre for the presentation of drama and contemporary dance with somewhere between 500 and 700 seats. There is also a need for a venue for music performance to about 300 seats, and a third performance space providing alternative configurations for smaller scale drama, dance, physical theatre, etc.

The fundamentals of intelligent planning could be applied to arrange these accommodation needs into an efficient and rational use of space. The three venues would share a service backbone including the backstage amenities, and much of the public areas would be merged.

The capital and operating cost efficiencies achieved by taking this route are obvious, but there are other attractions.

A significant requirement for such a Centre would be the acoustic separation of each venue – from each other, and from the outside world. Each venue would be built to NR15 rated acoustic separation, and include broadcast OB van connectivity.

Backstage accommodation required in the complex would include: dressing rooms rehearsal studios, scenery runways, spaces for technical operations and storage, a green room, offices for visiting and/or resident companies and a stage door/security point.

Front of house accommodation requirements would include ticket sales counter, and offices for marketing/promotion,

catering and centre management. Public areas would include foyers, lobbies, toilets and retail spaces.

MAIN THEATRE

Configuration

Cinemas have increased audiences' expectation of comfort but in theatres the dimensions of the seat and aisles can have a dramatic effect on the footprint of the auditorium and consequently not only on capital and operating cost but also on the intimacy essential to the work. (There is also a view that the degree of comfort and space should relate to the character of the work and the general age of the target audience).

In recent years there has been a return to what has been described as the "West End" model whereby excellent sightlines for all (Wagner's Bayreuth model) have been sacrificed by bringing the audience back around the side walls in order to reduce the footprint and make a living link between the main body of the audience and the stage. Actors are generally said to favour this format with consequent benefits not only to them but also to their audience.

Key proportions

The width of the proscenium opening is a module, which informs the remaining key dimensions in the theatre. These proportions have become the accepted standard in theatre building for generations. For example, the height of the opening for dance should be two-thirds the proscenium width, for drama half the width. These heights inform the maximum angle of the vertical sightline from the rear row of seats. The height from the stage floor to the underside of the flying grid over the stage should be at least two and a half times the maximum opening height. The width between the side stage walls should be twice the width of the proscenium opening. The workable depth of the stage, over which the flying grid can be used, should be at least the same as the maximum proscenium opening.

On no account should these proportions be compromised because of their effect on the external envelope of the building.

Equipment

Theatre is a very labour intensive industry and likely to remain so, consequently it makes economic sense to introduce a degree of mechanical and/or electronic assistance. However, in terms of the stage itself a degree of caution is required, informed by the experiences of other well-meaning designs.

For example, power-assisted flying is becoming standard over the stage, but whilst an orchestra pit lift (also forming additional stalls seating or an apron stage) has also become standard, a highly mechanized stage floor, with lifts, sliding stages and revolves rarely suits all productions equally and can be shunned by designers as being too restrictive. A removable modular floor, which allows machinery to be inserted as required, is more economic and flexible

It is essential that the design team of the Centre has knowledge of other venues both old and new and that this knowledge is informed by an experienced consensus.

INTIMATE SPACE

Consultations with potential users for this space (which might well provide better value than a significant upgrade of the Rechabites' Hall) firstly need to agree definitions for two of the words regularly used to describe these spaces – 'flexible' and 'adaptable'. In this a balance needs to be maintained between being able to locate anything anywhere and alternatively locating seating and staging elements to serve a number of predetermined formats. Both are quite feasible but the former is the more expensive. In considering the design of this space it is essential that there are no repercussions in the cost of hiring it to the many small companies, which are essential to the creation of new work.

Small spaces through their design and operation have produced exciting and creative work

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

As with the other spaces in the Centre the design of this one must be informed by a sense of purpose and priorities. These spaces frequently lack definition and terms such as 'chamber' 'recital' and 'rehearsal' are used, often as interchangeable descriptions. If this space is to be used for whole orchestra rehearsals, and also for choirs, then the platform size will be

substantial. The relationship of this to the economic seating capacity is critical.

The acoustics will obviously be critical but the statement of purpose needs to address the relationship between acoustic music and amplified music; for these mechanical and electronic adjustments to the acoustic might be required and these can have a significant impact on the overall cost.

FINANCIAL / COMMERCIAL

Evidence abounds that attempts to minimise taxpayer costs by tying together public facilities of this nature with commercial enterprises have had unsatisfactory outcomes, all of the successful centres that have established a key role in their city's cultural landscape are totally publicly owned. However there may be secondary opportunities within a well-planned centre to generate additional revenue through leases of retail outlets.

Ongoing costs

Commitment to establishing publicly owned facilities of this kind has to extend to the costs of ongoing maintenance and upgrading. Queensland and South Australia have examples of major performing arts facilities where commitment to an effective level of ongoing upkeep is clearly evident (and fully justified) by the results: those facilities continue to be at the leading edge in their categories after more than twenty five year of operation (in Adelaide's case) and continue to play a leading role in the social and cultural life of their respective communities.

CONCLUSION

This paper is not proposing a particular location, but such a centre would be a wonderful asset for any precinct. It would provide an impetus upon which, with intelligent planning, there could be the creation of a stimulating cultural and social focal point within the city. The complex should include its own cafes and bar facilities and may include book and CD retail outlets and other appropriate retail operations.

The location and design should maximise public access and circulation on an all-day-every-day basis, and provide a stimulating environment that encourages habitual use as a

rendezvous by the growing number of city residents as well as visitors from near and far.

A multi venue centre provides opportunities for every participating arts worker in the centre's activities – including visiting personnel - to meet and communicate at an informal level, creating a range of stimulating “cultural crossroads” and adding yet another layer to the enrichment provided by the Centre.

There is much evidence to show that new, well-planned facilities act as catalysts for the stimulation of audience growth, which in turn stimulates and improves the product on the stage.

Effective new performance facilities help define a community.

Cultivating a perception of broad public ownership is an intrinsic element in developing such projects.

The attraction and success of this sort of proposal is likely to generate wide public approval and support.

THE PATH AHEAD

The initial stages of conceiving a design are the most critical. Stakeholders can seem to have conflicting needs, conflicting agendas, and unrealistic expectations. Furthermore, stakeholders (not unreasonably given the rarity of exposure to venue design) can have little understanding of the processes involved.

The concept design generated by the architectural team relies totally on a design brief and this can only be produced in the context of the venue(s) purpose, location, format and management.

The eventual building will only be as good as its design brief. If this process is to fairly set out what the users want, and do this in a concise and analytical manner, then an independent and experienced conduit needs to be in place. The IIAC is well placed to assist in this respect.