Introduction

In this supplement *ALR* presents four studies of cultural developments at the local level. 'Local' is a difficult term to pin down in the era of global communications and cultural industries. The more we hear about how many billions of people around the world shared the World Cup soccer or royal wedding, the more insignificant appear those cultural practices that are bounded by local spaces and attachments. Yet, for most of us, many of our cultural pleasures are primarily focused around the street, local shopping centre or backyard.

Several meanings for 'local' dominate in the following articles. The most common refers to local government, that level of public administration supposedly closest to the people. For too long, local governments have ignored their responsibility for cultural provision. While there has been a strong commitment to the provision of local libraries since the 1950s, in many areas this was the sum of council culture.

In the 1980s this began to change as many councils across Australia participated in the community arts officer program of the Australia Council which offered councils seeding funds to employ an arts worker. More recently, many councils have expanded their cultural services with the provision of arts centres, support for heritage projects, festivals, galleries, etc. The Australia Council's survey of local government cultural funding, published in March 1991, shows that in 1987-88 councils throughout Australia spent over $440 million on culture, an increase of more than a quarter in real terms since 1981-82.

While these figures offer hard evidence of growth in council supported culture, they also signal the emergence of a whole new set of political dilemmas. The most urgent of these is the problem of expansion without policy. Few councils in Australia have comprehensive 'cultural policies' that explain the principles of local government support and provide a framework for public accountability. Instead, the disturbing evidence is of *ad hoc* growth driven by a variety of forces. First, there is the availability of state and federal money for cultural projects, which means that the prospect of extra revenue drives cultural development, rather than any long-term program based on close understanding of local cultural needs.

Another important force is the changing nature of local government's economic base, and in particular the reduction in funding from other levels of government. While it is ironic that one of the few areas of real expansion in this situation has been culture and recreation, these services are facing growing pressure to be privatised. Most performing arts centres, for example, are already designed to be self-funding after establishment. However, in other cases the threat of declining funds raises serious problems. The introduction of a user-pays system in public libraries, for example, threatens the very basis of democratic societies: free and equal access to information.

The downturn in the economy is also fuelling competition between councils who are all after new industries and tourists, often with serious consequences for local culture. In the frantic rush to attract investment many councils have completely ignored the cultural impact of large-scale industrial, retailing or tourist developments. This highlights the need for councils to see cultural policy as more than just a rationale for the provision of various services. When cultural resources are integrated into economic and urban planning, the benefits in improving quality of life and generating both profits and pleasure are substantial.

The case studies that follow therefore address the issue of public intervention in local cultures. All offer insights into the problems of not only defining but also planning 'local culture'. They also explore some of the interesting developments in the formation of democratic cultural policy that have emerged both here and overseas in recent years.

Colin Mercer's article outlines the approach he took when devising a cultural policy for the Brisbane City Council. With the emphasis on the idea of culture as a resource, he sets down the principles for good cultural planning. It remains to be seen whether the new Labor-controlled Council will take up the challenge. Marla Guppy outlines her experiences working to develop a cultural plan with a community in a new urban development in western Sydney. Marla's article explores not only the techniques but also the politics of local participation in cultural planning.

Julie Revallion's history of Parramatta Riverside Theatres is a saga of one council's attempt to provide residents with a local performing arts centre. The financial and management problems this centre has faced since its beginning are a telling reminder of the problems of edifice-led cultural development. Finally, Kathie Gibson and myself discuss some of the issues that have emerged from a study of local cultural economies. We look at the feasibility of a cultural industries strategy for economic development and find it seriously flawed when applied at the local level. We also explore the cultural impact of large-scale retailing developments on the Parramatta town centre and find a process of cultural planning by default.

Our impulse to produce this supplement was to explore the potentials and pitfalls of local cultural policies and planning. We hope that it can contribute to the growing debates around the role of local government, democratic cultural policy formation and urban development.

Gay Hawkins.