

The Big Leagues

Local cultures often bear little relation to the world of the Australia Council. Gay Hawkins and Kathie Gibson look at the real face of culture in Parramatta, NSW.



On Australia, cultural industries are rarely considered in strategies for local economic expansion. Instead, the major emphasis has been on manufacturing and sunrise industries which are seen as properly productive. This approach has marginalised the service sector in which leisure and cultural industries are increasingly important.

The term 'cultural industries' refers to that sector of the economy organised around the production and consumption of cultural goods and services. This includes organisations like cinemas, theatres, galleries, museums, bookshops, radio and TV stations, libraries, theme parks, festivals, live music venues, etc. These cultural organisations take varied economic forms ranging from the multi-national, to the small business, to the non-profit. The significance of the term 'cultural industry' is that it reflects the diversity of what people experience as culture. It also offers a challenge to the very value-laden cultural distinctions such as high and low, art and entertainment or subsidised quality and commercial rubbish. Most importantly, a cultural industries approach recognises the predominance of the market in meeting most people's cultural needs.

In sharp contrast to the traditional Left pessimism on mass culture exemplified by the Frankfurt School, cultural industries began getting a very good press in the 1980s. The 'discovery' of cultural industries was most prevalent in Britain, where numerous local government authorities began hailing them as the source of both economic revival and urban renewal. Glasgow is probably the most often cited example of cultural led economic recovery, rising from the ruins of a collapsed shipbuilding industry and born again as a cultural tourism mecca bristling with art galleries, garden festivals and riverside retailing.

There are two related themes in the British cultural industries literature. The first argues for an integration of cultural policy with economic and social policies on the grounds that cultural considerations are central to good social planning and economic development. For example, the growth of enormous shopping malls on the outskirts of towns has often meant the end of a lively, viable and accessible town centre. These retailing developments have cultural and economic impacts yet, in the rush to attract new investment, these cultural impacts are often ignored. Arguments for a 'cultural urbanism' or cultural planning point to the crucial role of numerous cultural activities from arts centres to record shops, to street life in

producing popular, safe and inclusive public spaces.

The second theme focuses on the economic importance of arts and cultural industries. In many centres industries involved in cultural production, distribution and/or consumption are now major employers. It is no longer possible to relegate culture to the margins of the economy. For example, in London the largest manufacturing sector is printing and publishing while 30,000 people are employed in the music industry. Studies of patterns of leisure consumption also reveal an increasing preference for cultural commodities be they in the form of magazines, video hire or visits to heritage houses. These studies highlight the dominance of commercial forms in most people's everyday cultural practices. They also point to the need for new public strategies for culture which focus on intervention in the market rather than subsidy to pre-20th century cultural forms which have limited reach and appeal.

For the last 18 months we have been working on a research project investigating the role of cultural industries in local economic development. One focus has been the Parramatta local government area—an area which formerly comprised the outer western suburbs of Sydney but which, in the last two decades, has become a populous city in its own right.

The research project has had two complementary aims. First, to write cultural industries onto the agenda of local economic strategies in order to highlight their potential for producing both profits and pleasure. And second, to shift the attention of cultural policy-makers away from the aesthetic or welfare value of culture and onto a consideration of its economic organisation and benefits. This article focuses on some of the major political and economic issues that have emerged from this research to draw conclusions about the field of cultural planning more broadly.

Both cultural planning and cultural industries shaped our approach to researching Parramatta. In seeking to apply these concepts to a study of one local government area, we wanted to answer a range of questions:

1. How significant were cultural production and consumption to the local economy?
2. Was a strategy for public investment and co-ordination of cultural industries viable?
3. What were the cultural impacts of various planning decisions on the spatial organisation of the city centre?
4. What should be the role of local government in progressive cultural provision and regulation?

Production and distribution of cultural commodities and services in Parramatta take place under a variety of different relations of production. At the most industrially advanced end of the spectrum are the three cinema complexes owned by the major exhibition chains: Greater Union, Village and Hoyts. Programming for these cinemas is handled centrally at national head offices and the majority of films screened are produced in Hollywood. Ticket sales are computerised and information concerning audience size for any one film at any one time is electronically transferred to head office daily.

The primary audience for the cinemas consists of young people in the 15 to 25 year age group. Families and elderly people comprise a very small fraction of the local market. Competition for the youth market is fierce and this

is reflected in the common programming decisions made at the cinemas.

Cinemas in Parramatta are highly capitalised and automated. The labour input is small and low-cost and turnover is high. The links to the local economy are miniscule in terms of employment and, as a generator of local economic spin-offs, are probably limited to the delivery of a youth market to adjacent restaurants and shopping centres.

Live entertainment is produced in a variety of theatres, pubs, clubs and nightspots. The smaller nightclubs offer live bands and a bar, and are generally owner-operated with low levels of capitalisation. Apart from site rental or ownership, furnishings of the club and sound equipment, major costs are the wages of the small casual staff.

Capital outlay on food and beverages is recouped at profit from the predominantly 18 to 25 year old clientele. Indeed, it is the sale of these commodities from which the bulk of the profit is made. The actual bands and the music they create on site provide a drawcard for the more profitable consumption of food and liquor. Bands are paid according to their reputation and, in many cases, the band itself will barely cover costs the musicians being reduced to the status of almost voluntary workers. As is the case with many cultural industries it is the owners of the distribution outlets rather than the cultural producers who make the substantial profits.

Much larger venues for entertainment are provided by the Leagues and RSL clubs and the Riverside Theatre. The Parramatta Leagues Club hosts a variety of weekly discos, bands, bingo sessions and one film per week. It caters to two main markets: 18 to 25 year olds and the 45 plus age group who come for the bistro, bingo and pokies. This is a profitable business which earns money for the local football team and has recently expanded. By contrast, the Riverside Theatre, a large-scale bicentennial-funded cultural centre across the road from the Leagues Club, is still struggling to make money.

The only significant broadcasting production in Parramatta is the state-wide radio station 2KY which is

owned by the NSW Labor Council. Yet, while broadcasting production in Parramatta is minimal, consumption is not. The most significant reorganisation in cultural industries over the last ten years has been the phenomenal rise of cheap home-based technologies from video to CDs. The growth of the home entertainment centre is reflected in declining attendances at cinemas and football. Most people now spend more on domestic cultural consumption than on going out for a 'bit of culture'.

The final significant cultural sector in Parramatta is that of museums and heritage sites. These are in relative abundance around the fringes of the city centre. They are run by an eclectic array of non-profit, publicly-funded organisations such as the National Trust, the Historic Houses Trust, and the Parramatta and District Historical Society. The management of these sites manifest many of the characteristics of the community services sector. They are run primarily by voluntary labour, most of the volunteers being middle-aged women who live outside the area and identify themselves as 'heritage hounds'. The main audience for this history is primary school age children who are bussed in from all over Sydney, and middle-aged tourists and visitors to the region. Admission charges are low and do not cover the costs of upkeep let alone acquisition of artefacts.

While Parramatta can clearly lay claim to having significant historical resources, this reality has been drowned by the suburban swamping of what was once a discrete centre and more recently by the emergence of a modernist townscape. Local history and its packaging is generally controlled by outside organisations such as the National Trust and the result is a fragmented historical enclave totally divorced from the local community. The main audiences for this history come from outside the region and there is a sense in which these historical resources are run almost as a secret society. Only those 'heritage hounds' in the know seem familiar with the irregular and idiosyncratic opening hours.

What this brief summary of the data reveals is a series of difficult problems about the viability of an industrial

strategy for cultural industries in Parramatta. In Britain, aggressively proactive approaches to local economic development emerged in several Labour-controlled regions in direct response to Thatcher's economic assault on urban infrastructure. The strategies focused on regenerating local economies and making them accountable to local needs. Cultural industries fitted well into this model because they represented both a potential growth area as well as addressing often ignored constituencies.

Translating this approach to Australia is almost impossible because of the very different structure of local government here. Not only does local government have a much smaller revenue base but it is also trapped in a complex system of grant and policy dependence with state and federal governments. While there is a concern to expand regional economies, local government is in a weak position to do this because it lacks the resources to pursue pro-active investment and it cannot be really effective in the role of planning and management of industry development without parallel initiatives at the state and federal level.

These factors make the idea of a 'local' economy difficult to mobilise. Structures of space, macroeconomic issues and public policy all work against any clear-cut identification of where the local ends and the regional, state and national begin.

Beyond the wider problems of local economic development is a series of more specific issues which emerge from the nature of cultural production, distribution and consumption in Parramatta. The first relates to the very low level of cultural production in the area. Parramatta is definitely not London. It is not a site for any major cultural output, nor does it appear to foster much independent or fringe cultural production. This is not to deny the vast diversity of cultural

practices which shape everyday life but, rather, to acknowledge the limited amount of organised or industrialised cultural production. According to Garnham, it is the small record labels, fringe theatre groups, student fashion designers, garage bands and so on which provide the research and development for larger cultural corporations. This is the crucial source of innovation and diversity in cultural industries and a primary target for imaginative public investment.

In Parramatta there could be two responses to the reality of little cultural production: to focus on developing the distribution and consumption aspects of cultural industries; or to investigate mechanisms for stimulating

Distribution and consumption dominate the structure of cultural industries in Parramatta. Like virtually every other area in Australia the heartland of cultural consumption is broadcasting and it takes place in the home. There is little a local authority can do to intervene in what flows into TVs and radios every day. The big questions about Australian content levels, foreign ownership, networking, pay TV and so on are the responsibility of a diverse array of federal departments and regulatory bodies. However, at the same time as the technology for a global culture emerges so, too, does the possibility for a genuinely local broadcasting sector. Although community TV and radio are underdeveloped and generally ignored by

local government, they offer interesting models for alternative, locally-controlled broadcasting.

When people do go out in Parramatta it is to a fairly restricted range of cultural activities which appeal to very distinct markets. Public intervention in distribution could be geared to addressing new audiences, at reaching those



more local cultural production. These approaches are not mutually incompatible. The technologies for small-scale, local production of anything from music to magazines are cheap and easily available. Their major advantage lies in their capacity to express diverse communities of interest, whether it is young fans of heavy metal music or the local old-time dancing club. However, without an established cultural production sector, the major benefits of investment to promote more local output would be social rather than economic. It is obviously more cost-effective to develop the economic potential of existing industry sectors rather than create them from scratch.

currently unable to participate or uninterested in the existing cultural repertoire on offer. Although there is little available data on audiences, it is possible to identify some groups whose participation levels seem particularly low. Families with young children do not appear to be well serviced by either public or private cultural organisations.

Obviously this constituency has restrictions on both time and money but innovative programming and distribution networks could begin to address this potential audience. For example, if the Parramatta Council bought the Roxy cinema it could use it as a centre for the distribution of cheap movies targeting new audiences. It would also rescue a wonderful

The Merlin Saga

Another angle on cultural industries that we investigated was their links to other sectors in the economy. The most obvious connection is between cultural industries and retail consumption. The recent trend towards installing cinema complexes in or adjacent to shopping malls highlights the way in which these two sectors create markets for each other. The lesson of the recent history of the Parramatta CBD is how the possibility for creating a distinctive cultural precinct was undermined by the flow of capital into retailing.

Parramatta was colonised by Westfield Corporation in 1974 when it began construction around an existing, free-standing department store. Not until the mid 80s was any attention paid to the impact of this development on the rest of Parramatta's retailing area. At this time the declining trade in shops along the main street, Church Street, had reached crisis point. Worst affected was David Jones (known as DJs), the other major retailer stuck at the very end of Church Street, far from the action in Westfield Mall.

In the early 80s the state government decided to relocate government offices out of the Sydney CBD to Parramatta, making it more of a regional business and office centre and less of a retailing centre servicing locals. As locals drifted to more accessible shopping malls elsewhere, well-heeled public servants began to dominate as the major consumers in the Parramatta city centre. Supermarkets closed down in favour of more up-market boutiques catering to lunch-time shoppers. The middle stretch of the main street was badly affected by these developments, acquiring a black hole, badlands image which fuelled council's anxieties.

In 1985 the council acted to stop the decline by closing the middle section of the main street and converting it into an outdoor mall. This had all the familiar hallmarks of a

low key, low capital investment rearguard action: redirect the traffic, install paving, seating and the ubiquitous performance space and then hope for the best. The following year work commenced on the Cultural Centre across the river. It was hoped that the Cultural Centre would create a focus and drawcard for the dead zone at the northern end of the main street.

A key player in this saga of Parramatta's main street is the property development company Merlin. Their joust with Westfield is a telling reminder of how much the spatial organisation of city centres is a product of corporate competition and the flow of capital rather than rational planning and good design.

Merlin was formed in 1987. The company had developed expertise in harbourside festival retailing schemes, redesigning Sydney's Darling Harbour and Manly pier. For Merlin the dank stretch of river separating DJs from the Cultural Centre had possibilities as a waterfront retailing development. A cultural/leisure precinct was envisaged, with 'Rivercentre' offering 24-hour speciality retailing, food outlets, terrace cafes, waterfront restaurants, entertainment and amusement facilities.

The proposal was to turn Parramatta around to face the river, the source of first white settlement. For years the city had focused on the railway, with its back to the river. This orientation emphasised commuting. In their rediscovery of the river Merlin promised to revitalise the badlands, rescue DJs and provide desperately needed audiences for the Cultural Centre. A leisure/cultural precinct would give Parramatta a focus for street and night life plus all the benefits of a 24-hour economy. This was a developer led cultural plan for Parramatta.

Meanwhile, at the other end of town Westfield sat back and

watched. There was an eight-month delay over the development application as battles were fought over who would meet the costs of the mall closure, traffic management provisions and numerous other details. Merlin became bogged down in local government bureaucracy. A shock report revealed that the ground floor of the Rivercentre would be flooded in the event of a one in 100 year flood.

Then Westfield announced yet another major expansion. Land it had purchased adjacent to its current site was rezoned for retailing and their proposal to include pedestrian walkways to the new site and a tunnel under the railway bridge to connect the whole complex to the Church Street mall was approved by council. The final feather in Westfield's cap was DJs announcement that it would relocate to this new development. Merlin was being abandoned on all fronts—the council, DJ's defection, the credit squeeze and the power of Westfield all combined to destroy its cultural plan for Parramatta. In March 1990 the Rivercentre project was dropped.

With hindsight, Merlin's cultural plan seems very sophisticated. As a developer-driven strategy for a cultural precinct, Rivercentre stands out as an enlightened attempt to revive the badlands end of Church Street. Merlin seems a long way ahead in understanding the potential for aligning cultural development with economic expansion. Not only could Rivercentre have helped to feed new audiences into the Cultural Centre, it could also have ended its desperate isolation. Yet, while the council stalled over this proposal, Westfield, with a proprietorial force, consolidated its position at the other end of town. Merlin, the Cultural Centre and Parramatta residents were the losers. This saga is an example of bad cultural planning by default.

rococo movie house from possible demolition and convert it into a public resource.

In sharp contrast to this approach is the Parramatta Cultural Centre, or Riverside Theatres as it is now known, a bicentennial-funded project hailed as the answer to Parramatta's lack of high culture. This massive investment in culture-with-a-capital-c by federal, state and local governments reflects the idea of edifice-led cultural development: build a temple to culture and your community will never be called culturally deprived again. Julie Revallion explores the history of this centre in detail in her article elsewhere in this supplement.

These issues highlight several problems in the cultural industries framework. It is difficult to describe the eclectic array of cultural organisations in Parramatta as a distinct sector. The different cultural forms and services do not appear to be in competition with each other, as each caters to a distinct market. Nor are employment figures very significant. While public policy could intervene and invest in diverse distribution infrastructures, this would depend on detailed information about current and potential audiences and markets. The main value of the cultural industries approach is that it recognises the broad assortment of cultural forms and organisations available in Parramatta. This presents a substantial challenge to deficit models of cultural analysis which measure the cultural 'health' of a region on the basis of the presence or absence of art.

Cultural planning is rapidly emerging as the 90s buzzword, replacing cultural democracy as the new objective for local cultural development. In contrast to the cultural industries strategy previously outlined, a cultural planning approach assumes that if you cannot invest in culture at the local level, then you can at least plan it. In seeking to write 'culture' onto the planning agenda the intention is to see culture as a resource which can be aligned with social and economic policies. In this way, culture comes in from the margins where its aesthetic or therapeutic value has generally been emphasised at the expense of its contribution to the economy or local amenity.

Cultural planning is rapidly becoming a term with almost as much ambiguity as community arts. In Australia several approaches dominate. Often cultural planning is used to mean little more than community development. Here the emphasis is on getting the community together to identify common cultural resources and plan for their management and protection. While this focus on public participation and control over planning is perfectly reasonable and long overdue, there are several problematic assumptions which underpin this approach.

First, it often relies on a technique known as 'cultural mapping' which is aimed at tracing the nature of local attachments to place. The outcome of this is supposedly the identification of a common culture and regional identity. This approach assumes that culture is consensual, that a region or locality will easily be able to identify a common culture which it will then plan to develop and protect. Romantic references to 'our town, our culture, our map' completely ignore the reality of the conflicts that surround the different cultural identities and interests which cut across any region. They also focus on the construction of a local identity, on the identification of a 'unique sense of place' in order to establish difference and distinctiveness. This process, in particular, is driven by the desire to attract tourists. Ultimately, cultural mapping emphasises process at the expense of outcomes. Getting 'the community' together to develop a cultural plan is given top priority because this is regarded as empowering. Cultural planning is reduced to a technical process in community consultation, with culture assisting in social integration and harmony. The economic and political dynamics which profoundly influence culture at the local level are generally ignored.

Our research at Parramatta highlights the naivety of this approach. For a start, it is almost impossible to identify who is the community for this locality. Is it the service workers and bureaucrats who pour into the town centre every working day and who are the major consumers in the retailing centres? Or is it the people who live there and are the main audience for

the variety of cultural and leisure organisations?

Apart from this, it is obvious that 'planning' in the Parramatta LGA is far from being a simple technical procedure. It is a deeply negotiated political process in which Council seems to be more reactive than pro-active. There are numerous battlegrounds which make up the city's economy and Council does not appear to be the referee. The flow of capital into retailing and state government decisions to decentralise various government departments have been the major forces in the spatial and cultural organisation of the city centre. Council's one significant cultural initiative—the construction of a temple to high culture in the declining and isolated downtown section—only highlights how ignorant it was about the potential benefits of cultural activity to the local economy, and about the potential exchange of markets between retailing and cultural facilities.

Cultural industries and cultural planning offer important insights into the intersection of cultural and economic processes. While our research has identified problems with the wholesale application of either model to the Parramatta LGA, this does not undermine their political value in providing more progressive approaches to understanding and intervening in local cultural organisation. Both approaches highlight the need to investigate the political economy of culture, to understand cultural production, distribution and consumption in industrial rather than aesthetic terms. While our research began with the desire to develop a local economic strategy for culture, the Parramatta example has shown the need also to explore a local cultural strategy for economic expansion. The demise of the main street in Parramatta is a disturbing example of the power of retailing corporations to erode any sense of amenity and civic culture in town centres. Hopefully, good cultural planning can offer councils a strategy for dealing with the brute economic power of developers.

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