The bicentennial year brought about a number of federal, state and local government initiatives in the realm of Australian leisure. One of the more permanent outcomes of the bicentennial celebrations in Sydney is the involvement of local councils in art institutions. Some councils funded modest projects such as Fairfield’s revamped School of the Arts. Others, however, embarked on major developments such as the Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre at Penrith, the Hills Entertainment Centre at Baulkham Hills, the Campbelltown City Art Gallery and the Parramatta Riverside Theatres.

Considering the traditional absence of any organised local government commitment to the cultural life of their constituencies, the existence of these major cultural centres is remarkable. This article will endeavour to provide a history of the controversial early years of Parramatta Riverside Theatres and the role Parramatta Council played in its first experience in managing a major cultural institution.

Funding for the new cultural centres came from a mix of state, federal and local council sources, with Parramatta Council receiving the bulk of state and federal government support. Once erected, however, the burden of responsibility fell squarely on the shoulders of local government. Local councils such as Parramatta have traditionally provided cultural institutions such as libraries, and have given some in-kind support to local cultural activity, but culture generally remains a low priority within the local government system. Consequently, there exists a total absence of any coherent cultural policy at the local government level. Nevertheless, Parramatta Council, lured by the availability of a hand-out from state and federal governments, decided to take on board long-term management responsibility. For Parramatta Council, the construction, funding and management of the centre has been a huge headache. Inexperienced in managing a leisure facility of this kind, the council members found themselves in the unenviable position of trying to make the arts popular and financially sustainable—something mainstream arts institutions have been unable to do despite their small but converted audience base and ongoing government patronage. Bitter political infighting, poor attendances and hostile community reactions, funding deficits and confusion over programming have all accompanied local council’s involvement in arts institutions.

The Parramatta Bicentennial Cultural Centre, later renamed Parramatta Riverside Theatres, opened its doors on 17 February 1988. The basic design was for a 695 fixed-seat theatre, plus two moveable seat theatres of 200 and 100 seats each. The centre also incorporated a bar and courtyard area. Original cost estimates started at $7 million but escalated by the time of opening to $10.6 million. Parramatta Council provided the land, but the entire construction cost was met by the state and federal governments with the aid of corporate sponsorship. An independent managing company, Parramatta Bicentennial Cultural Centre Limited, was set up to control the centre, comprised mainly of councillors and representatives from the private sector. Spiralling costs led to an attempt by Parramatta Council to disband the company eight months before the centre even opened, with the aim of managing the centre via a

**Phantom of the Theatre**

Julie Revallon looks at an example of cultural edifice-building gone wrong.
brief months to establish a local constituency and generate local support. Council attempted to install a new management team comprised of a joint venture between Playbill Australia and Michael Edgley International. However, the negotiations fell through as the groups concerned were discouraged by the bad publicity the centre had attracted and the limits on productions imposed by an inflexible design. Parramatta Council was stuck with Riverside and it obviously did not relish the prospect.

1991 will hopefully be the first year that the complex will operate in the black. Local publicity is more positive and the centre is gradually shaking off the ‘white elephant’ image. This year will be the first year that a mainstream company will perform on the site and productions of the Sydney and Melbourne Theatre Companies are planned for later this year.

Meanwhile, the cultural life of Parramatta continues to be defined largely by the market. While Riverside struggles to increase attendances, to woo city-based art institutions and make related connections with local arts groups such as the Western Sinfonia, most local cultural life continues elsewhere. The three local cinemas, live music venues, Rosehill racetrack, Parramatta Leagues Club and Stadium, shopping centres, the extensive Eisteddfod program, schools and multicultural centres, lounge rooms and street corners continue to provide the sites where meaning and pleasure are generated by the community.
by some mysterious and unexplained action, uplift and transform the very consciousness of the people, strengthening community pride and focussing community identity by its very presence.

For the Parramatta Council, in the early stages, a cultural centre located in their very own local government area offered a potentially promising opportunity for them to share in the prestige and exalted status accorded to the arts in this country. This is the major reason why a council such as Parramatta, which had previously displayed little interest in local cultural activity, suddenly decided to accept responsibility for a major cultural institution.

A constant theme within the rhetoric which surrounded the erection of Parramatta Riverside Theatres was the ambiguous notion that the centre would fill a ‘cultural gap’. It was assumed that the arts imposed on a community could potentially become a leisure resource for all sections of Australian society. This betrays a deep ignorance of how the arts operate in their social context. Participation in arts institutions fundamentally constitutes class affiliation, and it will take more than the regionalisation of arts centres to change that. If art is to broaden its audience base then it must tackle the serious image problem it carries within the majority of the population. Even then, without change in the content and context of its operations it will fail to compete with the diverse number of other leisure facilities available elsewhere.

The advent of cultural centres has done one thing. It has resulted in local government emerging as a major player in the public provision of public facilities. Within the field of cultural provision, local councils such as Parramatta have failed to fulfil their potential to be responsive to local needs and in touch with the unique characteristics of their constituents. It can only be hoped that in future forays into culture, local councils will base their decisions within a sound cultural policy framework which positions cultural centres within their social, political and economic contexts. Today, Riverside Theatres stands imposing yet forlorn in the depressed downtown area of Parramatta. It exists as an expensive reminder that cultural facilities provision requires a policy framework just like any other area of government intervention.

JULIE REVALLION is a graduate of leisure studies from UTS, Kuring-gai.