



# NSW Culture Review Submission

September 2023



Committee  
for  
Sydney



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## Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of our land.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise sovereignty was never ceded.

As an urban policy think tank, we recognise we are still learning about Country and what that means for our work.

This was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

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# Introduction

What we need is a strategy that gives culture the space and prominence to reinvigorate Sydney and the state.

Too often marginalised as a nice-to-have, something that can be ‘value engineered’ or left out, it’s when you’re forced to go without – as we all did in the pandemic – that you realise how central culture is to a functioning city.

The things that captivated us in and after Covid-19 were sea shanties and bingeable TV, Zoom dance lessons, the infectious mood of the Ramadan night market crowds in Lakemba and Vivid Sydney crowds in Parramatta, Sydney Theatre Company’s mesmerising *Picture of Dorian Gray* and a hundred other kinds of culture.

These activities bring fun to our city and they bring meaning, they’re how we connect with each other and how we express ourselves. There is no shortage of evidence for culture’s health and wellbeing benefits, its capacity to boost educational outcomes, support community cohesion and resilience, and to anchor local and major precincts.

Sydneysiders engage deeply with arts and culture (86.5% attended a venue or event in eastern Sydney in 2018, 78.4% in western Sydney<sup>1</sup>). However, access to place-based arts and culture within communities is limited (and hence participation), particularly in the city’s west, due to factors including cost of living, transport connectivity, skills shortages and limited local tertiary offerings in creative and performing arts.

The impact of Covid-19 continues to be felt across the sector, particularly impacting skilled workers and the small-to-medium ventures that fuel culture, and the repercussions are flowing through to major producers and institutions.

So much advocacy for culture focuses on the needs of the sector itself, and we need to get them right. But this sector has the potential to drive innovation, communication and connection, passion and energy across all industries, we need to support it to achieve all that.

We have a rare opportunity to transform the way we think about and encourage culture, and in doing so, help the state deliver on some of its biggest goals, including housing affordability and delivering great local precincts, healthier, stronger more resilient communities and a deeper relationship with First Nations people, and a thriving future economy.

Together with the NSW Government, the Committee for Sydney looks forward to better understanding our place on Country, elevating the transformative power of culture and boosting Sydney’s performance as a global city.

1. Itaoui, R., Merrillees, D. Gerace., G. (2023), State of the Arts in Western Sydney, Parramatta, Centre for Western Sydney, accessed via: <https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/content/dam/digital/images/centre-for-western-sydney/CfWS-State-of-the-Arts-2023.pdf>

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## Big ideas for the future of culture in Sydney

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## Idea #1: The remit of the state's first arts, culture and creative industries strategy must reach across all government departments

To achieve its full potential, this strategy needs to reach outwards as a key part of all the work government does.

To do that, it can't just be the province of one department or agency, it needs senior buy-in and deep engagement across government departments including Planning, Treasury, Investment, Aboriginal Affairs, Transport, Education and Health. There are large-scale opportunities for partnership with Schools Infrastructure and the education sector (particularly audience and skills development), Health Infrastructure NSW and the broader health sector (e.g. artist in residence type programs), and other agencies and departments to build in culture throughout existing programs. In practice, this must be backed with dedicated funding and governance for interdepartmental collaboration.

The strategy should reflect the fact that state government doesn't hold all the cards. Local government holds important local knowledge, relationships and programs across the state, particularly in Sydney's west where key councils do much of the heavy lifting. Over the past five years, the Department of Planning has built deep relationships of trust and respect with local government, we should build the same aspiration into this strategy.

The governance structure to deliver on this strategy should be considered. In the current structure, there are overlapping responsibilities for major cultural activities: Destination NSW, as structured and legislatively directed, is responsible for setting tourism policy for the NSW Government through Tourism and Major Event strategic plans, while Create NSW is tasked with developing and supporting the Arts, Culture and Screen sectors. These two purposes are overlapping. Tourists often visit NSW to experience our cultural sector. Major events are typically cultural in nature.

Crucially, this strategy must lead with an understanding that government doesn't produce culture, the creative industry does. We note the experienced advisory council selected to guide development of the strategy, and encourage government to adopt an engagement first model through to implementation, which is deeply and continually informed by broader industry insights and trends.

### Recommendations:

- Strategy development should include senior sponsors across relevant departments to ensure success, with dedicated funding and governance for interdepartmental collaboration, as well as setting an appropriate governance structure for agencies or authorities to support delivery of the strategy
- Strategy implementation should include significant industry engagement and feedback loops.



## Idea #2: We need a broader, more inclusive definition of 'culture'

To achieve its full potential, this strategy needs to change the way we talk about art and culture to bring people in instead of ruling them out.

Bundling cultural experiences with other place-based experiences, including dining offers, will encourage people to try things out and find out for themselves. We support the NSW Government's legislative reform to create Special Entertainment Precincts and complementary Uptown accelerator program, and would like to see these programs backed with incentives for programming cultural activities and packages that include food options.

Instead of creating an artificial divide between commercial projects and art projects, we should invest in both – some will succeed with critical and commercial success, others won't and it's not always easy to pick upfront which is which. And when investment goes to one or the other, the middle misses out which means a break in the cultural pipeline. One option is putting some of the funding for cultural institutions in the hands of the audience themselves, through a creative voucher for locally produced arts and culture available through the Service NSW app.

### Recommendations:

- Create incentives for cultural programming in Special Entertainment Precincts / Uptown precincts, supported with a broader place branding/marketing program using food and places as a path into wider cultural experiences
- Create a voucher system for locally produced arts and culture, distributed via the Service NSW app.

### Idea #3: Commit to a regular 'culture census' to support effective decision making

For an effective strategy, we need a detailed understanding of who, what, where, why and how culture is being created and consumed across Sydney and the state.

While research has been conducted in specific domains or local areas, we lack a holistic and detailed understanding of what's happening in this dynamic landscape.

Without this kind of comprehensive underpinning, decisions will continue to be made that tend to favour older, more established areas and institutions over younger and arguably more fertile grounds in emerging parts of the city. It's not just about resetting for equity, it's also about tapping into the creative potential of the breadth of our city.

The ongoing study should track where the hotspots and gaps are, where the unmet needs are greatest and how it's all changing over time. It should seek to understand the changing needs for infrastructure (e.g. are we moving from stage and tiered seating to performance in the round with the audience involved). Delivering this study on a regular basis – say 3-5 yearly – will also be important to be able to measure and assess performance of the program over time.

#### Recommendations:

- Commit to and conduct a regular cultural census of creatives, infrastructure and audiences
- Track and report on equitable investment in culture across Sydney and NSW.





## Idea #4: Fix the broken engine room of culture

Beneath an acute skills shortage is rising evidence the 'engine room' of Sydney's cultural sector is burnt out, this strategy needs deliberate action to stoke it back to full flame.

Big productions are fuelled to a surprisingly high degree by countless small ventures and skilled people. But many of these small-to-medium sized creative businesses were devastated by Covid-19, and people with technical skills left the industry for more stable work elsewhere, including film and sport.

A program of targeted training and skills development needs to be matched with improved conditions that encourage and support people to take up and stay in these important roles. This should flow through the pipeline, with opportunities for career progression, pathways and programs to support the development of mid-career creatives and technically skilled staff.

At a broader level, Covid-19 illustrated the trusted networks that exist in the cultural sector, with deep collaboration that proved essential in navigating the crisis. But with the crisis abating, BAU returns and a competitive mindset that results in teams working in silos. This strategy should incentivise better coordination on key sectoral challenges (e.g. insurance, statutes, audience development and so on): compete on culture, not on work conditions and policies.

And we need to ensure the processes designed to support creatives, like grant programs, are designed for them. Currently, many programs have cumbersome and confusing application and acquittal processes, and while public money needs to be properly accounted for, we should be designing systems that reward people and organisations for making culture, instead of navigating bureaucracy.

### Recommendations:

- Create better conditions and career pathways for creatives and skilled staff:
  - training and career development opportunities, including business management, technical skills (e.g. sound, lighting, AV tech, security, booking, publicity, etc), mentoring – e.g. microcredentials and mini-degrees with partners like TAFE NSW, ACE and others
  - explore potential for government to employ people full-time to work across multiple government venues to provide greater job certainty for skilled technical workers.
- Support creative production and the financial conditions of creative ventures:
  - design policies and programs that are simple and easy to understand (including grant application and acquittal processes)
  - create long-term fellowships that enable artists to live/work/create/perform while supported by a living wage
  - introduce quotas for established cultural institutions and government funded ventures to support new and local talent, as with broadcast licences
  - engage with, and incentivise business and philanthropy to provide new pathways for creative support and funding.

## Idea #5: Create a one-stop shop for creatives to navigate government support and approval processes

To unlock this creative potential for our city and state, we need to send a clear message we value and actively encourage creative and cultural work – the most direct way to achieve this is a one-stop shop for creatives engaging with government. A front door to government for culture.

Currently, creatives are forced to deal with myriad government departments and agencies to get anything done. There is no simple way to find out about opportunities or navigate approvals, and every step requires laborious and often confusing legwork. We should be looking to turn this around.

For example, Screen Australia helps film makers navigate government approvals and opportunities, at all levels of government and across the country – including production funding, tax incentives, filming approvals and so on. A similar program would dramatically improve the output of creatives. Closer to home, the customer-focused approach achieved at Service NSW is another useful reference.

### Recommendations:

- Create a one-stop shop or concierge service for creatives wanting to engage with the NSW Government or planning system, as well as communicating relevant state government initiatives.



Source: Unsplash

## Idea #6: Make space for culture in areas of future population growth

While large institutional venues are critical parts of the creative and cultural ecosystem, we also need to make space for culture right across our city. This is to ensure equity of access – spatially and in terms of price-points – to create a city where everyone has the right to present, participate and experience cultural activity every day.

This can mean public spaces that enable buskers to plug-in, providing plazas outside shopping centres that can be activated for public events, through to planning controls that future-proof 24-hour precincts in new developments.

Making space for culture also goes hand-in-hand with the government's focus on increasing housing supply. Creativity and culture contribute to the liveliness and 'buzz' of new housing precincts and contribute to making new growth areas places that people love to live in.

This will mean that areas of future population growth have much needed cultural spaces to match. As the shape of our city changes, you shouldn't have to travel from the west, north or south into the CBD or inner west to experience the night time economy, culture or creativity.

For example, current land-use planning around the new airport has included a late-night precinct in DCP, including provisions for late night venues and sound attenuating infrastructure in residential areas around the zone.<sup>2</sup> While it won't necessarily be financially viable for venue operators before the precinct reaches a critical mass, without this forward-thinking planning, the area would risk losing any future cultural space completely. Expectations need to be set early to avoid the friction that can come with audiences arriving and leaving venues, sound, light and other aspects of performance and late-night venues.

2. Leppington Town Centre Review Planning Proposal, accessed via: <https://www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/ppr/pre-exhibition/leppington-town-centre-review-planning-proposal>

### Recommendations:

- Strategic planning for areas of significant population growth must include 24-hour precincts to future-proof space for cultural, creative and night-time uses, and it should be considering the types of cultural and performance venues that will be required
- Plan for multi-purpose community spaces as part of future shops, schools, health facilities and transit-oriented development.

## Idea #7: Sweat existing assets to unlock creativity everywhere

Across the city and state, existing public venues, town halls, community centres, libraries, bandstands and other assets provide an untapped – or under-tapped – well of performance and cultural venues.

Our city is going through a significant period of change, with cultural and demographic shifts that are playing out in cultural creation, audiences and geographic location, but we haven't seen significant investment in cultural infrastructure to match.

The good news is these unused or underused venues are located in local towns and centres across the state, and provide a ready opportunity to significantly increase the range of performance venues available.

Some venues will need to be upgraded to ensure they meet fire safety, sound or technical requirements. In the case of libraries or community centres, there is an opportunity to provide equipment like green screens, recording equipment and so on, that empowers community members to create their own content.

Some councils including Fairfield City Council or Northern Beaches Council are already utilising their library network to provide shared equipment that reduces the barriers to creating a new podcast, short film or recording a first music album.

In other cases, the issue is the operational business model of the asset – with cultural producers charged full commercial rates, which makes costs unviable for small to medium scale production.

### Recommendations:

- Create a funding program to restore and bring strategic venues up to performance standard
- Create a funding program to support the operational running of venues, whether they are state or local government assets, to allow rates suited to small-scale producers.



Source: Sydney Fringe  
Photographer: Seiya Taguchi

## Idea #8: Reorient our visitor economy investment towards local culture

The phenomenal cultural events that captivate Sydneysiders – Ramadan night markets, electric Sydney Fringe shows, Mardi Gras – are also the events that drive word of mouth, attract visitors and keep them coming back. Instead of bringing in tentpole headliners, we should be celebrating more of this local culture, with benefits accruing both in terms of supporting the local culture to grow and thrive, and branding our city in a way that encourages visitors to come back time and again.

This does not mean never investing in events without a local flavour. Major events that lack a local flavour can still deliver value. But even then, they must adhere to a broader long-term vision for the state. We should be focusing the state's visitor attraction investment on achieving long-term return visitation and building on our state's identified strategic strengths, for example, education, business investment and so on, rather than the short term hit of single visits.

While the NSW Government spends tens of millions on marketing to visitors, this represents a small portion of 'share of voice' when considering the marketing of Sydney and NSW across different audiences and groups, alongside promotion by:

- Cultural, visitor economy and sporting organisations to attract visitors
- Universities to attract international students
- Companies seeking to attract staff
- Startups and companies seeking capital investment
- Cultural products – e.g. films and TV shows based here
- Citizens via their own networks and social media – including celebrities who choose to live here or visit.

Each promotional activity brings economic benefit to Sydney and the state, but they are typically uncoordinated and lacking in a shared 'brand narrative.' To maximise these efforts, the NSW Government should play a greater role in coordinating the marketing of Sydney and NSW by ensuring flagship campaigns more strongly align with the captivating experiences and real attractions that Sydneysiders delight in. This will support a consistent story being told across the many types of promotional activity.

The current state Brand, 'Feel New,' is focused specifically on the visitor economy. This is not a criticism of Destination NSW – which developed the campaign – as it's delivering against its legislated aims. However, Feel New should be integrated into a new brand, as it is not sufficient alone.

### Recommendations:

- Review the legislative objectives of Destination NSW to ensure they focus the organisation's efforts on catalysing return visitation and long-term visitor spends on Sydney and NSW experiences
- Review the current Visitor Economy 2030 Strategy with a direction to have it deliver against the objectives of the new Arts, Culture and Creative Industries Policy for NSW
- Undertake a holistic brand development process for Sydney and NSW aiming to create a singular collaborative brand narrative, coordinated and supported across government.

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Committee for Sydney  
[sydney.org.au](http://sydney.org.au)



@Committee4Syd



[committee@sydney.org.au](mailto:committee@sydney.org.au)



+61 2 8320 6750