

Western Australia's Cultural Ecology



John Knell is one of the UK's leading thinkers on the changing face of work and organisations and is co-founder of Intelligence Agency, an ideas, strategy and research consultancy. The Department of Culture and the Arts invited Knell to undertake a residency in WA to explore new possibilities and generate discussion for innovation in the creation and consumption of cultural products and to identify the organisations and policy structures most likely to foster a vibrant arts and cultural ecology for WA in the future.

This short snippet from his report acts as a companion piece to two public lectures he held in October and November 2007 which are downloadable from the DCA website.

'Western Australia's Cultural Ecology: A very relaxed sort of crisis'

Philistine Fairground?

'Perth is the biggest country town in the world trying to be a city. The most isolated country town in the world trying to be the most cut-off city in the world, trying desperately to hit the big time. Desert on one side, sea on the other. Philistine Fairground. There's something nestling here, something horrible waiting. Ambition,' Tim Winton, *Cloud Street* (1991.289)

Fiction often leads with a hook rather than a jab. But a jab stills wounds if on target – is Perth and WA a place where culture survives and doesn't thrive?

The verdict is in some ways uncomfortably close to call. There is no absence of culture in WA. The arts have received consistent funding and all of the commanding heights of arts and culture are present and correct. But there is a palpable sense in WA that too much of the cultural infrastructure is just 'getting by' – with too little being genuinely excellent by international standards or leading edge or engaged with the public in ways being increasingly demanded.

And yet, there is promise too. Western Australia has a fantastic record in producing first class artists and performers across all of the major disciplines. There is also a widely shared sense that the current economic success of Western Australia is providing a

once in a generation opportunity to place the cultural infrastructure of the state on a firmer footing, locking in its ability to create future value and opportunity for Western Australia and its citizens.

What struck me whilst in WA was the very relaxed crisis the sector seems to be having about deep seated ailments. It is a real crisis in the sense that too much of WA's cultural base is underperforming, with weak financial viability, a lack of innovation, and a lack of public reach and engagement.

Five clear issues emerged during the residency –

The Vision Thing - revealing that too many cultural organisations are seeking to hold on to what they have, rather than consider what the overall cultural ecology most needs, which may be their obsolescence or reform. At the same time, the main funders have been too defensive about their aims and intentions, unwilling to place on the record their views about what is core, and about what types of innovations and behaviours they are trying to seed within WA.

It's about the quality, stupid - A clear recommendation emerging from my work is that if WA is genuinely serious about becoming a leading international cultural centre it needs to urgently

develop a more rigorous and exacting regime to measure the quality of its cultural base.

Intelligent R&D – The cultural sector in WA needs to get better at research and development across a whole range of dimensions that I outline in detail in my paper. Funder and funded alike in WA need to think about how best to foster intelligent R&D for the sector which can genuinely transform their cultural and commercial practices and escape the mindset that traps arts and cultural organisations into ‘creating work for the sake of it.’

Talent before buildings - WA's arts and cultural sector has barely begun to resolve the debate about the best balance between continuing to support building based organisations (which have traditionally sucked in the largest share of available funding and investment) and more fluid people based investments. The degree to which the changing character of production and consumption in the sector might challenge the relevance and usefulness of much of the existing infrastructure as the sector strives to connect with a broader audience. This in turn will require public funders to acknowledge their relative addiction to funding infrastructure over activity.

Enrolling the public differently

The arts and cultural sector in WA also acknowledges that it is behind the curve a little on how best to engage the public in the arts and cultural life of WA. I would recommend that the Department of Arts and Culture takes an international lead and invests in a number of public value

/ citizen's jury type experiments to drive greater public interest in the arts in WA.

WA's relaxed cultural crisis reflects a lack of vision; a lack of urgency; and most importantly a lack of understanding of the changing nature of the world.

If these five issues were tackled more effectively and concertedly, WA arts and cultural sector would begin to lay the foundations for sustainable success. Are there any grounds for optimism that they are about to be tackled?

Yes, in so far as I was struck by the very real appetite across WA's cultural ecology to work through these issues. It also became clear during my stay that funder and funded were not miles apart in their approach to their issues and on how best they might be resolved.

In this sense my residency produced one very tangible outcome – a top line vision of a preferred future for WA's arts and cultural ecology expressed in terms of the required characteristics of the main state cultural funder (the Department of Arts and Culture (DCA)) and the qualities of a more confident cultural sector. (For expansion on this please see Knell's full report available on the DCA website)

To return to the opening quote, if cultural ambition is nestling in WA, it is treading lightly. Of course the rhetoric of ambition for WA's cultural sector is alive and well, although perhaps inevitably much of the current cultural narrative for WA is framed in terms of what culture will deliver in support of broader economic, civic, and social progress in the state.

Far too little of that ambition is rooted in an expansive vision of how WA's cultural ecology can fashion its own unique cultural personality – and help redefine the values and aspirations of WA in ways that West Australians would become proud to support. Boldness and bravery here might bring riches indeed.

As a consequence WA's cultural ecology is doing too little to refashion its cultural ambition in terms of genuine public engagement and real experimentation with new technologies, both artistically and in terms of generating that public engagement. The opportunity costs of staying relaxed about these failings is likely to be the slow stagnation of WA's cultural ecology and an under engaged and under value WA public.

A potential crisis – certainly. An appropriate source of relaxation? That's for you to judge.

These issues will be addressed as we head forward into a new policy development process. This process will draw together into one cohesive policy framework, the key policy and program priorities to drive outcomes across the breadth of the Directorate's work into the future.

To ensure that you have the opportunity of contributing to this conversation, the Department will be releasing more discussion papers and establishing a series of discussion forums and focus groups in the coming months, to examine the key theme areas of the policy framework.

To view the entire report and companion lectures
please visit www.dca.wa.gov.au/news/artslines