

Networking Culture: A Strategic Approach to Cultural Development in Greater Western Sydney

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Introduction

In July 2005, a review appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald's Spectrum section, covering four of the 'Western Front' series of exhibitions at Blacktown Arts Centre, Fairfield City Museum and Gallery and at Parramatta Heritage Centre (in a series of six exhibitions), and the inaugural Agri/culture exhibition at the new Hawkesbury Regional Gallery at Windsor. The piece opens with the reviewer describing the drive towards a rainbow over Blacktown:

... things are starting to look a lot brighter in the western suburbs. Once upon a time there was nothing but concrete shopping malls to charm the visitor ... [along with] bricks and grime of suburban sargassos. ... Nowadays there is at least a tacit acknowledgement that culture has a place at the table, alongside commerce. ... There is also a recognition that communities without adequate cultural facilities are breeding grounds for boredom, vandalism, social misery and crime. ... An arts centre or theatre group can make a constructive contribution [to these problems] (MacDonald, 2005: 28).

One sentence in particular captures the reviewer's overall assessment of the region: 'If there has long been a perception of the western suburbs as a *cultural wasteland*' [then Agri/culture gives the opposite impression] (29).

Western Sydney-based arts workers and cultural organisations have confronted this stereotype for more than two decades, asserting instead a more progressive and productive approach to the region's cultural life (Johnson et al., 1997: 3). By putting the spotlight onto the distinctive stories and cultural complexities that converge in the region, those who work in Western Sydney have consistently refused to subscribe to the tired 'welfare' or deficit based perceptions of Western Sydney culture. The battle to redress an historic backlog of cultural infrastructure provision has yet to be won, but in the meantime arts organisations are getting on with the region's cultural development (defined, following Dowling's survey of the development of this concept in Australia, as 'facilitating the provision of cultural resources' (1997: 24)). Western Sydney communities embody cultural forms that span the globe, driving our organisations to connect better with them and constantly seek new ways to understand, promote and 'do art'. As Deborah Mills remarked back in 1991 – an observation which perhaps holds even more true today – community-based arts 'is characterised by considerable energy, imagination, irony, humour, commitment and sacrifice' (1991: 9).

Western Sydney has always been an (often unacknowledged) incubator for innovative strategies – not only in terms of policy initiatives that have piloted whole-of-government and partnership approaches, but also in the cultural field. Indeed, the Blacktown LGA’s relationship to cultural developments and its communities is a case in point – it set many trends in cultural development in the mid-1980s when it employed the first Community Arts Officer in the country.

‘Western Front’— initiated by Blacktown Arts Centre — is itself an exemplar of this approach to investigative, resonant and networked cultural activity that characterises the West. The inaugural 2005 suite of ‘Western Front’ exhibitions and activities was an ambitious collaborative visual arts program, bringing together a network of partners across multiple venues to showcase contemporary artists from the region and to interrogate the challenges and contradictions of Western Sydney’s identity. It is perhaps the only rational way to respond to the demands of a dispersed population of around 1.7 million across 14 Local Government jurisdictions¹, covering 8,840 square kilometres.

Western Sydney’s distinctiveness

In the early years of British settlement, Western Sydney saw the first viable towns and roads, agriculture and industries. In the post-war era, the rapid development that ensued was poorly planned, and Western Sydney essentially served as dormitory settlements for workers to serve central Sydney (Johnson et al., 1997: 7). By the 1970s, as the ‘western suburbs’ were denigrated in the popular imagination, the formation of the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils (WSROC) – a networked body of 11 local government authorities – saw the emergence of a strong point of advocacy for region-wide coordination, and of a regional identity for Western Sydney. Over the last 30 years, WSROC, along with other regional players, has successfully driven campaigns to bring much-needed basic infrastructure to the region, including Westmead hospital, the University of Western Sydney, and relocation of State Government offices, as well as lobbying for a NSW Government Minister for Western Sydney.

Negative representations have long dominated the metropolitan media’s accounts of Western Sydney. Powell’s 1993 book, *Out West* (Powell, 1993) deals extensively with media representations of the region. These representations have served to ‘obliterate the history of the making of this space; they have constituted a denial and marginalisation of the everyday lives of the diverse population that now lives in the region’ (Johnson et al., 1997: 2).

Western Sydney’s cultural development cannot be considered outside the context of its geographic spread and social and cultural diversity (see Baeker, 2002a for a nuanced discussion of cultural policy and planning in the context of cultural diversity). Harnessing its social and cultural resources as *assets*, and investing in the growth and consolidation of effectively serviced sub-regional centres, is needed to conclusively ‘dump the old

¹ The 14 Local Government areas comprising Western Sydney are: Auburn, Bankstown, Baulkham Hills, Blacktown, Blue Mountains, Camden, Campbelltown, Fairfield, Holroyd, Hawkesbury, Liverpool, Parramatta, Penrith and Wollondilly.

stereotype that Western Sydney is a dormitory region', as former NSW Premier Bob Carr has argued (2004).

It is unfortunate that it is necessary to repeat these stereotypes in order to refute them – repetition serves to reinforce the very stereotypes that it hopes to challenge. The region's cultural stakeholders have certainly generated much discussion about how best to promote the region's strengths and distinctiveness, while at the same time arguing that there are deficits which need to be addressed. These issues were extensively debated within the region during the 1980s and 1990s. A special section of the Spring 1994 issue of the contemporary arts quarterly *Artlink* focussed on the 'paradox' of Western Sydney:

In 1994, Western Sydney is the beneficiary of a great arts paradox. For many years marginalised and derided as the embarrassingly poor relation of central Sydney and its northern and eastern suburbs, it was largely excluded from established art world power structures. Today ... it has learned to create its own structures. Instead of being exclusive, they are open and inclusive. They work on the principles of networking with regional origins barely 20 years old. (Knight, 1994: 38).

From the outside, and especially for State and Federal government agencies, the paradoxical nature of Western Sydney made it a 'problem'. In 1990, the Australia Council commissioned a report into arts development in the region and concluded that:

there is no basis for the general perception and representation of Western Sydney as a 'cultural desert'. The Region has a great diversity of arts and other cultural activities supported by substantial interest in their further development. (Chesterman & Schwager, 1990: np)

It found sufficient evidence, however, 'to suggest that the Region is disadvantaged in terms of access to arts programs and activities available in central Sydney and to opportunities for greater arts and general cultural development in the Region' (1990: np). The level of activity in the region at that time is evidenced by the fact that 'several hundred people in total attended over thirty meetings' held as part of the consultation for the Australia Council report, representing 'a broad range of locally based arts and community organisations and workers'.

As a strategic response to structural inequities documented in the Australia Council's 1990 report (Chesterman and Shwager, 1990), the NSW State Government and the Australia Council jointly funded a regionally based peak organisation, Creative Cultures, for three years in the mid-1990s. In 1999, as part of broader State Government strategic initiatives for Western Sydney, the NSW Government launched its *Strategy for the Arts in Western Sydney* (NSW Ministry for the Arts and Office of Western Sydney, 1999). Inequities which had been identified included low rates of participation and employment in cultural activity, and historical patterns of government funding 'which, despite policy changes and targeted programs with their resulting improvements, remains in favour of the Rest of Sydney' (NSW Ministry for the Arts and Office of Western Sydney, 1999: 20). The *Strategy* directed increased investment in cultural activity and infrastructure to the region.

In the last four years WSROC has turned its attention in a concerted way to the region's arts and cultural development, and connected this with broader initiatives for the region. WSROC plays a pivotal role in making the local and regional levels of spatial

organisation interact with and support each other. As Baeker (2002b: 20) points out, local cultural decision-making is *more*, not less, complex than it is at larger spatial aggregations, because decisions become more politically charged and personalised, and intense conflicts can be generated. Cross-regional coordination is essential to balance top-down with bottom-up approaches that harness local initiative and resources to benefit a dispersed population (Stratton-Smith, 2004).

The challenge of the region's heterogeneous spatial structure

Over the next 15 years it is anticipated that Greater Western Sydney will accommodate 510,000 more people. This dramatic projection underlines the need for planners to better understand community culture – the values and habits of people who create demand for services and resources – as fundamental to a robust, healthy society and indeed to the continuing success of Sydney as a thriving global city.

Greater Western Sydney is evolving as a 'multi-centred region of cities', with each city playing a distinct economic and socio-cultural role in the viability of the region. This spatial structure will decentralise economic, social and cultural opportunities to match population growth and create opportunities equitably across the Sydney metropolitan area. Growth will be concentrated to promote efficient use of regional infrastructure by supporting major facilities and institutions, linked by key transit routes. This vision of Sydney's growth has been institutionalised in the State government's planning for its capital through its *Sydney Metropolitan Strategy* initiated by the State government in 2004 to guide the growth of Sydney. The *Sydney Metropolitan Strategy* proposes a range of different 'centre types' to better understand the different capacities for growth and the future service needs across the region. The centre types being proposed by the *Strategy* range from Regional Cities and Major Centres, through to Town Centres, Villages and Neighbourhood Centres and other specialised centre types.

Indeed, the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils anticipated these developments and has attempted to lead the way in planning for better managed growth and change in its own region through its *FutureWest — Greater Western Sydney Regional Planning & Management Framework*. This framework, driven by WSROC's partnership with thirteen Greater Western Sydney Councils, addresses issues such as the equitable provision and funding of infrastructure, support for diversity, protection of the environment and employment opportunities.

WSROC's approach addresses the challenge to not fall into the trap of constructing 'anywhere' places – places which offer efficiency, speed and predictability of product, and are based on a 'rational' model of organization, but which often result in a 'machine' city lacking character and 'soul' (Bianchini, 2004). A quality built environment will have its own personality that reflects and enhances local cultural life – 'magnet projects' which respond to the existing culture or heritage of a place and community, and are visible and attractive to residents; also become an identifier and distinctive selling point for the development.

Governments, at local and State levels particularly, have a responsibility to address historical imbalances and backlogs in cultural infrastructure, but also provide for the

needs of population growth. In 1999, for example, an ABS household survey of attendance at selected cultural venues and activities indicated that attendance rates in Greater Western Sydney were lower than for the rest of Sydney for *all* cultural venues and activities surveyed, and that for art galleries, classical music performances and theatre performances, the attendance rates were about *half* that of the rest of Sydney (NSW Ministry for the Arts, 1999). Even for the most popular venues and activities, attendance rates were significantly lower (for cinema, 63% compared with 74%, and for libraries, 33% compared with 39%).

State and Federal Government provision of cultural infrastructure and services in Greater Western Sydney has not kept pace with rapid population growth and land development. The *Strategy for the Arts in Western Sydney* was premised on the observation that the fundamental problem for the arts and cultural sector in Greater Western Sydney was a lack of critical mass. That is, the region was lacking in the levels of infrastructure and activity, including artist and audience numbers, needed to make the cultural life of the region self-sustaining and self-renewing.

None of the well-funded State cultural institutions or major independent arts organisations is located in Greater Western Sydney. The flagship regional cultural institutions, such as Casula Powerhouse, contribute to the cultural development of the whole Sydney metropolitan area and regularly implement programs that are of regional, national, even international significance. Yet, because they are established as entities existing within and supported by a single Local Government Authority, they cannot access the same funding opportunities as the Sydney-based State cultural institutions. The region's fragmented mosaic of domains of local authority acts to limit the possibilities for building cultural institutions that have a broader regional or sub-regional catchment.

Non-government organisations operating at a grass-roots community level are particularly fragile. A number of organisations have waxed and waned, but have left their mark. Two such organisations were Garage Graphix (a community-based graphic design organisation producing posters, t-shirts, fabric design and pamphlets) and Street Level (an artist-run collective and gallery originally established in Penrith before moving to Blacktown), which were profiled as vibrant and successful contributors to the region's cultural life in 1991. Johnston observes that 'such organisations take the isolated and divergent cultural practices of western Sydney and, by facilitating communications and intertwining them with each other, transform them into instruments of collective strength' (1991: 21). Johnston goes on to ask:

One often wonders what would happen if these people and their boundless enthusiasm were to disappear. Would the inhabitants of western Sydney shrink from battling the barrage of high art sniggers that are directed at their practices? Or would the self-esteem which has been nurtured by places like Garage Graphix and Street Level be strong enough to sustain a belief in the value of cultural work and encourage them to continue raising the pitch of their voices?

The answer to this question – if the experience of the intervening 15 years is any indication – is that the belief in the value of cultural work is certainly continuing to grow. Both Garage Graphix and Street Level no longer exist as organisations, but the legacy of these and other organisations is still a strong resource for the region, because many of the individuals involved have gone on to undertake significant roles in other Western Sydney organisations and agencies.

The Western Sydney region manifests the fundamentally decentralised spatial arrangement that Kling et al. refer to as ‘postsuburban’. It accords with the definition, in that its diverse domains of economic, social and cultural activity are conducted in centres that are ‘functionally specialised and separated by travel times of fifteen to thirty minutes’ (1991: ix). The region’s population is heavily dependent on private cars for transport between its separate residential neighbourhoods, shopping malls, and industrial parks.

Under such conditions, a ‘critical mass’ of infrastructure to support the cultural development of the region is less likely to be achieved through concentrating investment in a few localised sites, than through a tiered multi-scalar and multi-centred approach to providing the infrastructure (both built and human) to support cultural activity and its growth and development.

A Cultural Strategy for Greater Western Sydney

Our culture embodies the stories and creative spirit that gives us a sense of belonging to the community of Greater Western Sydney. ... Creative participation in cultural life is not only a fundamental right of individuals in all communities — it is conducive to personal fulfilment and progress. (Lee-Shoy, 2005)

WSROC’s Regional Cultural Strategy (Lee-Shoy, 2005) seeks to coordinate and build on existing activity, to improve the creative opportunities available to Greater Western Sydney communities. The Strategy embraces Mercer’s definition of cultural planning as an ‘approach to cultural resources that links them to broader agendas for economic development, sustainability and quality of life’ (2002: 6). Mercer emphasises the need to develop a broader and inclusive approach to cultural resources and ‘an active and use-oriented definition of resources accounting for the ways in which people and communities interact with and negotiate them’ (2002: 169; see also Stevenson, 2004 for an overview of international trends in cultural planning).

The development process for the Strategy drew upon ideas, thoughts, questions and recommendations developed over several years. The scope of the project spans the eleven WSROC councils, as well as the MACROC – Macarthur Regional Organisation of Councils – areas of Camden, Campbelltown and Wollondilly. The Strategy complements local cultural plans and key regional strategies, including *FutureWest*². WSROC’s recognition of the importance of integrating cultural strategy with broader planning processes is also a tacit acknowledgement of the increasing identification of creativity as the raw material of the knowledge economy (Florida, 2003). Creativity is not just the motivation for producing art; it is the key to entrepreneurialism and devising new approaches to complex contemporary urban challenges (Matarasso, 2001), including that of sustainability in urban development (Bianchini, 1999).

² *FutureWest* is founded on detailed studies of the social, economic and environmental dimensions of Greater Western Sydney. These include: Urban Frontiers Program (2002; 2003) WSROC (2003); Department of Human Geography, Macquarie University (2003); PPM and CSIRO (2004); SGS Economics and Planning (2004a; 2004b). These studies are available from the WSROC website www.wsroc.com.au/regionalfutures.

The Strategy articulates a *cultural framework* as the basis for ongoing implementation of a *cultural vision* for the Western Sydney region over the next 25 years. The framework outlines key regional cultural development issues and describes policies to achieve six strategic directions, supported by action plans detailing long term goals, short term outcomes, critical actions and proposed partners.

WSROC's initiative is significant in that it is a region-wide initiative which comes from *within* the region. As Barrett points rightly points out, the first major report on arts development in Western Sydney, commissioned by the Australia Council in 1990, is flawed in that:

Unconsciously or not, the report sets up its powerful role of outside observer by outlining its need to investigate, to set up an authoritative document on western Sydney ... The relationship becomes one in which the centre exercises power over its subject. Western Sydney is researched; it is not the researcher. The Australia Council, through its consultants, assumes the role of the expert on western Sydney, presuming that westies need information on themselves but that they are unable or are prevented from finding out things for themselves. (Barrett, 1991: 23)

Indeed, Barrett argues that reducing the complexities of communities and their cultures to community arts is a mistake. As she points out, many cultural activities derive from community, including 'ballroom dancing performances at Panthers Penrith Leagues Club':

One could argue that popular culture activities such as going to the football or the movies, skating, graffiti, bingo and local historical clubs are the predominant cultural activities in the western Sydney region. If the cultural life of western Sydney is to be the subject of research and analysis then the aforementioned cultural practices need to be discussed and contextualised in order to ensure the relevancy [sic] of any conclusions. (Barrett, 1991: 23)

The intervening 15 years have certainly seen a significant amount of scholarly research into the cultural life – in the broadest sense – of many communities in the region. (Indeed, much of this activity having been undertaken by the University of Western Sydney itself, and significantly in recent years by its Centre for Cultural Research, which has taken extremely seriously the challenge to understand the complexities of the cultural life of the region and its communities.)

Barrett found it 'bizarre' in 1991 'that such important cultural activities as movie going, skating, graffiti, ballroom dancing, waterskiing, videoing, etc are not included in an analysis of the arts in western Sydney', believing that 'not to acknowledge them surely deems them irrelevant or at least not being as serious a pursuit as going to an art gallery or to a publically [sic] funded cultural event' (Barrett, 1991: 25). Yet, despite the now commonplace rhetoric that the 'culture' in cultural policy is about the 'whole way of life' of the community, it remains the case that the agencies charged with supporting cultural development and activity at State and Federal levels continue to see their role as arts-focussed. It seems that it is only at local government level that the integration of arts and broader community-based cultural activity, has any chance of productive integration.

A cultural vision for the year 2030

The *Regional Cultural Strategy*, entitled *Authoring Contemporary Australia*, attempts to articulate a vision for the year 2030. To paraphrase this vision, the Strategy hopes to see that in thirty years' time:

- People in Greater Western Sydney lead fulfilling and creative lives
- Greater Western Sydney Councils lead the way in best-practice cultural planning
- Increased civic participation strengthens a sense of attachment to communities
- State and Federal Government and private investment frame local government's role in the region's cultural development
- An accessible network of complementary creative spaces across the region supports all forms of creative endeavour
- The importance of the region's diverse heritage, arts and culture in Australia's cultural development is well known
- The region retains its skilled creative graduates
- Cultural and creative industries contribute to the regional economy
- The people of Sydney's Greater West are proud of their culture
- ***In short — Greater Western Sydney is the author of contemporary Australian life.***

The Strategy's concluding assertion that Greater Western Sydney is the 'author of contemporary Australian life' is explicitly aspirational. It aims to situate the region, not as one requiring welfare, but as a site of cultural leadership that the nation as a whole can look to for guidance in dealing with the complexities of contemporary urban life. As Burton has argued, 'if we are now to reinvent our national identity as the cultural policy makers would have us do, with multiculturalism as the linchpin, then Western Sydney is not marginal but central to this development' (Burton, 1994: 34).

The *Regional Cultural Strategy* aims to address the region's challenges through activity in six strategic directions. These are:

Strategic direction 1: Achieve planning outcomes that originate from community values.

This strategy aims to promote forward-thinking, inclusive public policies as an ingredient in regional cultural development, and to forge institutions that exemplify a generosity towards community in their public and urban planning and organisational management policies³.

Strategic direction 2: Arrive at distinctive and creative places. Key to this direction is establishing a network of facilities that support people to produce, contemplate and enjoy arts and culture. Each facility would be targeted to the specific cultural needs and talents of its local community, whilst contributing to the growth and sustainability of a complementary regional network of quality flagship, specialised and local cultural facilities.

Strategic direction 3: Tell the region's diverse cultural stories. Greater Western Sydney is dogged by an image of disadvantage, crime and inertia. Although powerful, this

³ One key initiative to support these efforts that is currently being undertaken in partnership between WSROC and the Centre for Cultural Research at UWS is the development of a powerful new information management portal, the **Digital Cultural Atlas for GWS**, which aims to manage cultural information for the region and integrate it with other planning data. Based on a GIS system with a sophisticated indexing capacity and image collection, the Atlas maps cultural assets and enables the user to search for information, projects and photos/ videos on specific themes or locations.

image bears little resemblance to the everyday experiences of most Greater Western Sydney residents, and barely scratches the surface of life in the region. This direction aims to promote a diverse and nuanced array of narratives and representations of the cultural life of the region.

Strategic direction 4: Cultivate a creative regional spirit. This direction focuses on ‘soft’ infrastructure, particularly cross-disciplinary networks. The aim is to nurture the conditions that enable creativity to flourish and to open up opportunities for all Greater Western Sydney people to be participants in lively, self-renewing cultural life.

Strategic direction 5: Realise the region’s creative potential. This direction focuses on the creative heart of Greater Western Sydney, that is, the artists, entrepreneurs and arts workers for whom creative invention and artistic interpretation is core business. Their skills and works are the soft infrastructure necessary to sustain a vibrant and self-replenishing creative economy.

Strategic direction 6: Secure equitable cultural investments in GWS. The aim of this direction is to secure equitable State and Federal Government investment in the cultural development of Greater Western Sydney, commensurate with its status as a geographically dispersed area accommodating almost half of the growing metropolitan population.

The region’s existing network of cultural infrastructure

The networking approach that has served the region so well to date forms a strong foundation for its cultural development: through joint regional programming initiatives like ‘Western Front’, through the region’s developing network of complementary cultural institutions and facilities, through information distribution networks like *Artfiles* and the Digital Cultural Atlas, through linking and bridging disciplines, and through strong articulations as both hard and soft infrastructure are built up. Ensuring each place within the region has its own ‘magnet’ that reflects the local community and talents therein will give the region a distinctive constellation of networked cultural infrastructures. Finally, the network of councils, organisations and individuals who contributed to the Regional Cultural Strategy have provided a cohesive and sustainable approach to cultural development.

In this section we provide a brief survey of the region’s current network of infrastructure for cultural development — its handful of flagship cultural institutions, distributed network of cultural infrastructure, and dense constellations of cultural activity — before outlining how the Regional Cultural Strategy looks to the future.

Flagship cultural institutions

The region’s emerging cultural identity is significantly enhanced by the increasing visibility of its ‘flagship’ cultural institutions. With the capacity to act as potent cultural symbols, cultural institutions are particularly suited to the task of regional self-representation, because they can build a sophisticated image that is genuinely

representative of the region's cultural diversity, giving 'voice' and expressing multiple strands of meaning.

The particular conditions of Western Sydney have tended to facilitate the development of a new kind of multi-disciplinary cultural institution, well suited to the task of providing diverse cultural services to a significant segment of the State's population. Developing new ways of engaging communities and creating innovative work that expresses the region's diverse identities and voices, these organisations provide opportunities and activities for a broad range of artists and audiences, mitigating the geographical dispersal of the region.

The three regional public art galleries – Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Penrith Regional Gallery & Lewers Bequest and Campbelltown Arts Centre – have become icons of Western Sydney creative energy. Similarly, Information and Cultural Exchange, a new media-based cultural development organisation and publisher of the *Artfiles* directory and website, has grown despite unstable project-to-project funding to provide vital cultural infrastructure to the region. The major performance venues in Western Sydney, the Parramatta Riverside Theatre and the Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre showcase local excellence and give the region's population local access to national and international productions.

The programs of all these organisations investigate important social issues affecting Western Sydney communities, as well as celebrating personal and regional achievements. The galleries hold permanent collections of contemporary and historical art, generally themed according to specific periods of Australian art history, and often including works of national significance that depict the local area, notable local artists and donations.

Overall, the distinctive character of Western Sydney's cultural sector is shaped by the activities of these flagship institutions. The sector is characterised by:

- Active engagement with the region's economy, social issues, history
- Active engagement with the region's ethnic, cultural and religious diversity
- Collaboration on projects and joint programming with other organisations within and outside the region
- Significant and long term financial commitment from local government, but with a level of independence from Council
- Organisations and facilities that are producers, not just presenters
- Different kinds of arts practice are combined and hybridised: CCD, Fine Art, contemporary practice, cross-artform practice, multidisciplinary programs, heritage, research and development, and issue based social history work
- Work that is recognized as cutting edge and best practice outside the region – to international level
- Increasing attraction of artists, collaborators and audiences from outside the region.

A network of cultural infrastructure

Western Sydney's 14 Local Government Authorities play a key integrative role in the region's tiered spatial structure, through striking a balance between local distinctiveness and regional and sub-regional cooperation. The availability of dollar-for-dollar matching

funding for local government-initiated infrastructure and activity projects via the State Government's Western Sydney Arts Strategy programs has given local government an incentive to show leadership in local cultural development and planning. The increasing levels of local investment has fostered the growth of smaller cultural organisations and provided them with access to vital infrastructures.

Greater Western Sydney is home to a diversity of museums, galleries and collecting institutions, including regional museums (for example, Liverpool Regional Museum), social history museums (Fairfield City Museum), house museums (Rouse Hill house) and heritage centres (in Wollondilly and Parramatta). These places and their collections are integral to the identity of the region, and intensify our understanding of the historical development of NSW and Australia.

Libraries are responding to the challenges of the digital age by moving towards a more formal 'learning centre' role, providing entry points to cultural participation, information and technology and social exchange.

Each local government area has neighbourhood centres and community halls available for hire. New multi-purpose-built community hubs such as the Castle Hill Library and Community Centre offer accessible and inclusive cultural opportunities for the whole community.

Constellations of local cultural activity

The myriad clubs, religious organisations and migrant services are often the social hubs from which artistic and cultural activity of the region emerges. Artists from culturally diverse communities often share a desire to maintain cultural traditions for their community, to express cultural identity and build community solidarity, as well as a personal interest to develop or pass on their creative skills.

The region's artist landscape is rich with emerging artists, including students, young hip-hop performers and aerosol artists, newly-arrived artists who are seeking to re-establish their practice in Australia, as well as amateur and hobby artists. Most artists in the region support their creative practice with other employment, often in a non-arts related field. Artist directories within the region, including *Artfiles* (Information and Cultural Exchange 2004) and those held by Councils, list up to 2000 individual artists.

Greater Western Sydney is home to numerous artist organisations, from community theatre companies and radio clubs, through visual arts and craft groups, writing societies and music clubs, to heritage and historical societies and multi-artform membership collectives.

A keystone practice in Greater Western Sydney is community cultural development (CCD). CCD is a strategic and proven process for building confident, expressive communities. Through creative and social activity, CCD fosters a safe forum for people to share experiences, negotiate ideas and appreciate different frames of reference and knowledges.

Most councils host festivals and events, including local celebrations recognising national events, and support community-initiated festivals and neighbourhood events that celebrate local culture and involve community partners. Greater Western Sydney organisations also participate as partners in Sydney metropolitan events and festivals.

Conclusion

As Tony Bennett has recently observed, the marked inequalities which characterise relations to culture are ‘strongly connected to some of the main drivers of social stratification more generally’, particularly occupational class position and level of education. There is, indeed, ‘little room for doubt regarding the regularity of interconnections between cultural, social and economic inequalities’ (2006: 239).

Socioeconomic disadvantage coupled with high levels of cultural diversity have provoked ingenious and resourceful cultural practices in Western Sydney. This response may parallel the observation by Kling et al. of a high level of cultural vitality in Orange County, which they describe in terms of an increasing ‘cosmopolitanism’ — ‘an interest in, knowledge of, and appreciation for many parts of the world’ (1991: xi). Western Sydney’s many cultural organisations do more than present art; they have evolved to perform multiple roles in community development, mentoring and networking. However, this network of organisations meets the cultural development needs of almost half of Sydney’s population. Despite their exemplary work, the community’s demand for creative working spaces, professional guidance, peer support and audience development, exceeds the capacities of our institutions. Recognition and long term commitment to these pivotal cultural organisations would secure the cultural life of the region, and allow the social and economic development outcomes that flow from it.

In Greater Western Sydney, we are seeing a convergence of the complex socio-cultural, economic and environmental challenges facing the world today, and without theoretical brooding or glossy fanfare, these issues are being worked out in the dynamics of everyday community life. This fertile mixture arouses debate that forges fresh new ways of thinking and adds to a bank of creative skills, knowledges and stories, offering new insights to address today’s problems.

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