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## Vision and Value

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Anticipating cuts to the arts in the New South Wales state budget earlier this year, the *Sydney Morning Herald* suggested that the city's star is waning. The Victorian Government's commitment to arts and culture and Melbourne's bid to become a UNESCO City of Literature had attracted comment on the Labour Day weekend. Anne Summers and Andrew Frost both warned that Sydney stood to lose its competitive advantage as Australia's global city. Both appealed to Sydney's sense of itself as edgy, sophisticated and innovative to argue for the importance of investment in cultural assets and resources.

In a piece headlined 'Down South, it's a totally different culture', Summers tallied up Victoria's investment in arts and culture: a \$250-million upgrade of the Southbank cultural precinct to include redevelopment of St Kilda Road and construction of a new recital hall; and further development of the State Library, begun by the Kennett government with a \$186-million dollar investment, to make it a centre for Books and Ideas.<sup>1</sup> These plans are designed to rebrand Melbourne and add to the 3.5 million visitors who currently attend the venues.

The visionary thinking that Summers applauds links arts and culture with urban amenity and with economic benefits derived from tourism and the attraction of new investment. She reports on her recent visit to Melbourne, and highlights the pleasures of the night-time economy. Invoking the traditional Melbourne-Sydney rivalry, she underscores the value of cultural resources. Melbourne's plans will overcome the disadvantages of 'flat landscape, lack of harbour and inhospitable climate', and the city will overtake Sydney as 'the place to be'. The city's natural resources alone will not be enough to sustain Sydney's position in the global economy.

Andrew Frost pursued a similar tack. His Melbourne visit focused on its 'amazing art galleries and museums' and the 'really good' Federation Square. Sydney comes off poorly in his estimation of cultural value: 'Sydney's public art museums can really compare themselves favourably only to Perth ... or possibly Darwin'.<sup>2</sup> Even Brisbane has invested in culture: the \$100-million Gallery of Modern Art might look like 'an inflated beach house', but it is 'actually very nice and the art inside is excellent, too'. Frost's irony transposes to Sydney values traditionally associated with Melbourne. Where the 'grand southern capital' has been transformed, Sydney has become complacent and dull.

Frost's target is leadership. He is critical of leaders in the cultural sector and not optimistic about leadership in politics. While Summers promotes economic benefits, Frost is primarily concerned with the wellbeing of the cultural sector, and with support for contemporary arts. He appeals for 'a bold cultural

## *Who Profits from the Arts?*

declaration' regarding the value of arts and culture, but concedes that it is unlikely to come from leaders who believe the arts exist in a sphere apart from other dimensions of social and commercial life.

This tale of two cities raises questions that go to the heart of the research project on which we have been engaged for the last three years, *Sustaining Culture: The Role of Performing Arts Centres*. It is an ARC-funded collaboration between Griffith University and Australia's capital-city cultural Centres: the Sydney Opera House, the Adelaide Festival Centre (AFC), the Arts Centre, Melbourne, and the Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC). Our aim is to produce new research that describes the cultural, educational and economic values of these centres; to develop a more effective language with which to convey the value of performing arts centres; and to devise new strategies for engaging with arts, community, business and political counterparts.

We have one further aim—and we share it with the present series of *Platform Papers*—namely to encourage national cultural debate. So, in the pages that follow we propose to ask a number of important questions: Why build publicly-funded, site-specific arts centres? Why do we hold culture to be a public good? How do we measure its value? Since the 1960s our major cities have competed in the creation of cultural icons worth billions of dollars of investment; and generally the public has endorsed these ambitions. Funding them, however, is quite a different story.

We write from Brisbane, where it is widely believed that Expo 88 has 'matured' the state capital as a city, transforming it from a country town into a vibrant