

The Power of Persuasion: How to Build a Creative City



an Arts and Public Life Breakfast Lecture
at the Sofitel Wentworth Hotel, Sydney, Wednesday, 13th June 2007
by David Borger, Lord Mayor of Parramatta and State MP for Granville

Thanks John and Martin. Good morning and thanks for being here and for your interest in building creative cities. And thanks to the Sofitel Wentworth for playing host.

As the new state member for Granville, in the NSW Parliament last month I gave my inaugural address – we don't have maidens anymore! I spoke about the emotional and social dislocation I felt as a teenager growing up in the fibro housing suburbs of Western Sydney. I went to 10 schools—five public and five Catholic in two states, New South Wales and Queensland, and lived at various times with mum, with dad, and two sets of grandparents. I was a difficult child and caused my various families no end of grief. I wagged school, smoked cigarettes and generally got into trouble. I ran away from home, if that was the right word for it. I got involved with the wrong crowd, graffiti artists and school dropouts. I became a ward of the state in Queensland. I ran away from that situation too, rejoined mum in Parramatta, left school pretty fast and got a job as a process worker in Newtown, when Newtown had factories. This was the most boring job I ever had, like Charlie Chaplin's in *Modern Times*. I picked up springs from a bucket and dropped them into a machine to shave the ends off—repeatedly, unendingly, eternally, depletingly. I was not happy doing it. I became convinced there must be more to life, and maybe the path to it was, once again, to study.

I went on to study urban design and – since those teenage years – took an interest in how you build well-designed cities and meaningful community spaces. I also grew interested in how you can bring creative energy and engagement to the suburbs of my youth.... and change the feeling that real ambition and creative success can only be achieved by leaving town and going to the metropolis.

By the time I served my first term as Lord Mayor in Parramatta in 1999 I realised that my boyhood experience was not so rare. I realised that the greatest challenge for a city like Parramatta was to curb the brain drain of our creative young people to the bright lights and urban villages of Sydney.

Sure, Parramatta may be the sixth largest CBD in Australia. Sure, the economy was beginning to boom, but we faced an urgent task to show that this is a city where you can happily live and work, this is an attractive and dynamic place where you can stay, you can grow and thrive. Our challenge was to counter outdated images that Western Sydney is some kind of cultural desert. We needed to change the Westie myth that this is a suburban wasteland without artistic activity or opportunity, without wealth or reflection. Old images and snobberies like these are hard to shift.

Most of these perceptions are absurd. Western Sydney is home to two million people. After the cities of Sydney and Melbourne, Western Sydney is the third largest economy in Australia. The NSW Government sees this. It has made the infrastructure and further development of Western

Sydney – with Parramatta at its centre – a priority in the Sydney Metropolitan Strategy. Housing, transport, industry, jobs are all considered.

But as with most people who talk economic development, few talk about how to make Sydney's regional centres more interesting. Few talk about building a cultural infrastructure and how we seed a sense of place and belonging. Attracting jobs is one thing but what about attracting people? How do we attract and retain the young, creative and talented?

And so to shift these perceptions and better the quality of our civic life – and to help billboard a newly dynamic city – Parramatta has turned to its artists.

Our ambitious arts and culture plan for the next ten years – and some of its early outcomes – has already won four Local Government Cultural Awards in just the last two years. I'll talk in a moment about the consultative process and the political leadership which made this plan so unique – and some of our early accomplishments.

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Of course there's nothing unique now about local governments having cultural plans. Indeed, since Parramatta Council adapted our plan two years ago, the Department of Local Government has spelt out guidelines for councils to come up with their own. And Arts NSW is now unlikely to give grants to councils unless they have a cultural plan. Apparently 62 NSW Councils now have a cultural policy or plan; 40 are developing one and 50 don't yet have one. It would seem we have come a long way since Liverpool Council, another star of Western Sydney, became in 1991 the first local government in Australia to appoint a cultural planner.

I don't want to overstate the importance of cultural planners – because I suspect that there is whole industry of these people trying with variable effectiveness to influence the cultural life of cities and Towns. I also need to confess some of my own cynicism – that great cities are not created by cultural planners but by communities and artists who value creative life. Perhaps the most transformative actions are those which produce space – spaces to dream and create, to feel safe and valued and then to just take a hike and allow culture to develop. I'm talking here about studios for artists writers centres rehearsal spaces for actors and dancers and even market places – cheap consumption spaces more encouraging of fashion than Westfield's and Stockland Malls.

Having said that, these things can only happen if they are embedded by local authorities in their structural plans and strategic plans and development plans... in their management plans and budget plans and political plans. And to do these you need courage and inspiration ...and enlightened vital planning.

Plans and policies are one thing; it is quite another thing to have the money and staff to put them in action and to actually build and maintain cultural infrastructure. Things may be changing but in 2005, when Parramatta announced its new cultural plan, there were only 8 fulltime cultural planners employed by councils across NSW and only 3 part-time ones.

And their visions cost money. We've just had news that the reported cost blow-out for the Hastings/Port Macquarie Arts, Conference and Entertainment Centre has gone from \$7m to now \$60m. There is a lesson here perhaps to not build big iconic buildings in the name of cultural plans ...but this sort of debt blow-out for capital infrastructure is impossible for the small budgets of local councils.

Local government is well placed to read the often diverse and complex cultural currents and needs of their communities, and to judge how resources can be best used to maximise artistic opportunity and expression. But they can't do it alone.

We are under significant community pressure to pick up from other levels of government the provision of so many important new social and human services – and now culture is amongst them. Combine this with the infrastructure backlog – the urgent maintenance needed for our footpaths, river ways and parks – and councils are being squeezed. And we are especially challenged in NSW where rates – our principal source of revenue – are pegged.

One avenue of finance available for Councils is through the development process. Councils can require the provision of public art in large new buildings in town and city centres by making this a part of local planning laws. Developers can also be required to pay contributions, a Section 94 levy, of say 3% of the value of the building towards worthwhile arts projects in the local area. Parramatta was onto this even before we forged an arts plan and we continue to have these provisions in our public works plan. Importantly, this illustrates how arts and culture must not be a niche concern with its own isolated policy but an automatic and integrated part of all Council strategies and policies – much like environmental concerns now are.

But beyond these measures, if Councils are seriously going to build culture plans and infrastructure, then they need new finance. If Councils are to raise their heads above the traditional concerns of rates, roads and rubbish – and have a vision now for culture and a creative economy – then they need to also plan for its financial maintenance. Parramatta has done this. But like all Councils we also look to Government to give the building of cultural infrastructure the same value they give to the provision of housing, transport and industry. And especially so in Western Sydney.

The NSW Arts Ministry has forged with the Local Government and Shires Associations three Cultural Accords to promote cultural activity and participation at the local level. These Accords have been going since 1997: they express important and achievable strategic goals for developing local arts and culture. We are now in the middle of the Third Accord. The NSW government pays for the employment of one policy officer whose brief I understand is to help smaller councils get started on their own cultural plans. But what next? Cultural visions need more support than this.

Here I think Australians should question a system of government where the biggest and wealthiest level – the Commonwealth – has no responsibility for the way our cities are run and supported. Let's hope that Kevin Rudd and a resurgent Federal Labour Party will take some inspiration from what Whitlam, Howe and Keating did, variously investing in the sewerage of Western Sydney, stimulating local economies or in the Better Cities program. Cultural regeneration and industries are surely now ripe for Commonwealth attention. And yet I don't at the moment fancy winning that political battle in Canberra!

To win that battle we need strong local champions who see the arts as a cornerstone to building communities and also building great Cities and Towns. Sadly we have few of these at the moment. And we have few politicians able to or interested enough to make the arts an electoral winner. My experience in Parramatta suggests it is possible to build a political constituency around the arts. My regret is that of those many in Western Sydney who are making or have made fortunes in Western Sydney, few of them live in the West and hardly any contribute philanthropically back to it. The region needs more people like John Marsden. He is rightly a hero out Campbelltown way for the energy with which he demanded political attention and cultural resources for his home town.

For one, local champions like this must question why there are now no public arts teaching institutions beyond the borders of Sydney City. With the Film School moving soon from Epping to the Showground, and vocational drama and now dance courses finally axed at the

University of Western Sydney, the process continues with arts education in all forms being sucked backed to the metropolis.

Of course, Sydney is a global city – but most of its citizens live in a region which is now without cultural educational facilities. Similarly Arts NSW holds some valuable real estate in arts facilities, with the most recent addition being the Carriageworks complex in Redfern. But Arts NSW apparently shrinks from investing in any arts property west of Leichhardt. This inequity must change.

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And yet in Parramatta we have created some good news and created a political unity of purpose to build a creative city. Let me show you how we forged that resolve into our Arts Facilities and Cultural Framework.

The plan identifies the cultural and heritage facilities we need, the ways to build community participation and the steps to attract new creative industries into identified precincts. I'm talking about facilities for artists, writers and performers ... but also ways of attracting filmmakers, designers, architects, multimedia and technology companies, advertising agencies and all those who create ideas and content.

These arts and related creative industries drive new economies. And they also help create an attractive and sophisticated city in which to live, work and invest.

(PIC Map) The plan is built around the unique position of Parramatta as the demographic centre of Sydney and the central hub – and creative hub – of Western Sydney. This is recognised in the Sydney Metropolitan Strategy.

(PIC Aerial) Underpinning this role are significant infrastructure developments like the near completion of what will be the third largest justice precinct in Australia the opening last year of the new Bus Railway Interchange ... and the massive new revitalisation of Civic Place in the heart of the city.

The strength of the plan was that it was put in the context of other arts policies at federal, regional and state level

And even more vitally it was embedded into Council's other existing plans and strategies and, most importantly, into a key destination of our Strategic Plan 2025. This itself involved thorough community consultation through a resident's panel of some 1800 citizens – who of seven destinations or goals for Parramatta wanted a city that was "innovative and inspirational".

(PIC Committee) Equally important was the diversity of those who made up the working party for the arts plan– a spread of councillors and the Lord Mayor, a spread of staff and the General Manger ... a consultative process with the community and a spread of industry specialists ... including John Montgomery.

We evolved three linked themes: to grow in Parramatta our identity, our contemporary culture and our prosperity.

(PIC Trust) The first priority was the foundation of a cultural trust and the earmarking of a regular amount from Council's parking mater revenue ...

(PIC Old Kings School) The long-term vision for the city is to develop distinct cultural precincts of supply and production and consumption, matched to areas of historical heritage, retail and cafés

(PIC Cumberland Hospital)

(PIC Artists Studios) A key early outcome is the opening of fifteen **studios** deliberately in the heart of the city and designed to house both emerging and established visual artists – and encourage their participation in the community. Partly financed by the NSW Government, Parramatta is the only council in NSW to make such an investment.

(PIC Studios) The Studios have already attracted further investment from other areas of State and Fed Government support.

(PIC Animation) *Animating the City* is a key means to change how people experience and perceive Parramatta through activity and surprise on the street.

(PIC Mall) Advised by pedestrian studies into how people use the city and perceive safety, we pulled up the Mall built 21 years ago and introduced partial traffic along with public art and new landscaping.

(PIC Lane) Public art was extended too to a new laneways and small spaces strategy. **Laneways** are a feature of Parramatta's original Georgian grid but, unlike in Melbourne, we are yet to reinvent them into the safe and distinctive thoroughfares they could be.

(PIC Riverbeats) Civic events reviewed and new quality events now established to better target changing perceptions of the city eg. Riverbeats.

(PIC Night-time) The Centre for Cultural Research at our nearby campus of the University of Western Sydney is collaborating with council on three vital research projects for the future of the city. An important one is on the character and significance of Parramatta's night-time economy and how it can be further developed – to improve the liveability, appeal and economy of the city for both visitor and resident.

(PIC Riverside) Popular and critical success now of the Riverside Theatres is integral to the cultural profile of the city, and Church/Eat Street in particular – especially with its festival partnerships.

(PIC Stories) Our arts plan also details a priority to better manage our unique **historic precinct** – and better articulate and promote the different themes which link these diverse sites and stories. We call it *Telling the Parramatta Story*. Tourism of course is an important dividend of building a creative city and seeding a proud local identity and ownership around Parramatta's unique heritage.

(PIC Stories) Interpretative media and public art is central to building these physical linkages to sites – as is building partnerships with all levels of government.

(PIC Contemporary) Our focus is not just on a convict era sandstone history of Parramatta but also on the contemporary stories of an astonishingly rich, culturally diverse Parramatta.

(PIC Gallery) And with the same focus on contemporary art, one vital new social/cultural infrastructure is the incorporation into the new Civic Place of what is the first public gallery in Parramatta. It will actually be a converged new library, heritage centre and **art gallery** centred in the development: a model of how this convergence works for combined arts facilities.

(PIC Civic Place) Significantly the art gallery in this New Generation Centre will be focused on new media and technologies. The gallery will have a strong interactive presence in Civic Place and also reach to interested audiences far beyond Parramatta.

(PIC Gallery) At the heart of this massive new commercial and residential inner city space, the New Generation Centre will be a cultural landmark. The gallery will house travelling exhibitions coming to Parramatta. But the gallery's own multimedia focus includes the capacity for visitors to interact with and download from giant outdoor screens through mobiles and text

messaging – harnessing an interest in new technology which is universal across Western Sydney.

(PIC Design) Our ten year plan to complete this cultural infrastructure converges with a new City resolve to raise the general design quality of the public domain and our urban design standards. An urban planning team, backed up by expert design review panels, is in place and since 2003 Parramatta has held biennial design excellence awards.

Given current and coming big developments in the city, it is timely for the political leadership to assert this design rigour, this care for high design standards. We have opened up all these large projects to competition to ensure the best architectural resolution.

(LAST SLIDE)

Richard Florida has written much on creative cities and the use of artists and the so-called creative class to drive urban renewal in America. Cultural consultant Dr John Montgomery, who advised Parramatta, also discussed with us UK examples of arts-led recoveries in places like Newcastle, Sheffield and Dublin.

The lessons apply equally to regions like Western Sydney. Investment in places like Parramatta, Penrith and Liverpool will only work if there is also investment in culture and in building a connection to place. Excellence in creative industries and endeavour, and indeed in all aspects of work, need not to be confined to just the metropolis, to just the centre of Sydney. Creative excellence can also be seeded in the suburbs.

Parramatta's integrated and cross- disciplinary arts plan – and the political leadership that drives it – is helping to expand the *supply* of that arts excellence. In turn, at the other end, the consumption and participation in the arts will grow too.

Our focus on the arts as excellence is different from the habit of most councils to invest in local arts as a means of building communities, of answering the cultural needs of so-called amateur individuals and communities. There is a tension between these two goals, of building a gallery for arts excellence or building a gallery for the local arts society. Both are worthy goals and both ultimately grow the education, the supply and the consumption of the arts. But as I've said Councils can't do everything!

I hope that we begin to understand that when a neighbourhood, a city and a region, half the size of Ireland loses the brightest and best each year to Coogee and Clovelly and Camperdown then we also lose our tolerance and spark, our ability to influence the creative life and the public life of those busy creative people left behind.

David Borger,

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