

‘Making Facilities And Management More Responsive To Community Needs’
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I will begin by introducing myself. I have a background in teaching, and within the arts my background is largely a technical one with a focus on stage management. Both areas have given me a solid base in negotiation of and balancing competing claims. My work within facilities has varied from Deakin University’s Phoenix Theatre which was a venue totally dedicated to community hirers, Darebin Arts and Entertainment Centre and Frankston Arts Centre, to my current role as Director of Cultural Facilities at the City of Greater Dandenong

At City of Greater Dandenong have responsibility for

- Dandenong Community Arts Centre and Walker Street Gallery, a community based gallery that is growing in reputation in the region and a community arts centre utilised by a range of clients.
- Heritage Hill Museum and Historic Gardens, both of which have been established for a number of years. However the level of what one might call professional management has varied over the years. The focus of this facility has developed over the last two years into a leisure destination with a heritage flavour.
- The Castle. This is a \$1.2 million refurbishment of an old hall, which was mainly used by scouts, into a music venue capable of accommodating 300 patrons with a real youth focus. This is due to commence operations within a month.
- The Drum Theatre. This is a \$14 million redevelopment of the Dandenong Town Hall which involved restoring an 1890 façade and building a brand new 520 seat proscenium arch theatre. It was officially opened in February and is fully operational at this stage although we still have “builders in residence” (rather different to artists in residence but they both seem to manage to make a lot of mess) and expect them to be with us for another month or so. Council has approved a long term funding model that will provide a professional theatre at accessible rates for the community and allow the presentation of a program of events.

These are all great projects and lovely places to work, but today I want to briefly talk about the community consultation processes surrounding the Castle and the Drum projects. These processes will provide some examples of making facilities and management more responsive to community needs, particularly prior to them being built. Then I will also have a quick look at some of the operational ways to help this responsiveness.

There are a couple of givens that will underline the examples I have today. One is that in order to respond to our communities you need something to respond to and that involves consultation. But as we know that’s not always easy. It is almost a given that the aims in looking after a facility in as professional a manner as possible and the goals of those from the community making use of the facility are often completely opposed.

So one might be forgiven for thinking that when building two new facilities with a strong and diverse community and an active sense of cultural development in the City, we might turn these opposing forces in the same direction.

Well yes and no.

The key learning in bringing these together is in making sure that the goals for facility are clear, clearly understood, accepted (or at least agreed to disagree). The accompanying corollary to this is that this process is an often long, tortuous and frustrating one. I had two very different experiences of this process in relation to 'The Castle' and 'The Drum'. In fact it has only been very recently that in the frenetic activity from opening two buildings within four months that I have been able to reflect on the processes.

I'll start with the process I personally haven't enjoyed and hopefully point out some positives and negatives of it. As a project, the Castle started as a refurbishment project for a different facility, the Muso Network Venue in Noble Park. The Muso Network is a Council program for young people and as a group they were actively involved in securing around \$250,000 worth of funding for an upgrade to their existing facility.

At some stage what was known as Armytage Hall came up on the planners' radar and a decision was made to upgrade it with the Muso Network in mind, as it was in a better location, much larger and thus could offer more to a variety of users. Another \$1 million of Council funds were allocated to the project, the change approved by the CSF and the project commenced. That's where things got a bit difficult.

The move to the larger facility meant that the Muso Network were no longer able to have sole use and management rights to the facility the way they had in the smaller venue. They would be the main users with priority bookings and no charges, etc, but other community groups would also have access to the facility. This would involve proper management supervision and therefore funding of the facility and provide a range of training opportunities, vastly improved equipment and so on. All up it seemed a reasonable thing.

However, at some point someone didn't tell the Muso Network that. The chain of communication certainly broke down so that there council officers responsible for both the programs and the facility were working in one direction and a key community group were travelling in a completely different one.

About then, I joined the City of Greater Dandenong. You can imagine the reception I got when I sat down with a group of 20 young people and enthusiastically started telling them about the facility, how it would work, how they could operate within it and so on. Not great! In fact so badly that after two or three subsequent meetings I had to remove myself from the discussion table altogether and hand over to others to work through the issues with me in the background.

These issues are still somewhat up in the air today. In the meantime there has been changes to key youth services staff, meaning additional points of view have been injected into the mix. Councillors have been lobbied, and as is their want, they tried to steer the process at a Council level.

Whilst it might seem that the community group has a reasonable right to expect that they would continue to operate in the new facility as they had in the old, that simply would not be possible. There were a number of reasons for this, not least of which was their ability to do so. And it is

only now, when the keys are about to be handed over, that the specific aspirations of the Muso Network for the facility are being responded to.

But responding to them at this end of the process means that the operation of the building is in a bit of a holding pattern which will hopefully only last a matter of months. I am confident that as everything is already out on the table, so to speak, the eventual model will have the needs of the Muso Network and a range of other Youth Services programs and other community groups met as well.

The couple of up-sides to this consultation model, (if you could call it that), are that:

- the building program was spectacularly smooth and a wonderful result has been achieved.
- the building has been completed on time and basically on budget. Unheard of for these sorts of projects.

Now we certainly were lucky with our architects and builders, but having all those with some stake in the building step back from the process has meant that the package is very unified, and whilst it has limitations as a building, those limitations are clearly understood.

So, one process we have experienced, the development of 'The Castle' had these features:

- limited communication and consultation with the community until late in the project
- although late, the communication and consultation will have positive outcomes
- a smooth building project
- a slight delay in operation
- now that the building is understood, the programs can be better tailored to the environment.

The other process I will discuss involves 'The Drum'.

'The Drum Theatre', formerly known as Dandenong Town Hall, is a project that has seen the conservation and redevelopment of an 1890s building, the demolition of a pretty ugly and almost derelict 1940s Town Hall and the building of a very striking 520 seat theatre. It is set in the heart of Dandenong and has already proved to be a significant factor in kick starting the revitalisation of central Dandenong to which the State Government has pledged close to \$300 million.

There is some debate as to how long this project has gone, however there is a clear path back over ten years to get the building up and running. The actual building project has been going just over two years now, but the process of consultation goes way back. At every step of planning, the community was involved, and in each and every decision about the direction and future, the Council had input. This was a building that hundreds of thousands of people had danced and sang in, and every second person I meet in Dandenong tells me how they meet their husband or wife there. It is a building with rich community connections.

As an example, the process of finding the right name took less than a month, with approval gained over six months of discussion, consultation, public polls, newspaper debate and council deliberation.

Just as a side point, James Morrison was one of the artists who appeared at the opening of the theatre. He wrote to me afterwards praising the sense of intimacy of the building and the acoustics. His only suggested improvement was to rename it 'The Trumpet'!

Whilst the name is obviously important, you can imagine the process and delays involved in deciding the type of venue, its location, its aims and funding implications. I wasn't part of all those debates and may I say I am thrilled that I wasn't. But what it has done is meant that decisions at this stage of the process are much clearer and easier to make. There is a compass and a course that has been set and so operations, the marketing of the venue and so on have been able to get up to speed quickly and very successfully.

The down-side? Well apart from the delays in the facility, simple things such as what the community could have got five years ago for the same money would have been quite different. The plans have, in essence, changed little over that time, except to accommodate a declining ability to fund the project with a given amount of dollars. The process is bloody hard and often very frustrating, in many ways beyond the speed at which things happen, and once people have been involved there is an obligation to continue to inform and involve them, which almost compounds the difficulty.

So, the second process (with The Drum Theatre) has had

- lots of consultation – very early in the process
- delays a plenty
- changes necessitated by the actual delays
- a tedious approach to decision making
- but in the end, a building ready to work as soon as it is ready.

And now I want to mention a couple of other traps that I've fallen into over the last two or so years in trying to respond to the community. Consultation often has an associated expectation that the results or input will end up being followed. Whether this is possible or not needs to be spelt out early and clearly.

Sometimes it's not good to share information. Showing plans for a building too early can cement ideas in people's minds. Somehow once things are down on paper, they take a sense of actuality that is difficult for people to move from. Sometimes it's better to keep things general and a bit hazy. Many people jump straight to 'what colour will the chairs be?' before it's really decided how many, what type and where the chairs will be.

For me it will be interesting to see how the processes for the two projects will be judged in twelve months time. How will those judgements be made? How will the processes be evaluated? I believe the proof will be in the operational pudding. If the consultation has been successful, then the operation of areas such as the technical areas, the box office and catering will be essentially smooth.

I also believe that one of the best indicators of how well a theatre is tuned into the needs of its community clients, is the quality of the relationship with one or two key local performance companies, the local theatre group or the local eisteddfod.

There are a number of ways to really develop the relationship with local companies and they involve a fair bit of personal contact. Technically you could try visiting a rehearsal, or organising special stage crew visits to the venue, perhaps even training sessions for use of equipment. In relation to marketing, it is often the case that venues have access to much better mechanisms for things such as press releases. The chance to provide opportunities for venue displays well in advance of a season not only gives the group a sense of belonging but gives you the opportunity to lift the quality of display.

Local companies generally reflect the drive and vision of their committee. If they have a high turnover, they may need help with some succession planning. This not only helps them, but helps you with knowing who is who. It also means any changes to committee are less of a surprise and you can help with their strategic planning and directions. After all their future is on par with yours!

The Frankston Arts Centre have at various stages run Local Company forums and dinner meetings with performance groups to discuss issues of common interest that went well beyond the relationship with the venue. Similarly, the City of Greater Dandenong have had a Performing Arts Network to look at the same sorts of things across a wider range of groups. That also provides a ready-made and ongoing chance for consultation.

Local performance companies embody and concentrate many of the things that make users difficult in a venue. For example:

- their technical vision and requirements can often be challenging
- their budgets can often be challenging
- their passion and enthusiasm for their projects, both as organisations and individuals, can be difficult to match.

If over time, the venue and the company can achieve their often competing goals, then I think the venue overall will be genuinely responding to their community. Certainly it's not easy and the thought that you will always succeed will only lead to frustration. I guess we all need to try to remember that it is not until goals are clear and articulated that they can be achieved.

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