Aqua Profunda – Culture and the Regeneration of Local Facilities

Abstract

Around two-thirds of Australia’s community cultural and recreation facilities were built in the years of growth following the Second World War. Now ageing and in need of renewal, many of these facilities face change or closure as community needs and building codes change, market principles influence public policy, and local governments struggle with funding shortfalls. State and local government responses to the community infrastructure “crisis” (Troy 1999) have been mainly concerned with technical, financial and service outcomes. Although celebrated episodes of community resistance to facility closures (such as the Fitzroy Pool in Melbourne) suggest treacherous waters for local government officials, there has been limited recognition of community facilities as cultural artefacts or focal points of community life. This paper explores the cultural value of community facilities, and the challenges presented to local museums and cultural workers as infrastructure policy – still seen as the domain of engineers, property managers and financiers - re-shapes local cultural landscapes. The paper is illustrated with case studies from urban and regional Victoria.

Introduction

Community facilities are the focal point of much of our social and civic life. They provide a distinctive texture to urban forms, contribute in various ways to personal well-being, and shape the sense of place and identity of local communities. As an ensemble, however, community facilities have attracted little critical interest in the humanities and social sciences. This may be due in part to their omnipresence, partly to their association with the local government sector, which has not been a popular site of social and cultural research. An estimated 80% of public open space, leisure and recreation facilities, and cultural venues in Australia are provided by local government authorities, and, consistent with the outlook of that jurisdiction, policy frameworks in this area have a strong operational focus. The common reference by local authorities to their community facilities as assets points to the dominance of financial, technical and property perspectives, and the styling of facility patrons as clients brings a focus on service provision and utility.

While each of these perspectives is valid and important, in this paper I want to look at community facilities as cultural spaces and cultural artefacts, and examine the implications for heritage and social policy of the current concerns of local authorities to rationalise their asset holdings. Many local authorities are under significant financial
pressure, from widening service demands, downward cost-shifting by higher level
governments, population decline in small rural shires or development pressures in urban
and coastal regions. It is estimated that two-thirds of the stock of local government assets
were built or acquired after the Second World War. Rapid population growth and
suburban expansion during these years and public disinvestment in following decades has
left a legacy of ageing facilities requiring maintenance and upgrading to current
regulatory and service standards. The use of new materials, construction techniques and
designs emblematic of modernist architecture created a set of civic facilities with poor
physical performance and uncertain life-spans (MacDonald 2001). Municipal
amalgamations have left some local authorities with what are perceived as duplicate sets
of civic facilities. In a policy environment favouring low public debt and reduction in
taxation burdens, the prospect of asset sales to fund facility renewal is tempting.

As local populations age with many of the facilities that were built for their recreation
needs and moral guidance as young persons, difficult questions are posed about the future
of what many local residents see as important places as well as important services. Does
an outdoor pool open four months of the year, with a cracked floor leaking chlorinated
water into a local watercourse, sited on a now valuable tract of inner-city land, best meet
the service needs of the local population and fulfill the council’s mandate to optimise
financial, environmental and social outcomes of decisions? Or would an indoor leisure
centre with a gymnasium and hydrotherapy pool, open year round, perhaps funded
through the sale of the now-closed outdoor pool site, better respond to these demands?
How can the options be evaluated? With some modulations, this is a typical scenario with
which local authorities across Australia have been wrestling, sometimes in the face of
sophisticated public campaigns to resist closure or change.

Why is this an important issue for museums and heritage professionals? An obvious
reason is that many museums in Australia receive funding from local authorities, or are
housed within council-owned or maintained ‘assets’. They compete with local roads,
footpaths and drainage for funding, and they may vie with other community groups for
the allocation of space. A more fundamental point is that the quest for economic and
service efficiency dominates assessments of the value of community facilities,
particularly those facilities without formal heritage attributes. Local cultural landscapes
may be re-shaped with only cursory consideration of the social or cultural value of public
buildings and places.

However, renewed interest in community and locality as a policy focus has given a more
complex character to debates around community facilities. Two narratives about
community infrastructure can be identified in current public policy that require
coherence. The first is a story of fiscal discipline to assist recovery from poor forward
planning and infrastructure decisions based on short-term political calculations. The
second narrative argues for reinvestment in community facilities as concrete ways of
overcoming locational disadvantage, promoting community cohesion, generating social
capital, and reaping the cultural and economic rewards that come from a strongly
expressed vernacular.
It is plausible to argue that the narrative of rationalisation and improved asset management, on the one hand, and calls for more community on the other, are two sides of the same coin. Thus, the argument might run, when local authorities are able to manage the financial and service aspects of facilities in a sustainable way, they can better encourage the more intangible contribution of community facilities to social cohesion and community identity. However, this argument has three limitations. Firstly, the proportion of the national tax take available to the local government sector has declined over past decades, creating financial pressures irrespective of views on the efficiency with which local funds are spent. After a decade of municipal amalgamation in all states and service rationalisation by higher-level governments, there is lingering unease that rhetoric about partnerships, social capital and community strengthening is code for service withdrawal and self-reliance. Secondly, the locus of power within local authorities has traditionally been in the financial, engineering, property services and statutory planning areas. There has been limited innovation in policy and administrative arrangements to encourage connections between physical assets and what can be described as social assets: community networks, local identity and sense of place, and social capital. Thirdly, the evidence base and consultation processes that inform facility change are often selective and limited. Local authorities use the terms social or community value freely, but these are generally high level indicators of majority voter support for a proposition, rather than conceptually robust and empirically-informed assessments of the non-economic benefits of facilities.

However, the aggregation of facility life-cycle requirements, demographic changes, changing recreational preferences and patterns of civic engagement, the rise of community as a key site of public policy, and local authority budget pressures mark the current period as a time of intense interest in community facilities. In this paper I want to discuss three significant issues that this renewed interest in the provision, use and management of community facilities presents for local museums and heritage professionals: community equity, rescaling and reuse, and change management.

Community Equity

For most of local governments’ 150 year history in Australia, the fashionable term community building has had a literal truth. Religious, philanthropic, trade union, sporting and civic organisations played a significant role in the provision of social infrastructure such as community halls, libraries and recreational assets, and in the management of local environmental features. Many of these facilities were built on public land, reserved by colonial and state governments for the institutions of civil society. These early public-private partnerships sought to provide basic services and establish a civil sector which accommodated communal differences. While the proportion of nineteenth and early-twentieth century infrastructure that remains in service varies, its identification with communities of interest, such as faith-based groups, has been overlain with views that it has heritage value for place-based communities. In recent years changing land uses and rising financial values, the inability of community groups to maintain facilities, and new state government asset management policies geared to economic efficiency have brought
friction over competing local and state-level values, and sometimes awkward policy resolution.

The post-World War 2 period in Australia, as elsewhere in the Western world, saw rapid population growth and settlement in new suburbs. Decentralised housing provision commonly outstripped the establishment of social infrastructure. Governments at all levels in Australia sought to remedy planning imbalances and encourage social bonds in new tract housing areas by encouraging local sporting and community associations to construct pavilions and clubhouses. Residents of new post-war neighbourhoods built facilities through voluntary labour contributions and innovative community finance schemes. Local authorities and other levels of government may have matched the monetary contributions of associations, and the details of facility ‘ownership’ were often vague. Who, then, has authority to decide the future of community facilities, when their ownership status is unclear? Questions of ownership and authority are complex and problematic, but are key ethical and strategic issues in facility renewal programs.

A striking illustration of the complexities of this policy environment is seen in the Warburton Mechanics Institute (Plate 1). Warburton is a small and relatively isolated town in the Yarra ranges, on the eastern fringe of Melbourne. The now dilapidated Institute was built in 1913 on a Crown reserve, largely with funds raised by local subscription. For many years it was the focus of a diverse range of community activities, a civic hub in current parlance, overseen by a local committee of management as required by state Crown land legislation. In 1992, with the building falling into disrepair for want of funds, the committee transferred management responsibility to the State Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (CNR). The hall was closed for safety reasons in 1996 and, with prospects of it re-opening slim, the property was transferred by CNR to the Victorian Property Group, which has a remit to dispose of redundant state government assets. Redundant in whose terms? The local shire, having resolved to restore and re-use the building as a community centre, was obliged to purchase the site from the Victorian government. The Institute’s future, then, was effectively secured by Warburton residents buying what they considered they already owned. Subsequently, the Shire Council has been granted $250,000 from a State government regional development program to refurbish the building.

There is a point here about disconnected and competing policy objectives here, about price signals taking priority over wider appreciations of public interest, but there is a more fundamental lesson to learn: if governments want to encourage community building and volunteering, they must have due regard for earlier efforts. Intergenerational equity also has a retrospective component.

Re-scaling and Re-use

Two major trends in facility development at local level are the co-location of services, mostly in new facilities, and the adaptive reuse of old, particularly heritage-listed buildings. Both trends have implications for museums and heritage workers.
Contrasting with the community-building ethic of post-World War 2 Australia sketched earlier, there is now a firm conviction amongst local authorities that, in the words of one municipal mayor, “the age of single-use facilities is well and truly over” 1. Local authorities advance persuasive arguments for shared occupancy, including widening demand of community groups for places to meet, operational and cost efficiencies, peer support of staff, and (more speculatively) the ‘linking’ social capital created through shared use. Co-location is seen as most appropriate for local health, recreation and educational services, but may offer interesting synergies for museums and local history societies. However, enactment of co-use policies may over-write the physical evidence of a place’s history. At least two Melbourne councils, in seeking to widen the use of their community halls, have considered requiring club insignias and honour boards of the main tenant to be covered up when they are not using the premises. A scouting troop in Footscray, a culturally diverse suburb in Melbourne’s inner west, agreed to cover a large painted scene from Kipling’s Jungle Book, of historic significance to the troop, when their scout hall (in use since 1925, see plate 2) was used by another community for worship. The scout troop has been obliged to lease out the space to generate revenue for upkeep of the structure. This may seem a trivial example, the resolution of which demonstrates the capacity of community groups to build understanding in such circumstances. However it also suggests tensions between past and present, local sense of place and wider cultural and economic concerns that are not easy to resolve.

In 2004 a New South Wales parliamentary report into the co-location of public buildings urged greater focus on the adaptive re-use of facilities, arguing that existing planning and asset management practices frustrated attempts to maximise the use of public assets in this way (New South Wales Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Public Works 2004:xii). In the same year NSW Museums and Galleries Foundation released a booklet titled Just Because it’s Old… which acts as both guide and cautionary tale for adaptive re-use. The conversion of a Walter Burley Griffin designed municipal incinerator in Moonee Ponds, Melbourne (plate 3) to a community arts complex is an example of the seemingly natural transition of a disused industrial site to a cultural facility. In this instance, the declaration of the site’s state-level heritage value in 1979 conferred benefits on local residents, in terms of the wider recognition of the site’s heritage value. But this came at a substantial cost. Ratepayers had to meet much of the true costs of refurbishment and subsequent operation of a theatre and gallery in a building not well suited for either purpose. Re-opened in a half-finished state in 1984, the facility operated for only eight years, then closed for lack of patronage, operating funds, and appropriately skilled management (it was overseen by the Council’s recreation department). With renewed funding to complete the building works, a firmer direction as a community arts venue, and a management base in a new cultural facilities department of the council, the complex re-opened in 2004, filling a cultural void as the only community arts venue in a city of with a population of 110,000. But a community arts program, particularly if based in a heritage building, is likely to require continued public subsidy. In a political environment where the current deputy mayor of the city campaigned at the most recent local government elections for cuts to property rates and council outlays, questions about

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1 Sam Alessi, Mayor, City of Whittlesea – Opening Remarks, Better Facilities, Stronger Communities conference, Melbourne, 2005.
sustainability, value and local preferences for utilitarian goods such as better roads and footpaths may once again arise.

The momentum of multi-use facilities seems assured, supported by testimony of their financial and service effectiveness (New South Wales Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Public Works 2004). There has, though, been little attempt to assess whether the loss to neighbourhoods of the re-scaling and re-location associated with this type of renewal exercise outweighs the benefits. Issues of change and loss lie at the heart of co-location or regeneration projects, and partly explain the political controversy surrounding many proposals. However, the importance of change management processes to the success of such projects has received little attention.

**Change Management**

An example of the productive outcome of sound change management is the successful redevelopment of a community hall and kindergarten in outer suburban Melbourne. The facility was built in the late 1940s by residents of the new suburb, many with young children (plate 4). After fifty years or so of service as a meeting place, function room and kindergarten, the facility began to fail compliance standards, particularly in the children’s services area. The local council was anxious to upgrade the structure but equally sensitive to the history of the site and the real and symbolic equity of the now ageing ‘pioneers’. Council staff, too, were concerned that the former and current users of the kindergarten had limited contact with each other, indicative of changing social and demographic structures of the suburb. When first built, the kindergarten played a secondary role to the social environment of the hall. In the intervening years, the professionalisation of pre-school education and a more exacting regulatory climate effectively reversed this order, and planning for the new facility focused on the kindergarten function. The ‘pioneer’ residents were involved in the community planning process, which sought to accommodate the earlier tradition of a neighbourhood community centre with new requirements for pre-school education, and which brought together the former and current facility users. An agreement between the ‘owners’ of the original building and the council set out the formal terms under which control was transferred to the council. A plaque at the new facility recognised the history of the site and the community contribution. The process, with its mixture of symbolic and substantive actions, was overseen by a council manager whose local knowledge came to be recognised as both a key input and evidence of the council’s commitment. The process has become a model for further regeneration projects by that council.

**Conclusion**

Time permits only a limited overview of this complex but under-researched field. However, this paper identifies a central dilemma in local infrastructure policy: while local authorities struggle to manage their existing stock of community facilities, governments at all levels worry about the erosion of civic life and loss of social capital. Innovative schemes, such as Heritage Victoria’s Public Heritage Program, have sought to make connections between heritage and sense of place, community building and civic life. But
many councils are treading water, unable to adequately fund retention and use of their existing civic fabric, and nervous about a political backlash when proposing change. Additional funding is necessary, and the Australian Local Government Association is currently campaigning for access to a growth tax base rather than rely on rates and charges (which may be capped by state governments).

However, additional funding is not sufficient by itself. In some ways, earlier funding structures, such as grants by higher governments that require matching funds at local level, have been part of the problem. The leadership of higher level governments is vital, through policy frameworks that define community assets as both physical and social, and acknowledge that an active and sustainable public sphere requires both elements.

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Plate 1: Warburton Mechanics Institute, courtesy Context Pty Ltd

Plate 2: Scout Hall, Footscray, courtesy Heritage Victoria
Plate 3: Incinerator Arts Complex, Moonee Ponds, courtesy City of Moonee Valley

Plate 4: Hall & Kindergarten, Vasey Park, courtesy City of Whittlesea