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Author

Adair, David

Published

2005

Conference Title

Sites of Cosmopolitanism: Citizenship, Aesthetics, Culture

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Designs on the audience: performing arts centres as sites of cosmopolitan citizenship.

David Adair

Abstract.

Changes in cultural consumption and in modes of governance are prompting performing arts centres (PACs) to take a more proactive role in urban life; they are reconfiguring their internal and external spaces to improve how they engage with their publics and adjacent urban spaces; and they are developing strategies to better manage their cultural and social impacts. This paper draws on qualitative research with Queensland Performing Arts Centre audiences and cites some specific initiatives to test the proposition that in reinventing themselves as multiple-use civic resources, performing arts centres are potentially significant sites of cosmopolitan citizenship. It argues that in addition to the PACs' symbolic functions and the expertise they contribute to public life, they provide linked physical and social spaces that embody and promote the values of diversity and community cohesion.

Introduction.

This paper developed from research into the problems faced by performing arts centres (PACs) as they re-imagine and redesign themselves as multiple-use civic resources. In testing the proposition that cultural citizenship – and its cosmopolitan forms in particular – can be a viable rationale for PACs, it makes reference to initial findings of qualitative research conducted in 2004 by Griffith University in association with the Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC).

The paper deals with how PACs currently use social and physical spaces to form and maintain certain attributes of their publics that can be called 'cosmopolitan'. In making a case for PACs' role in civic capacity-building, it raises some issues related to the differences between wide or loose affiliations and close or deep ones and considers examples of some of the strategies that PACs have adopted to foster capacities for tolerance of the unfamiliar, and for adaptability in the face of change, plurality and innovation. The tensions characterising cosmopolitan worldliness have some interesting repercussions for how we understand the role of performing arts centres.

Cosmopolitanism as ethos.

Like many of us attending this conference I had assumed that I had the measure of 'cosmopolitan', as a kind of worldliness akin to the political doctrine of multiculturalism or to a moral attribute like tolerance of the Other. Now I believe I have been only half right and that 'cosmopolitan' extends beyond relationships with those unlike ourselves and embraces a more radically abstracted sense of identification with a common humanity. This paper is a preliminary and necessarily limited exploration of how cultural managers in performing arts centres mediate the tensions inherent in such a cosmopolitan orientation.

‘Cosmopolitanism’ is an ethos of world citizenship. Its attributes include a sense of membership in a worldwide humanity, and an inclination to draw moral and political imperatives from that affiliation. Yet as Samuel Scheffler (2001) has shown us, cosmopolitanism can *also* value moderating these wide affiliations by appreciating the integrity – if not the innate superiority – of other sources of responsibilities and reasons for action (Scheffler 2001: 117). To be successfully cosmopolitan one must be capable of moderation.

Scheffler (2001) identifies two strands of recent thinking about cosmopolitanism. The first is about justice, and widening the scope of justice. To a greater or a lesser degree, it is sceptical of moral communities and of impulses to put the interests of our families and close acquaintances above the interests of strangers. In cultural and arts contexts, it is found in the principle of positively valuing equity and access. It may also be found in narratives and performances that give substance to the idea of ‘human-ness’ by, for example, using violations of justice as the subject matter of a performance.

The second strand of thinking on cosmopolitanism is concerned with culture. This focuses on affiliations with local and global (or larger) cultures. It is concerned with where we draw the borders between different cultures and art forms. And it searches for ways to respond to the truths that cultures are always in flux, are incorrigibly promiscuous, and are constantly giving birth to new hybrids that alter or replace familiar certainties (Scheffler 2001: 113).

Cosmopolitanism associates a lack of inter-cultural exchange and culturally unadventurous tastes with personal, cultural and political failure. Thus, in the mid 1990s, cosmopolitan Australians responded to the rise of ‘Hansonism’ by questioning whether Pauline Hanson was a viable model of moral personality, and by criticising ‘traditional’ Australian chauvinism. From a cosmopolitan perspective, Hansonism did not simply represent an eruption of outdated cultural and political values. It also meant a failure to moderate this chauvinism with other, more broadly-derived, reasons for action. This is why it is possible to follow Hanson’s subsequent immersion in the performing arts – as one half of a dancing team with the entertainer Todd McKenney – as a narrative of personal redemption. McKenney certainly interpreted the situation in this way when he expressed the hope that by performing as his dance partner Hanson might develop tolerance (Hallett 2005: 38).

While cosmopolitan citizens value a taste for cultural hybridity and a capacity to meet change with equanimity, there is no guarantee that ‘exposure’ to the performing arts will deliver these aesthetic and moral outcomes. A traditional way to anticipate, and hopefully obviate, the need for a Pauline epiphany in later life, is to invest in arts education. The well-known Australian cook Stefano de Pieri (*Talking Heads* 2005) sees his own childrens’ arts education in these familiar terms:

Food may be good for the body but we need the arts to nourish our soul as well, and I’m so lucky to have two children who are interested in music, and who have an uncle who is a good musician [and who] is really keen to give them a thorough understanding of music. I believe that without the arts you are not really a complete person ... I want them to be engaged with the world; I

want them to be modest but authoritative, informed but not arrogant; I want them to be fully grown up citizens who partake and take responsibility.

An infrastructure of cosmopolitanism.

If some attributes of cosmopolitanism are invested in the moral personality of the cosmopolitan citizen, others are found in the infrastructure of cosmopolitanism: the policy frameworks and interconnected social practices and physical spaces within which a cosmopolitan ethos is enacted and which give it leverage as one mode of cultural citizenship among others. Policy and research responses to the main problem of cosmopolitanism – how to develop and maintain a range of affiliations – are currently being developed and applied across numerous cultural and arts contexts. These changes in research agendas and in modes of governance are among the factors now prompting Australian PACs to improve how they engage with their publics, to strengthen their ties with educational institutions in general, and to develop their own research capacities in collaboration with universities in particular (Ferres and Adair 2004).

PACs expose their audiences to a heterogeneous repertoire drawn from international circuits. Yet by themselves, this repertoire or stock of cultural capital may not ensure cosmopolitan outcomes. Taste cultures can be narrow and drain scarce resources. Audiences may maintain exclusive social bonds that discourage audience development and even participation. Yet despite the popular image of PACs as elite ‘culture bunkers’, their managers are increasingly likely to treat these, and other unintended outcomes of their policies and programs, as problems to be anticipated and corrected. QPAC, for instance, is not limiting itself to programming changes that aim to breathe life into stale repertoires. Its designs on its audiences – exemplified by its current Masterplan – acknowledge a need to reconfigure the building and its uses. The Masterplan consequently intends to expand the range of public amenities in and around the building, such as cafes and free live music performances. The aim is to not only increase visitor numbers and add cultural and economic value to visits, but to also widen the scope for visitors to have a range of informal social interactions across social networks.

In addition to programming and architectural responses, Australian PACs are expanding their research capabilities. Like other members of the OZPAC forum of performing arts centres, QPAC has invested in new ticketing software to improve the depth and versatility of its audience data. It is also conducting qualitative research that seeks to move beyond the marketing focus of existing audience development strategies. This qualitative research response is in part an opportunistic move to better position QPAC relative to current and anticipated patterns of cultural consumption (cf Peterson and Simkus 1992; cf Peterson and Kerns 1996). But it also stands as a best practice for the PAC sector. Improving capacity to gauge the repertoires of skills, preferences and attributes of particular audiences is a condition for the sector to better contribute to the infrastructure of cosmopolitanism.

In 2004 QPAC conducted a series of focus groups with audiences, in collaboration with Griffith University. One of these groups was made up of Brisbane drama students from a public high school, who had attended a Bell Shakespeare Company

production of *The Comedy of Errors*. Participants responded enthusiastically to those aspects of the production – comic characters interacting closely with the audience prior to the play commencing, and highly physical acting styles – that differentiated this production from others they had seen. The participants were also aware that their own knowledge of theatre influenced their attendance choices and conditioned their experiences. As a group they were particularly interested in the actors’ stagecraft and in how the production was directed.¹ This recognition of the variability of cultural capital extended to expressions of tolerance for older audience members:

When we were laughing we had older people in front of us who were not laughing – they were not getting the messages. Later they were killing themselves with laughter and we did not understand that. But not every show has that and I think that was what made it so special as well.

During a discussion on the wider social value of the performing arts, one participant made an implicit connection between cultural capital and cosmopolitanism. The social value of the performing arts, he said, ‘is just variety’, and theatre ‘is another material medium that you can broaden your mind with, instead of just TV or *Big Brother* or something.’ In a group discussion about the mixing of materials from different cultures and historical periods, another participant was prompted to talk about how his peers actively sought out cultural experiences that challenged them.

People around our age group,² or probably a bit older, they are all getting into this alternative arts and they end up getting other people into it, even if you are not that sort of alternative person that likes to go and look at different art, just feeling like something different every now and then.

Initial analysis of this qualitative research confirms that this cohort of young, responsible and proactive cultural consumers bears the attributes of cosmopolitan citizenship that de Pieri sought to secure for his own children by investing in their arts education.

PACs may have designs on young cosmopolitan audiences but these audiences are by no means passive recipients of this attention. The sector’s existing market research shows young audiences generally to be highly mobile, with social habits and communications preferences that make them hard to reach. Marketing to them requires innovative strategies through the Internet or by targeted pamphlet drops that aim to generate word-of-mouth publicity, rather than through traditional marketing channels like the press. A combination of their mobility, limited budgets, and competition from other kinds of cultural and arts activities also makes them liable to ‘overshoot’ QPAC for other venues that are better placed to specialise in ‘edgy’ productions. The focus group confirmed these assumptions and lends support to current moves in the sector to develop and apply more innovative policies that can better achieve its government-mandated brief to provide socially inclusive services.

¹ The researchers and the participants themselves acknowledged that as drama students this cohort was not in all respects a typical ‘youth’ audience.

² Most participants were in their mid teens.

Managing cultural diversity.

One recent policy development in the PAC sector that promises to deliver a comprehensive approach to cultural and arts management is the concept 'sustainability'. This concept was worked up in the environmental field, where it proved a powerful conceptual framework and effective advocacy tool. It is already common in the cultural heritage sector and is being adapted to other cultural and arts contexts (de la Torre 2002; Arts Queensland 2002). Sustainability in culture takes its cue from environmental management, where it is associated with biodiversity. David Throsby (2003: 109-110) is a prominent advocate for adapting the sustainability framework to culture and the arts. He compares biodiversity with cultural diversity, and natural capital with cultural capital.

Just as biodiversity is seen as significant in the natural world, so also is cultural diversity important in maintaining cultural systems. The diversity of ideas, beliefs, traditions, and values yields a flow of cultural services that is quite distinct from the services provided by the individual components. Indeed, diversity could be seen as one of the most important attributes of cultural capital in the large, because it has the capacity to yield new capital formation (Throsby 2002: 110).

Throsby emphasises that it is as a whole system approach that sustainability has the potential to significantly contribute to cultural management.

There is little research to date on what PACs may contribute to the maintenance of healthy cultural systems. Researchers, governments and other stakeholders have instead been preoccupied with the pressing governance and finance problems of the performing arts companies (Nugent *et al.* 1999; Strong *et al.* 2005). Yet economists are increasingly questioning the adequacy of financial reporting in recognising values that are not easily quantifiable or assigned a market value (Throsby 2002: 101; Madden 2001). As the PACs reinvent themselves as multiple-use civic resources, they are adopting 'sustainability' as a way to manage diverse, difficult to quantify, and often incompatible, cultural, social, economic and environmental values.

Another promising policy response to the problems of managing diversity is the 'community cohesion' paradigm that is gaining ground in the United Kingdom, as a way to cosmopolitanise the infrastructure of cultural citizenship. According to its advocates, the advantage of 'community cohesion' over the more established concept 'social inclusion' is that the former encodes the cosmopolitan principle of striking a balance between 'valuing diversity, challenging inequalities, and promoting a sense of belonging' (Harris and Dudley 2005: 11). It does not assume that affiliation with a specific locality or community precludes other affiliations. On the contrary, it actively aims to achieve cosmopolitan outcomes. Thus the British Home Office Community Cohesion Unit defines cohesive communities as those with a sense of belonging *and* an appreciation of differences (Harris and Dudley 2005: 7). To put this in the language of social capital discourse, community cohesion emphasises the bridging over the bonding forms of social capital. In other words, it encourages heterogeneous and open social networks, in preference to those that are homogenous and closed (Ferres and Adair 2004).

In a report on recent applications of community cohesion principles to British public libraries, Harris and Dudley (2005: 15) identify four attributes of the libraries that together give a well-rounded account of their public role. When adjusted to take account of differences between public libraries and PACs, these attributes – resource, expertise, place and symbol – can help us understand how PACs operate as sites of cosmopolitanism.

First, ‘as *resources*, public libraries give access to cultural materials that people can use to explore differences, learn about heritage, and develop solutions to problems’ (Harris and Dudley 2005: 15). PACs host performances that expose audiences to the familiar and the unfamiliar, and mediate their encounters with their own cultures and with those of others. Yet as I have noted, to develop cosmopolitan tastes and explore cultural differences requires more than widening and expanding the repertoire. QPAC, for its part, is planning additional public exhibition spaces and has new curatorial strategies in place to present the diversity of its archival memory; it is using more costumes, props and memorabilia from previous performances and materials drawn from a range of local, national and international sources. The QPAC Museum is currently the only public collection of Queensland performing arts history. The museum’s usefulness as a public cosmopolitan resource lies in its ability to both reflect and challenge Queensland’s cultural heritage, in ways that help extend and diversify the value chain, or, in Throsby’s previously quoted phrase, the flow of cultural services.

Second, libraries ‘have *expertise* in information management that their publics can use to lever other resources and share their own knowledge and experiences’ (Harris and Dudley 2005: 15). PACs routinely use mentoring programs to develop the artistic and administrative skills of individual performers. In addition, QPAC has a company-in-residence program. In 2004, the Brisbane-based theatre company Zen Zen Zo was QPAC’s first company-in-residence. The company received financial and other forms of advice and training that developed its artistic skills, freed up time and energy for creative endeavours, and improved its administrative capacities: all of which are conditions for sustainability (Ferres and Adair 2004).

Third, ‘as civic buildings, libraries are *places* that encourage visitors, provide free access, and offer a range of venues for formal and informal interactions’ (Harris and Dudley 2005: 15). Since public libraries do not charge entrance fees they are more ‘permeable’ than are PACs, whose outputs and amenities – the performances and ancillary function venues – typically have a market value. QPAC is moving to increase its own permeability by physically opening the building out to the surrounding spaces in the precinct. It is using architectural spaces as well as programming and other strategies, to increase access to its building and public amenities, and promote opportunities for visitors to meet formally and informally in and around the building. These efforts to promote a vibrant and diverse public life on the site include improving physical access and safety standards for visitors. New York’s Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts is one of many international examples of PACs moving to re-purpose and redesign themselves as places worth revisiting for a variety of reasons (Dobnik 2005: 14).

Finally, libraries have *symbolic* value as public resources providing a public good. According to Harris and Dudley (2005: 15-16), this attribute ‘symbolises the relation

of individual to civil society, presenting an image that, ideally, should reinforce the meaning of cohesion'. As civic architecture, a PAC performs this function by being a 'conversation piece' for citizens and tourists alike. This 'funky roof factor' has economic and traditional audience development significance – it has impacts on visitor numbers – but it also has a role to play in cultural citizenship. When working correctly, a PAC's distinctive physical presence – typically adjacent to the CBD – is a provocation to public debates about urban life. Indeed, in the twenty years since it opened, the QPAC building has often appeared in press and television reports as a symbol of Brisbane's cosmopolitanising transformation (Milne 1985). Public debates over plans for the building's renovation have publicised the notion of heritage values, while access problems in the current building design are helping to give equity issues a new prominence in public life.

Conclusion

PACs are currently playing a role in the cosmopolitanising of contemporary urban life. The case of QPAC shows how these designs on audiences are coordinated across a series of architectural, programming, and research strategies that aim for cosmopolitan outcomes. As might be expected, these are not always successful. Yet neither are they simply imposed from above; they seek to engage active audiences whose attributes pose problems for cultural management. Some audiences have narrow taste cultures and homogenous and exclusive social networks incompatible with cosmopolitan values; others have adventurous cosmopolitan tastes that are nevertheless hard to accommodate.

The need to maintain relationships with a variety of publics while fulfilling a 'cosmopolitan brief' poses ongoing intellectual and policy challenges for PACs. Their recent responses have included forging research partnerships with universities, as well as developing and applying innovative concepts and associated policy frameworks, two of which have been briefly dealt with in this paper: a 'sustainability' concept that cultural managers are currently using to mediate the diverse values entailed in managing multiple-use public resources; and a 'community cohesion' framework that may have the potential to better articulate the ongoing tensions between the local and the global poles of PACs' cosmopolitanising role.

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Biography

David Adair is a Research Fellow in the School of Arts, Media and Culture, Griffith University, Brisbane. He works as project manager and researcher on the ARC-funded research project *Sustaining Culture: the Role of Performing Arts Centres*. *Sustaining Culture* is a collaboration between Griffith University's Centre for Public Culture and Ideas and four members of the OZPAC forum of Australasian performing arts centres: Sydney Opera House, the Adelaide Festival Centre, the Queensland Performing Arts Centre, and the Arts Centre, Melbourne.

This paper was delivered at the Griffith University Centre for Public Culture and Ideas conference 'Sites of Cosmopolitanism' (July 6-8 2005) in Brisbane.