



Arts
Centre
Melbourne

Encore

Arts Centre Melbourne's Supporter Magazine

2015



Issue 5

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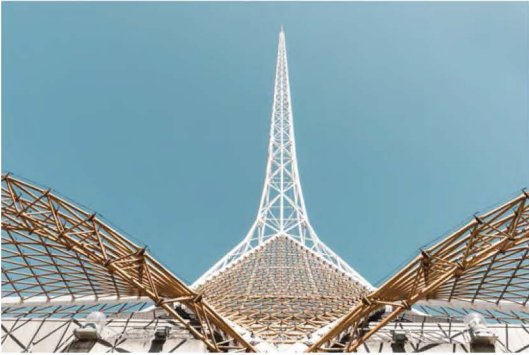
The Evolved Performing Arts Centre

Steven A. Wolff, CMC, Principal — AMS Planning & Research Corp.

Images — Kate Ballis and Tom Blachford



It is no longer enough for performing arts centres to play host to local performing arts organisations and present visiting artists and programs from across the country and around the world. In the first of a series of articles, Steven Wolff, CMC, Principal of AMS Planning & Research, an American arts management consultant with a global practice, who has worked with Arts Centre Melbourne and across Australia, shares some perspective on where arts centres have come from and where they are likely to be headed.



Modern performing arts centres like Arts Centre Melbourne which officially opened in 1984 were relatively new concepts that dated back only to the 1960s. But now, they have become highly sophisticated businesses run by expert professional staff and guided by deeply engaged boards.

A highly visible and complex enterprise, the contemporary performing arts centre (PAC) is often one of the largest and most diverse arts organisations in a community. It is expected to be a leader in the arts sector and support civic priorities.

But, the environment in which performing arts centres operate is one of dramatic change. From rapidly changing and diversifying communities to universal on-demand access to content via the internet; from a new, more sophisticated definition of the marketplace and high customer expectations; who today's "artists" are and new economic realities; it is no longer possible for a performing arts centre simply to be what it once was envisioned to be, an 'island of culture.'

Over the past sixty years, the PAC has evolved, in fits and starts, through four, possibly five, distinct generations. While not among the earliest group of performing arts centres, Arts Centre Melbourne, too, has responded to the changing times over the course of its 30-year history in many ways and is positioned, internationally, as a leader in the continuing evolution of performing and arts centres and their roles. In this first article, Wolff looks at the first 50 years of arts centre development.

The evolution of the Performing Arts Centre

Generation One – Arts Centre as “Home”

While cities and their leaders have been building theatres throughout recorded history – from Greek and Roman amphitheatres to the great European opera houses and concert halls – the prototypical modern performing arts centre, comprised of a complex of several genre-specific performance spaces – dates only back to the 1960s and early 1970s with the development of New York's Lincoln Center, London's National Theatre and the Sydney Opera House.

These first arts centres brought together the traditional art-makers, producers and, in the case of Lincoln Center and others, sometimes a public library or arts school, providing a home for the classical performing arts: the symphony, opera, ballet and occasional theatre company in a campus-like setting for the arts.

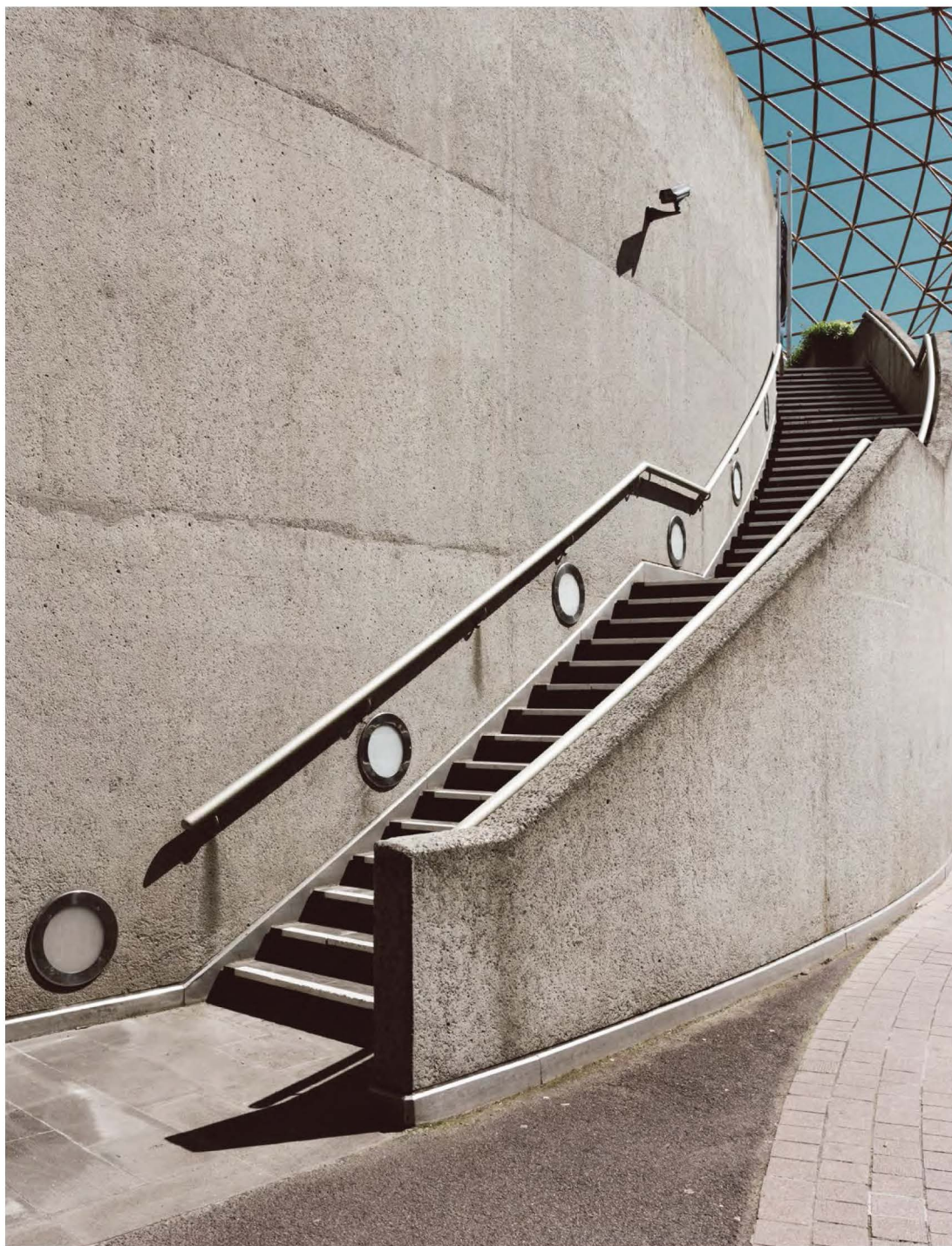
Perhaps best described as “showcases,” these first centres focused on excellence, bringing the “best” of the traditional performing arts to the community. These first modern performing arts centres created a nexus of activity largely targeted to the community's elite. This strategy was about creating a “home” for the ‘high arts’; a place to see and be seen.

Generation Two – Arts Centre as “Place”

By the mid to late 1970s, these early PACs had demonstrated a valuable secondary effect – the density of activity and people (artists, artistic companies, audiences) that they created often resulted in secondary development (or redevelopment) in the surrounding neighborhood. Arts precincts became attractive places for new commercial developments and renewed investment in restaurants, retail, housing, business offices, or other amenities were attracted by arts and related activity.

Cities around the world recognised that performing arts centres could drive activation or revitalisation of their urban cores at a time when many residents and businesses were leaving for the suburbs. Planners and community leaders recognised the arts as a key anchor for city centre vibrancy; breathing life into precincts through performances, the presence of artists and the support of their patrons.

This effect was a guiding force in the development of Arts Centre Melbourne and the entire Melbourne arts precinct as well as redevelopment initiatives in the US, Europe and Australia that began in the late 1980s. It continues to drive the development of new performing arts centre even today, especially in Asia and South America.





Generation Three – The Community’s “Centre”

The third evolution of PACs began in the early 1990s. Previously, communities often used a new arts centre as a magnet to attract established, touring artists and companies from “out-of-town, to bring culture to their cities and towns,” because they lacked complete arts systems and needed to add diversity and credibility to their existing or emerging local performing arts companies.

Around the same time, some of the early Generation 2 PACs recognised that they had become indistinct from one another, that from city to city they were presenting the same shows and the same artists. These centres sought to carve out a broader, more organic, role connected to the fabric of their community. They became nexuses of civic activity, interlocutors, incubators, meeting places and centres of discourse and learning. Their activities became about better community access, serving more children and families and bringing diverse communities together.

Success at this stage often included development of extensive education programs; and we began seeing more frequent combination of the performing and visual arts within the same centre or campus. An interesting reflection of the extant juxtaposition of the National Gallery of Victoria and Arts Centre Melbourne.

Generation 3 centres often offer school-time performances, master classes, pre- and post-performance discussions, talent searches, scholarships, summer theatre camps and more. All strategies to create additional points of entry for the community. The goal was to make the PAC more accessible to a broader and more diverse community.

To a vital and successful future

Generation Four – Creativity and Innovation

Research by the Urban Institute, a Washington, D.C. think-tank, beginning in the late 1990s and continuing for more than a decade, documented that one of the essential elements in successful communities is a concept termed “cultural vitality.” Cultural vitality comprises three elements, each of

which can be found in contemporary centres like Arts Centre Melbourne that have been or are now moving toward being fourth generation PACs. These three elements are:

1. Facilitating the presence of opportunities for cultural expression
2. Enabling participation in arts and cultural activity
3. Providing support for arts and cultural activity

The Generation 4 PAC creates public value opportunity by making diverse programs accessible to diverse audiences. It provides critical support for high quality programs, enables innovation in the development of content and delivery and provides essential support to emerging ideas of artistic expression.

The Generation 4 PAC must also be nimble, provide a high level of technical and functional accommodation, look beyond its traditional performance venues and usual delivery mechanisms to meet its audiences where they want to engage and be able to take risk to supplement programs already present in the community.

A Generation 4 PAC is a learning environment through which new experiences are generated and new knowledge is created that enhances cultural awareness, expression and understanding

Looking ahead, the successful Gen 4 PAC will have many different roles, from home and host to thought leader and enabler among others, assuring that its particular community is served with the broadest possible arts and cultural opportunity that is relevant, authentic and in demand. We will explore those characteristics and how Arts Centre Melbourne has or can respond in the next issue of Encore. ☺