Dr Lisanne Gibson, Cultural Industries and Practices Research Centre, University of Newcastle – “Cultural policy and the built environment – Cultural Vitality for Who?”

Firstly I wanted to congratulate Port Phillip Council and the Cultural Development Network on holding this Symposium and particularly for framing it in such a ‘bold and brave way’, as the Mayor said this morning. I hope to respond to this ‘bold and brave’ framework by making some big statements. So hopefully you will have lots to take me up on at the end. I think that this is a very timely Symposium. It has been a long time—I would suggest it has been a good 8 years—since there has been a Symposium in Australia that has been on cultural policy as opposed to ‘creative industries’ or ‘cultural development’.

This Symposium is trying to take in the whole framework of cultural policy. I think that in Australia at the moment it’s this going back to brass tacks that is really required, so, I am going to talk about cultural policy more generally.

As I was thinking about what I was going to talk about today there were four key cultural policy issues that I considered discussing. I could have discussed the subject of public art commissioning and cultural heritage management and particularly the lack of nexus in policy between these two areas of cultural policy. This is most tellingly demonstrated by the radically disproportionate resources invested in public art commissioning, on the one hand, and the comparatively slim governmental focus on cultural heritage management. Ironically, in this respect, our public art heritage is one of the most poorly managed categories of cultural heritage. This is most particularly the case for post World War II public art. This discussion would have been about the central role of cultural diversity in the facilitation of places that are successful in sustaining the usage of diverse publics.

In part related to that set of issues I could have also discussed the supposed phenomenon, much loved by cultural planners, of ‘culture led regeneration’. In both Britain and America this phenomenon has been developed over the last 20 years. The British model, developed most famously by Franco Bianchini and Charles Landry, proposes the use of cultural animation programs based on community need as a way of reclaiming the, at times, deserted and often dangerous streets of Britain’s city centres. We have seen antipodean versions of these developments. As it happened, these initiatives have been successful at bringing the middle classes back from the suburbs and into the city centre. This brings attendant problems, not of violence this time, but problems of cultural homogeneity, as much of our inner city heritage dies a ‘death by cappuccino’ and our live music venues are closed to make way for more lucrative high-rise apartments or wine bars for their residents.

In another model of ‘culture led regeneration’, the siting of cultural iconic institutions on brown field sites are heralded as the savior of economically depressed towns such as Glasgow in its role as City of Culture and more recently Newcastle-Upon-Tyne despite its loss in its European City of Culture bid. The logic of these cultural plans is that the economic and esteem boosting effect of massive cultural investment in the region will have a trickle down effect to even those who we know socio demographically are unlikely to make use of these publicly funded cultural investments. As English Academic Graham Evans has recently pointed out in his critique of cultural planning, these claims
are still primarily based on say so. Even the European City of Culture program including Glasgow has yet to be the object of the sustained study, which measures its long-term benefit in relation to cultural diversity and a broad range of socio demographic groups.

I also considered discussing the various understandings of this new term ‘creative’ as compared to ‘cultural’ industries. In particular, I would have discussed the distinction between the British development of the term in policy. This usage originated from Australian discussions in the early 1990s that were spearheaded by the Federal Government Department through their Cultural Industries Development program and was ultimately articulated in the Commonwealth government’s cultural policy, *Creative Nation* (1994). In the UK ‘creative industries’ picks up the tripartite focus on cultural, economic and social policy objectives, which also characterised Australian cultural policy in the late 80s and early 90s. Recent articulations of creative industries in Australian cultural policy discussions have been less focussed on the challenge of combining cultural development objectives with economic development as a way of facilitating sustainable cultural development. They have instead been more targeted at facilitating application outcomes from which there may be an economic benefit. It’s suggested that this bastardization of creative industries’ policy logic will result in programs that attempt to cherry pick winners with a loss of funding to those not considered to have economic potential. The problem, of course, is that the cultural industries exist as a kind of ecology, all of the parts of which are dependent on one another, so it is not possible to pick winners.

Lastly, I also considered discussing the necessity for culture to be recognised as a central consideration in free trade agreements (FTA). Most particularly for us, the FTA that Australia is currently involved in negotiating with the USA. Without an exemption clause for culture in such agreements we are at risk of losing the protectionist measures, such as content regulations and even governments arts funding, which have enabled the production of Australian cultural product despite the never ending avalanche of cheaper and better marketed cultural product from overseas. It is telling to point out, in relation to these current Australian/US negotiations, that 60% of the USA’s export is intellectual property. The USA is also Australia’s largest provider of cultural product. We can see that it is important for the Australian community to be advocating strongly for cultural exemption in relation to this current agreement.

So this is a fairly simplistic account of four very big policy issues. I then reflected that there was something actually common to all of these and it was the source of difficulty in each of them. It is a failure to balance the cultural, social and economic objectives, which should be at the centre of good cultural policy. What really struck me about this was that despite the prevalence of a particular understanding of cultural policy in Australia over the last 20 years, government has still failed to put cultural considerations at the centre of governance. Indeed, and it seems with notable exceptions that in Australia at the moment this is increasingly so, despite the rhetoric, government has failed to take culture seriously.

I would suggest that cultural vitality, however that might be defined for each particular community, is not ‘beyond cultural policy’ but involves taking cultural policy seriously. So hence my wish in the minutes I have left to return to brass tacks. I thought it might be timely and useful to return to asking what exactly is cultural policy? Elsewhere I have argued that in Australia we can trace the origins of the discursive influences on cultural policy from the establishment of mechanics institutes in the mid 19th century. Here, and
later through the institutions of state galleries and museums; culture was to exert a civilising effect on the visiting public. This was considered particularly crucial due to Australia’s distance from the civility of the mother country. During World War II cultural programs were utilised to raise the morale of a citizenry who at least initially were less than enthusiastic about joining another European war.

H.C. Coombs who described culture as the “real business of life”, attempted to initiate the development of cultural policy at the Federal Government level in his role as Director of the Department of Post War Reconstruction. It was not in fact until 1968 that the Federal Government entered the arts funding arena in a thorough going way with the establishment of the Australia Council. At that early stage its function was to fund ‘few but roses’. The limited understanding of excellence and quality, which dominated at that time was quickly challenged by proponents of community arts, access and participation and for instance, Donald Horne’s articulation of cultural rights.

An ever-extending notion of cultural diversity has been perhaps one of the most powerful changes to arts policy in shifting its basis in notions of artistic excellence. During the 1980s and 1990s in Australia cultural diversity was most often addressed through cultural programs that facilitated a notion of ethnicity rooted in cultural and social difference. Particularly over the last 5 years or so, cultural diversity has increasingly been extended to encompass cultural forms which were previously seen as best served by the commercial cultural market, such as popular music, computer game development and so forth. This radical expansion in what gets counted as cultural, in part precisely because we did take culture seriously, has now become the biggest challenge for cultural policy.

At the big end of town for instance, the challenge is to come up with a workable process for defining the cultural if it is to have special exemption from free trade treaties. For example is the German Volkswagen or ‘folk mobile’, cultural? Well, surely it is, but a globally economically successful car manufacturing company is not the kind of thing we want to benefit from protection under a cultural exemption clause.

At the little end of town, how do we judge between applications to our cultural development fund where the art is a tool for a very worthy but social outcome rather than a cultural one, and those applications where the outcome is artistic but will be engaged with by a very limited part of the community?

In the late 80s and early 90s Australia was known internationally as experiencing a ‘cultural policy moment’. Academically this was led by a Federal Government funded research centre called the Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy. The Directors were Colin Mercer and subsequently Tony Bennett. Both of these personnel, reading the cultural policy writing on the wall, have returned to their mother country. To declare my own influence, I was a postgraduate student there and subsequently employed as a Research Fellow until the Centres’ demise last year. The project at the centre via a broad cross-disciplinary team was to develop a theoretical model for cultural policy, which was concrete enough to withstand the competing pressures of politics or to put it in another way, to develop an accountable and pragmatic way of adjudicating between the claims of different cultural communities.

I would like now briefly before concluding to outline the main components of this theory of cultural policy. It has been argued that the demise of cultural policy as a discreet
Object of study from academic horizons in Australia has been because it is now subsumed within various other disciplines, urban planning, social policy and media studies for instance. It is interesting to note by the way and we can reflect whether this might be due to a local political shift because in Europe and the USA cultural policy is a massively burgeoning field of research and practice.

One of the primary reasons for outlining this theoretical model of cultural policy is to point out that cultural policy is not simply a practical application of critical cultural theory. Cultural policy is not about releasing the well springs of the popular aesthetic but it is about strategic deployment of human, cultural and physical resources for a group of beings living in a given area. To reiterate that slightly and to pick up the implications of this for the facilitation of cultural diversity, this model of cultural policy advocates a resource management approach to culture rather than a presentational model.

It is in this concern with the everyday tactical uses of private and public spaces and facilities and to the encouragement and facilitation of some types of self and community and not others that this model of cultural policy is always focussed on making strategic connections with economic and social outcomes. It is in this way that cultural policy can strategically rather than politically balance between social and economic claims and benefits.

For those who rail against the strategic emphasis of this articulation of cultural policy or who argue that it has nothing to do with art it is worth recalling that the governance of culture has always had strategic cultural, economic, political and social objectives. In relation to urban concerns think of the utility of museums and parks in early 19th century France and a little later in London in opening up and civilising the squalor of the 19th century city. Culturally led regeneration has a long history it seems.

The Louvre was the very first museum opened to the public at large and why did the first revolutionary Government of France do this, because the exhibitionary complex of the Louvre signified the glory of the French Republic to its citizens. The Victoria and Albert museum was opened in 19th century Britain to provide British ‘mechanicks’ or trades people with access to an education in good design in response to the poor quality of British lace in comparison to its continental and particularly Italian rivals. Initially the function of the V and A was therefore to help develop Britain’s poor export in design. The creative industries, too, have a long history. Also think of the later 19th century function of this same museum in civilising the working classes by providing them with access to ‘rational recreation’. Culture then has always had a central role in relation to social and economic policy.

What is crucial here then, and most difficult to achieve, is the positioning of cultural considerations at the centre of Government. That is to say this requires a real and not rhetorical whole of Government approach. This is the only way in which the field of culture can be managed in a way that is culturally and economically sustainable and politically and socially defensible.