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LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION
EXPLORING THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE FOR ARTS ORGANISATIONS

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Abstract

Many arts managers and marketers are looking intently at the importance of high-speed communication and other technologies for the creation of virtual places. These places in cyberspace can only be accessed via a computer terminal and high-speed telecommunications tools. This paper asserts that there is still much for managers and marketers to learn about the importance of physical spaces for the arts. We use a model of place and apply it to three Australian arts organisations located in heritage buildings. One organisation failed, the other changed ownership, the third moved location. The findings demonstrate the importance of place and of strategy in determining place. We note the tension between the strategy, the venue, the objects, and the essential task and call for further analysis of place(s) for the arts.

Background

The Importance of Place

The goal of this paper is to explore the strategic importance of place for arts organisations. We assert that place can be crucial to the viability of an arts organisation. The location of the organisation can assist the organisation to survive where other organisations might founder. Alternately the location may appear attractive but in reality is totally unsuited to the task. We focus on the latter. The paper starts with a presentation of some of the complexities of defining place and what it means to society. A way of viewing the meaning of place and how these meanings may shift over time is presented. This model is used to discuss three Australian case studies; the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Sydney near the harbour; the Meat Market Craft Centre (MMCC) in Melbourne and the Jam Factory (JF) in Adelaide. The paper concludes with a discussion of the importance of place for arts managers and marketers and a call for more consideration of both physical and cyber places.

What is Strategy?

Strategy is about how organisations innovate, drawing on certain elements of tradition, such as values and core mission, as well as creating services and products that are entirely new. Strategy is relevant to the discussion of location because it emphasises the theoretical underpinning of organisations and how they adapt in times of change. While strategic models abound in the marketing literature, they are scarce in the arts literature. Strategy is shaped by organisational and social processes on the nature and extent of organisational change. Strategy has been variously defined as an approach that marshals and allocates an organisation’s resources into a unique and viable posture based on its internal position and the anticipated changes in the context (Limerick and Cunningham 1993; Mintzberg 1989; Mintzberg 1994; Quinn 1980), and as the need for a shared vision inimical to core ideology ‘which remains fixed while ... business strategies and practices endlessly adapt to a changing world’ (Collins and Porras 1996: 65). Strategy determines the overall direction of the organisation and ultimately its viability. Shared vision is a focal point for the effort, which is inspiring and challenging people in the organisation. Strategy gives conceptual rigor to concrete notions such as location. Strategy identifies and then challenges organisational logic in changing circumstances.
Ways to Consider Place

Places consist of objects and spaces. They are constructed not only by architects and builders; places are made, developed and imbued with social and cultural values. The concept of place is as much a 'psychological phenomenon as it is a physical one' (Kalay & Marx, 2001).

Places are connected to the past physically and socially and connected conceptually to a range of values and perceptions. Canter (1977) says that place consists of three interconnecting elements: the activities carried out, the objects contained within and the conceptions connected with the place. Put the three elements together and a physical and social place has been established. A place has meanings for these directly involved and associated with the place.

The Australian anthropologist, Philip Smith (1999) believes that there are four elemental forms of place: the sacred, profane, liminal and mundane. The elements described below are from Smith (1999) and applied by the authors to Australian places. Sacred places offer contact with the meaning and generate high levels of emotion, awe and respect. Events of great heroism and achievement may have occurred in sacred places, such as ANZAC Cove at Gallipoli. Profane places are considered evil, depraved and dirty or polluted. Examples of profane places might include places that have debased and degraded basic human values. Port Arthur, Tasmania, is an example of a profane place. It is a site that has been the scene of much evil over an extended period of time. Liminal places are at the margin, barely perceptible and very much different from every day life. Places like King’s Cross in Sydney, particularly during Mardi Gras is an example of a liminal place. King’s Cross is often associated with creativity, the ‘zany, alternative lifestyles and cults’ (Smith, 1999:21). The mundane is very much part of the everyday world. Mundane places are in between the sacred and the profane and so ordinary they that are not often noticed (Smith, 1999:16). Examples of the mundane place include the average suburb in an Australian city. Smith’s (1999) typology of the sacred, profane, liminal and mundane can be used in a dynamic and temporal mode. As he asserts that places can be established in one realm then over time transform into another realm. We accept that Smith’s model expresses some of the importance of place to societies and is worthy of further examination and application to the strategic positioning of arts organisations.

Any evaluation of the location of arts organisations is multifactorial. For example the strategic location may itself assist the organisation to attract funding and/or sponsorship. The location may be attractive of itself to visitors and tourists regardless of the essential task. This paper explores what happens when governments attempt to “kill two birds with one stone” by putting arts organisations into unoccupied historic buildings. Politically, this strategy solves the problem of what to do with a decaying building and how to provide some form of support for artists by providing them with a venue for their practices.

Arts organisations in Australia are often located in disused heritage buildings. Many artists welcome the opportunity to work in interesting and historical venues that are affordable and charming if cold and often unsuited to the technical task of production. These nearly derelict buildings may have a charm for those looking for more sacred rather than mundane venues for their arts. This trend was particularly popular in Australia in the 1970s (Cochrane, 1992:280-284) of which the Metropolitan Meat Market Craft Centre and the Jam Factory Design Centre are two examples. Each of these arts organisations has been owned by an institution, located in a distinctive place in a heritage building and had multiple purposes before being used as a cultural centre (Table 1). This chequered history is representative of strategic conflict and tension in the importance of place both in the minds of the managers of the places and in the minds of the institutions with which they have been linked.
We look briefly at three arts organisations in Australia and how those organisations developed and changed and were changed by their places. First, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, then the Meat Market Craft Centre in Melbourne, and finally the Jam Factory in Adelaide.

The Museum of Contemporary Art – Sydney

The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney was established in the former Maritime Services Board building on Circular Quay West, the Rocks. It was designed and built between 1940 and 1952. It is an “H” shaped very large office block faced in yellow sandstone and granite. The foyer is magnificently clad in Australian marble. It is an interesting example of Art Deco design with bas-relief work on the tower and over the entrances. The MCA is located within walking distance of the Sydney harbour ferries, city buses and trains, as well as other cultural icons such as the Opera House. It is superbly located. In 1991 the building was opened as the Museum of Contemporary Art designed to house the collection established by the Power Bequest, left to the University of Sydney. It has a row of shops facing the tourist-flooded end of inner-city George Street, the focal point for the promotion of local and international works of art; and a vehicle to facilitate private subsidisation of the arts. Despite variable attendance figures, the MCA is very well recognised throughout Sydney. The MCA’s site in the heart of the city gave it a profile vital to accessing the wider community and attracting substantial corporate sponsorship, but created a psychological and philosophical distance from the University and its central role as an educational institution (Wallace 2000:34).

The Metropolitan Meat Market – North Melbourne

The arts precinct in Melbourne is located on the southern side adjacent to the Yarra River and along St. Kilda Road, which is the major boulevard for the city. The arts precinct includes the National Gallery of Victoria, including Federation Square, the State Theatre, Concert Hall, State Ballet Centre, and The Victorian College of the Arts, and all are located along the boulevard. The Royal Botanical Gardens, the central business district and the bay side suburbs surround the precinct, which is custom-built for its purpose with excellent facilities. Craft is represented in the southern Arts precinct, but only once a week (on Sundays) when crafts people are allowed to set up tables on the footpath to entertain those promenading on the boulevard. This presentation of craft in a temporary fashion, along the street and exposed to all weather, is opposed to the presentation of art only a few metres away in the controlled atmosphere of National Gallery of Victoria.

The precisely named Flagstaff Hill defines the northern boundary of the city of Melbourne. Beyond the Hill the terrain flattens out to wind swept plains that have been developed as the industrialised western suburbs, home of many noxious industries. The northern side contains the Queen Victoria Market (fresh produce), urban industry, several public hospitals and a jail. To the south-west is the flood plain mouth of the Yarra and Maribyrnong rivers. Located in the inner-city suburb of North Melbourne, the city’s largest craft institution, the Meat Market Craft Centre, was not co-located with any other craft or art entity. Indeed, it was on the “wrong side of the river” and “off the beaten track”, without any passing traffic at all. The MMCC was housed in a recycled Meat Market; the building has a cobbled floor, vaulted ceilings, and no environmental controls making the hanging of exhibitions and the care of the craft extremely difficult. The building has been given heritage listing, which means that
no alterations can be made to its fabric. Thus there is clear separation of the two activities, the “arts” in an accessible, high profile, custom-built, prestige location, while the crafts are hidden away in obsolete and recycled facilities. From its early days as a Melbourne wholesale meat market, the site has undergone several dramatic shifts in identity while continuing some material and relational connections with the past. This large building has been used as a meat market, a car park, a bank, a hotel, a disposals warehouse, accommodation for arts and crafts groups, an auction house and a functions venue.

**Jam Factory – Contemporary Craft and Design – Adelaide**

A Craft Centre was established during 1973 in a disused jam factory in Adelaide, South Australia. It remained there until 1990 when strategic planning processes revealed that it was not viable for the centre to remain located within the confines of the old and inappropriately designed building. The costs of reaching and maintaining occupational health and safety requirements were prohibitive. The occupational and health issues made the building unsuitable for purpose of craft design and production. It moved to a higher profile and safer venue. The Jam Factory now has four studios and a gallery in Morphett St and a retail outlet in the shopping district of Central Adelaide. The move to new premises was crucial for this long-standing and successful organisation.

The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney has survived, albeit precariously at times, as it is high profile geographically and is in the ‘eye’ of the public. The City of Sydney is interested in the building because of its location, but the University of Sydney is not so keen as there is confusion between the MCA’s role as an occupier of a *sacred* site, its work as a university museum and its importance to the people of Sydney as a destination. Distance from the University of Sydney means that the MCA’s positional advantage for tourists is negated by political infighting at the university over its strategic fit with the university mission. The Meat Market Craft Centre was located in North Melbourne in a *mundane* suburban and inner city area with little to recommend itself. The building itself is ‘off the beaten track’ and difficult to find. The establishment of an arts and crafts centre within the heritage building proved to be far too costly and no one administration was able to raise sufficient funding to keep the organisation going. The MMCC closed briefly due to financial difficulties during the 1980s and was reopened with a grant from the Victorian State Government. However it suffered another financial down turn in the early 1990s and closed finally as the costs of occupying the site were far too great for the organisation to bear.

The mini case studies presented illustrate some strategic implications and costs of providing accommodation for not for profit organisations in heritage locations. Issues of public access and occupational health and safety are highlighted regularly. A strategic approach enables a holistic, integrated, well-founded set of conclusions about location to be made. The lessons of the past must be heeded if arts organisations are to flourish rather than bask in the reflection of the historical site yet be crippled by the costs of managing the building that is inappropriate for the task. It should be noted that only the modern and very well located Museum of Contemporary Art has survived in its location, the other two organisations have had to close or to move.

This paper chose three arts organisations to demonstrate the importance of place and to explore some of the relevance and symbolism of place for arts managers and marketers. A significant study of many organisations locally and internationally would be required to derive and test particular hypotheses. The evidence from the three case studies suggests that there is a tension between how places are perceived. Some stakeholders will see the places as *sacred* regardless of the activity being carried out. This is particularly the case for heritage buildings. A clash of interests can occur between those who wish to see the place preserved at all costs, and those who wish to see it adapted for the purposes of art production. Other sites may be *profane* and rejected as contradicting the values of craft. The original site of the Adelaide centre was somewhat *liminal* owing to its history but *mundane* in that it was too far away to attract visitors. The lessons for arts marketers and managers relate to the tensions between interesting, low cost sites for art and craft centres. The site may be *sacred* but the reality of occupation may make the site *profane*. 
References


