

**Arts in the Suburbs:
A Microscope on Western Sydney**

Speakers: **Jenny Bisset** Manager, Arts and Cultural Development, Blacktown Council
Kathy Baykitch Director, Western Sydney Dance Action

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By Tracy Ellis

Since 1999, the NSW government has spent more than \$21.4 million on cultural infrastructure and arts delivery in Western Sydney.

SAMAG invited some arts practitioners from the region to offer their perspectives on the development of Western Sydney as a cultural precinct and to discuss some of the achievements, as well as the challenges to maintaining growth and opportunities into the future.

Before taking on her current role as manager of arts and cultural development at Blacktown Council, Jenny Bisset, worked for four years as the Western Sydney Arts Program manager at the NSW Ministry for the Arts. She says her new role is “a very different experience from working in stage government, let me tell you”.

At Blacktown Council she presides over the third biggest local government authority in Australia, “an enormous bureaucracy ... with a staff of 1200.”

“We are a very boastful region about our riches and our assets” says Bisset.

Blacktown alone has a population of 300,000 while greater Western Sydney is home to two million people – 50 per cent of the population of Sydney.

Some areas within Western Sydney, such as Liverpool and Camden, are the fastest growing regions in the country. Western Sydney is also the most culturally diverse region in Australia. Over half a million people have migrated there from over 100 different countries. It also has the largest urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, primarily based in Blacktown, Campbelltown and Penrith.

The population is also one of the youngest in the country, although it competes with the Central Coast for that title.

While it's an area characterised by its suburban development, and historically has often been referred to derogatorily as a vast suburban wasteland, it also has the natural geographical features of The Blue Mountains, the Nepean and Hawkesbury river systems and the Cumberland Plain. Early agricultural development in this region provided the produce for the growing population of Sydney and over the last two centuries and it has lost more than 90 per cent of its original flora.

Along with the development of the rail system, Western Sydney expanded as a series of cities within the city, including the recognisable second CBD of Parramatta. As the population expanded so did services and industry, and cultural services have emerged that once were solely located in, and associated with, the Sydney CBD.

Western Sydney now comprises the third-largest regional economy in Australia, after Sydney as a whole and Melbourne.

It also has a political volatility and diversity – both sides of parliament are after the aspirational voters who reside there. “Western Sydney used to be seen as the home of the working class or the poor,” says Bissett, “but increasingly that is not the case.”

As well as Blacktown and other individual councils, Western Sydney also has cultural support through a very strong regional lobby – the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils – the only Regional Organisation of Councils that has a comprehensive regional cultural strategy.

On the role of the local government in the cultural development of the region, Bissett insists that local councils, because of their direct contact with residents, have a high level of responsibility and accountability to their constituents.

There are several key local government owned cultural centres in Western Sydney, including The Campbelltown Arts Centre, Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre, The Casula Powerhouse, and Parramatta Riverside Theatres – all of which are supported by substantial funding. All these centres engage in exhibitions and productions of racial, cultural and religious diversity and deal with issues directly related to the local community.

The Casula Powerhouse has staged and presented some particularly challenging performances and exhibitions, such as **Anita and Beyond**, an exhibition that dealt with the brutal murder of Western Sydney resident Anita Cobby.

To illustrate just how involved Blacktown Council are in the arts of their region, Bissett lists just some of the projects and activities they have supported in the last two months. They include **Western Front** – a collaboration between visual arts centres in the region, presenting a suite of contemporary arts practice exhibitions at Blacktown Arts Centre; a series of artists talks, seminars and children's workshops; an exhibition called **Songs of Travelling Birds** featuring four Iraqi artists based in Western Sydney; the latest Urban Theatre Projects production **Back Home**, and performances by **The Song Company** and the **Sydney Symphony Orchestra**.

Blacktown Council are also engaged with many of the other cultural service providers and organisations in the region, such as the Migrant Resource Centre, and with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities on the development of an artists co-op that will feature rehearsal spaces and, eventually, it is hoped, will see the establishment of a cultural centre within the Blacktown local government area.

Most of the arts organisations and venues in Western Sydney take an active role as both presenters and producers of cultural product that reflects their local community and the region has also been instrumental as a training ground for many respected arts workers who have come through the ranks of such companies as Shopfront Theatre and Urban Theatre Projects.

Bissett explains that the reason local government remains one of the key features of arts presentation in Western Sydney and why they are so active in the region is that there is actually a lack of funded arts organisations there, compared to those based in the Sydney CBD, despite half the population living in the west.

Many well-established community arts organisations have been working in the region for a long time, such as Urban Theatre Projects (UTP), who have been there for 15 years; Fairfield Community Resource Centre who, early on, identified cultural development as part of their work; the Bankstown Youth Development Service, and Information and Cultural Exchange (ICE), who now produce a comprehensive guide to arts activities, events, venues and services across Western Sydney

Western Sydney is also home to some very large ethno-specific communities who frequently run their own events. For example, the Indian community might bring out an Indian performer and pack out their own shows at local venues through word of mouth and publicity that barely exists outside their own community, and certainly not in the mainstream arts press.

There is still a lack of artist-run spaces in the region and, specifically, a noticeable lack of professional music organisations. But some key Sydney CBD-based organisations are finding receptive audiences in Western Sydney, like the Sydney Symphony Orchestra (SSO).

Despite unprecedented cultural growth in the region, Bisset admits that there are a few missing links in Western Sydney's cultural development, including a vibrant writing culture – something that could possibly be addressed with the establishment of a Western Sydney Writers' Centre and a Writer's Festival. There are also a great number of active musicians in the area but many work and perform outside the region, and are even forced to relocate in pursuit of their careers. She also warns that some of the key arts organisations are struggling to maintain their output on current budgets. Arts workers are stretched and there is a high level of burn-out among staff.

The NSW Ministry of the Arts took advantage of the State Government's politically motivated investment in the region back in 1999 and developed the Western Sydney Arts Strategy to grab funds for cultural development.

Their leadership has resulted in increased confidence in the region but Bisset cautions that the increased activity needs to be backed up with more funding if the momentum is to be maintained. Government needs to stop viewing their strategy as an affirmative action case and specifically support growth in the non-government sector and prioritise the development of indigenous artists.

Snapshot: Western Sydney Dance Action

Kathy Baykitch started in her role as Director at Western Sydney Dance Action, based at Parramatta Riverside Theatres, in August 2000. From the start the organisation had a strong community focus.

They have developed programs that target a range of community groups and worked to increase public awareness of dance through inventive and contemporary means, such as presenting performances outside the traditional venue of the theatre.

They have also actively explored opportunities for cross cultural dance practice in the region, be it working with Indian dancers on a style of traditional Indian dance or developing a project with the local Laotian community, or holding public dance classes in different cultural styles such as Flamenco.

Western Sydney Dance Action aims to offer support to dancers who live and work in the region at the early stage of their career, and to that end the company has built relationships with established artists, to benefit the development of their emerging dancers, and have also been involved with the University of Western Sydney's BA in Dance program, (sadly being phased out at the end of 2006).

They have also been active in schools throughout the region, offering a workshop program for primary school students and a work experience program for secondary students, and have created employment opportunities for dancers by employing graduates as trainee artists and developed other artist support programmes such as mentorship initiatives.

They have also established a successful and ongoing season of performances by emerging dancers and choreographers called Dance Bites (launched in 2003).

This quick tour of the achievements of just one emergent arts organisation in Western Sydney – a company that didn't exist before the injection of cultural funds into the region six years ago – demonstrates the need for cultural services in the region.

That one organisation can become so established in such a short time, on a budget that is a drop in the bucket compared to the funding some mainstream dance companies might receive, is a sign of a cultural life in the region just beginning to brim to the surface. Despite being a young company, should the funding dry up, Western Sydney Dance Action's loss would already be sorely felt – by its participants, audiences, and even those that might never take an interest in dance but still like to know it's there, enlivening and adding dimension to their local community.

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