

SUBMISSION

Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs

Inquiry into the future use of the Fitters' Workshop, Kingston Arts Precinct
October 2011.

By Murray Upton and Judith Erskine.

Submission to Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs Inquiring into the future use of the Fitters' Workshop, Kingston Arts Precinct, October 2011.

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Preamble: This submission arises from our interest in the development of the Kingston Foreshore Precinct and the fact that one of us (Murray Upton) was a member of the original community consultative committee in 1996. We are not associated with any music group in the ACT.

We first raised our concerns about the development of the Cultural Precinct with the Chief Minister, Jon Stanhope, in 2007 and received obfuscatory responses that failed to address our concerns. Following proposals in 2009 by the LDA to demolish sections of the Old Bus depot buildings and the outcry that followed, Jon Stanhope promised "a separate consultation process regarding the cultural precinct of the Kingston Foreshore would start in about April 2010" (CT 7 November 2009, p1). This never occurred, but in July 2010 Jon Stanhope wrote that "public consultation on master plan options -- is expected to begin within the next three months", and on 21 September 2010 he wrote that "public consultations will commence in November 2010 on the Cultural Redevelopment Strategy and Precinct Plan". This did not occur either, and when asked in the Legislative Assembly in March 2011 about the promised community consultation Jon Stanhope stated that "Community consultation will take place mid 2011". Mr Stanhope's office further advised us (2 March 2011) that "The decision to defer public consultation on the Precinct Plan was made to allow time for the LDA to fully consider both the Heritage Council's decision and the work being undertaken on options for arts activity in the precinct. The LDA is also developing a draft master plan". All this **prior** to any public consultation that should clearly have occurred first.

Worse was to come. On 23 April 2011, during the Easter holiday period, there was an announcement in the Canberra Times that the historic Fitter's Workshop in Kingston Cultural Precinct was to be transformed into a new home for the Megalo Print Studio at a cost of \$3.9 million; yet another decision before any public consultation. Furthermore, this decision was apparently made privately with Megalo Print Studios back in 2008/9 with no tenders being called, no public notification, and no consideration being given to other cultural institutions that may have been interested in the Fitter's Workshop.

It should also be noted that, despite the newspaper reports, our correspondence with the Chief Minister about the matter, and the fact that the matter had been raised in the Assembly, not a word was mentioned about the private deal with Megalo until the middle of the Easter Holiday period in 2011.

It is our considered opinion that the matter of the Fitter's Workshop should be dealt with in the context of the development of the Cultural Precinct as a whole and not one of 'musicians' versus 'print makers'.

Terms of reference:**(2) (a): The best use of the Fitter's Workshop:**

The best use for the Fitter's Workshop is that which provides facilities to the largest number of community groups that could use the building without it having to undergo extensive renovations. The present round of community consultations being carried out by Purdons will hopefully address the best and most sustainable use of the Fitter's Workshop for the greatest good of the community.

The proposal that the building should be extensively renovated at considerable cost for the sole use of one single type of enterprise does not appear to be in the best interests of the community. It precludes any use whatsoever of what is currently a very valuable spacious interior that can accommodate a considerable audience and a variety of functions. Furthermore, it does not fit in with the Heritage status of the building. The grandeur of the building would be destroyed by the proposal and the public would never again have proper access to it. An anonymous proposal circulated recently "The Art Box Model", [See Appendix 1] would appear to us as one of the better ways to approach using this building for the benefit of the community. What ever use is finally decided for the Fitter's Workshop the decision must be reached in a transparent and open manner.

No matter how it is to be used in the future the internal structure of the Fitter's Workshop should remain uncluttered. An adequately sized extension should be constructed on the southern side. This extension should be large enough to include space for storing all the materials and equipment needed to furnish the main building for the purpose decided upon, space for rooms to facilitate that purpose, and public toilet facilities to cater for the entire precinct as these are currently lacking.

(2) (c):Accommodation for Megalo Print Studio:

The current Development Application [201120317] to construct a new, free-standing, two storey timber building within the Fitter's Workshop together with a new extension on the southern side adjacent to the Old Bus Depot building would appear to be far from the best outcome for Megalo Print Studio. Given that funds amounting to some \$3.8 million have been budgeted for, the best outcome for Megalo Print Studio would be the construction, within the Kingston Cultural Precinct, of a single, purpose-built building designed solely for their requirements. It could be located in approximately the same location as their proposed extension or it could be elsewhere in the Cultural Precinct if that were found to be more appropriate. This would provide Megalo a far better outcome than having to fit around the Heritage requirements of the Fitter's Workshop with the damaging changes that will result to that building from their plumbing, draining and ventilation requirements.

It is hard to believe that Megalo are serious in wanting to renovate the Fitter's Workshop when a much more viable alternative is preferable. Perhaps it was just the "status" of the building that they were seeking not the best accommodation or outcome for their art?

(2) (d):Other relevant matters:

In view of the difficulties and costs that organisations have when wanting to hire or use the Albert Hall it is probably relevant to suggest that this enquiry examine the various options open to the ACT Government when deciding how to manage the numerous facilities that are proposed for the Kingston Cultural Precinct.

It is suggested that the operation of the entire Cultural Precinct be handed to a body such as a "Kingston Cultural Precinct Trust" comprising a Board who would have the responsibility to manage the precinct free from the overly bureaucratic requirements of government.

Murray Upton and Judith Erskine

Kingston 16 November 2011

APPENDIX 1.

The ArtBox Model for the Fitters Workshop – proposal

The historic **Fitters Workshop** (one of the earliest completed structures in Canberra) has the extraordinary gifts of vibrant acoustics, superb light and excellent design. It was the second permanent structure in Canberra designed by J.S. Murdoch. It is likely to be the fifth building overall, and it is a powerfully elegant example of Industrial architecture at its best, of which we have very few examples in the ACT. The openness of the design and the quality of the light enables an unusually broad spectrum of responses to this evocative space.

This proposal is for a highly visible display case (an **ArtBox**) that could showcase the finest ACT Art practices. A 50 week / 25 fortnight curated schedule of exhibitions, installations, shows, concerts, workshops and other public outcomes would create an artistic epicentre and meeting place that would help profile artmaking in Canberra. The proposed intervention in the building ideally should be minimal, limited to power, lighting, heating, and perhaps an unobtrusive wire hanging system rigged to the gantry frame. All staging (such as a sprung dance floor), seating and display systems should be modular and removable, and stored nearby. Amenities should also be housed exterior to the building. In this proposal, artists invited to respond to the space would have a blank canvas to work with and an open space to inhabit.

The brand development would be a vital component of the **ArtBox**, creating over time a trusted focal point within the artistic diversity of the Kingston Foreshore Precinct. The installation of fixed high definition camera positions on the gantry frame could facilitate web streaming and allow viewing of exhibitions and concerts from users in regional and remote Australia and internationally. There are current models whereby this footage can be accessed either freely or as pay per view, but in both cases the art practice will gain from exposure outside of Canberra.

Live performances captured by such a system would make it cost effect possible for the ABC and other digital broadcasters to take arts programming from the venue perhaps under a “**Live at the ArtBox**” banner, similar to the ABC’s “**Live at the Basement**” series. ABC Classic FM and other radio stations could also broadcast live from the venue, which could also be used as an acoustic recording venue.

As an exhibition space, visitation numbers to events in the ArtBox are guaranteed to be high due to the proximity to the Old Bus Depot Markets (3000-5000 visitors every Sunday). For individual artists and / or collectives, it would be a potent environment to display and sell their work. For live performances, the venue’s crucial mid-range capacity of 400 - 500 seats would fill a needed gap amongst Canberra’s venues.

All these outcomes would attract increased visitation to the precinct outside of the peak Old Bus Depot Market hours and invigorate the area.

The following art forms could all be showcased to great advantage in the **ArtBox**

- Glass (specifically allowing the Canberra Glassworks to mount major exhibitions)
- Art and Printmaking Exhibitions
- Photographic Exhibitions
- Ceramic Exhibitions
- Sculpture Exhibitions
- Art Installations including sound installations
- Live Music (CIMF, NFF, Canberra Choirs, Jazz, ANU Ensembles plus a recording space)
- Film (after sunset)
- Theatre
- Dance
- Design
- Fashion
- Multi-disciplinary work