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8 December 2011

Amanda Bresnan MLA
Chair, Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs
ACT Legislative Assembly
GPO Box 1020
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Ms Bresnan

Future Use of the Fitters' Workshop, Kingston Arts Precinct

PhotoAccess is pleased to make a submission to the Legislative Assembly's Inquiry into the Future Use of the Fitters' Workshop in the proposed Kingston Arts Precinct.

PhotoAccess is a contemporary visual arts organisation that encourages involvement in photo media through exhibitions, courses and community projects. We are located in the Manuka Arts Centre, on the corner of Manuka Circle and New South Wales Crescent in Griffith, ACT. We have served the ACT community for 28 years, and receive support from the ACT Government as a Key Arts Organisation. More information about PhotoAccess can be found at www.photoaccess.org.au.

Our interest in the future use of the Fitters' Workshop arises from its important position at the heart of the proposed visual arts hub in the Kingston Arts Precinct. Following release of the Kingston Arts Precinct Strategy in March 2011 PhotoAccess reassessed its long term accommodation needs and has expressed a strong interest in relocating to Kingston to contribute to the range, diversity and viability of activities that will make the Arts Precinct an essential destination for the community and visitors to Canberra interested in the visual arts.

We believe accommodating Megalo Print Workshop in the Fitters' Workshop is critical to the success of the Kingston Arts Precinct.

Our submission follows at Attachment A.

Yours sincerely



David Chalker
Director

PhotoAccess submission on Future Use of the Fitters' Workshop, Kingston Arts Precinct

Kingston Arts Precinct

The ACT Government's long-standing decision to create the Kingston Arts Precinct with a visual arts focus at Section 49 Kingston was farsighted and well known to the community, including the music organisations allowed use of the Fitters' Workshop in recent years.

Establishment of the Canberra Glassworks was the first and major step towards implementing that plan. Successfully accommodating Canberra's major visual arts organisations, including Megalo, in refurbished and purpose built facilities on the Kingston site will see it completed with significant benefits for the ACT.

A visual arts hub

Collocating major ACT visual arts organisations at Section 49 Kingston will:

- provide a stronger focus for community involvement in the visual arts as practitioners and audience members
- assist the visual arts organisations themselves by facilitating audience building and creating a critical mass of higher profile gallery and work spaces and facilities for learning
- promote the ACT's standing as a mature community offering rich and varied creative opportunities for its people and visitors
- benefit the ACT economy by providing a new, high profile destination encouraging and assisting visitors to look beyond the national institutions and extend their stay in Canberra.

All of the ACT's visual arts Key Arts Organisations—Canberra Glassworks, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Megalo Print Studio, Craft ACT: Craft and Design Centre and PhotoAccess—are planning to be involved in the Kingston Arts Precinct development. It will significantly increase audience for all five organisations and build the ACT's reputation as a cultural destination. All of these organisations see exciting prospects for cooperation and the creation of an outstanding, lively place that will enrich Canberra's community and cultural life.

We were very pleased with the ACT Government's clear support for the creation of a visual arts hub at Kingston in its response last month to the report on the Review of the Arts in Canberra (the Loxton Report).

Factors that will be critical to the ongoing success of the Kingston Arts Precinct include:

- the right mix of viable organisations with a good track record of program delivery
- adequate space for the activities of those organisations
- appropriate facilities for their programs
- appropriate landscaping and public facilities
- establishing and maintaining an active, lively profile and a reputation for quality.

The organisations listed here all have established reputations and audiences and would bring those and the energy and commitment of their members and supporters to the precinct.

Land Development Agency's proposals for Section 49

The Land Development Agency's general approach to establishing the arts precinct at Kingston has been outlined in community consultations on Section 49 and at a meeting of the visual arts Key Arts Organisations with Christine Purdon on 9 November 2011.

It was agreed that there is merit in the positioning and general principles for the facilities that will make up the arts precinct in the draft plan we saw and which, we understand, will form part of the Land Development Agency's submission to the ACT Legislative Assembly this month.

A concern we have, however, is that there may be insufficient space to meet the needs of the visual arts organisations currently interested in relocating to the precinct, let alone all of the organisations representing other interests and art forms—particularly if there is any change to the plans for Megalo and the Fitters' Workshop.

We hope final decisions on the Section 49 development will reflect the more detailed work we presume will soon be undertaken by artsACT on the make up of the arts and creative industries elements of the development, including management arrangements that ensure our organisations can have viable and sustainable economic futures.

Solutions for Section 49 that will satisfy the needs of our organisations, other arts organisations and the many other interests that must be accommodated in this development, will need to be made at an early stage to achieve a coherent and workable precinct. It will not be possible for the needs of all organisations to be met within the Section 49 footprint identified for the arts precinct.

Megalo and the Fitters' Workshop

Megalo is a deserving candidate for accommodation in the redeveloped Fitters' Workshop. Its programs for making and showing art are well established and well respected.

An important aspect of Megalo's work, and of the visual arts organisations mentioned here, is that people can visit to see exhibitions for most of the working week and on weekends. It is imperative for the success of the Kingston Arts Precinct that there should be something for visitors to see and experience consistently and at times when people wish to visit. Empty buildings do not draw visitors to a place and nor do they contribute to a lively and successful arts precinct.

Megalo's art making facilities and access programs mean that artists will work in the Fitters' Workshop, as was the case in its early years. This sits more comfortably with the heritage values of the building than any other proposal of which we are aware.

We believe accommodating Megalo Print Workshop in the Fitters' Workshop is critical to the success of the Kingston Arts Precinct.

Acoustic properties and music performance or shared use of the Fitters' Workshop

We are not aware of any scientific assessment of the acoustic properties of the Fitters' Workshop, although anecdotal evidence suggests that the building does have a remarkable acoustic.

Preserving its acoustic quality would mean that there should be minimal interventions in the building, including interventions to ensure the building is fit for the purpose of hosting music performances on a regular basis. It seems unlikely that work required to allow the Fitters' Workshop to operate as a regular performance venue could be done without destroying or at least compromising its acoustic quality.

Any work to create the building for shared use would similarly destroy or at least compromise its acoustic quality.

Unless the building is in use and accessible to visitors at all times it will diminish the appeal, utility and ultimate viability of the precinct.

Of course, the Fitters' Workshop has other qualities that might be considered in coming to a decision about its future use, including the quality of southern light and its important contribution to a good art making environment, its location in proximity to Lake Burley Griffin and Telopea Park, similarly its proximity to the Canberra Glassworks and the national cultural institutions, most of which are primarily concerned with collecting and exhibiting artworks and other cultural material.

Critical decision making

The proposed Kingston Arts Precinct will succeed or fail on the strength of decisions to be taken by the ACT Government and the Assembly in the near future.

It is clear not all of the uses proposed by many diverse arts and other organisations can be accommodated in the final mix for the precinct.

A clear and coherent vision has to prevail if Canberra is going to benefit from what is an unparalleled opportunity to plan for and create a place that could have national and international significance for the diversity, quality and concentration of arts programs and facilities it offers its community and visitors to the ACT.