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# Fitters' workshop, Kingston Arts Precinct - Future use

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Submission to Enquiry

Standing Committee on Education, Training & Youth Affairs

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## Personal note

My original education was in physics, leading to radiophysics and space research. I moved into the computing field, and before retirement I was an engineering professor (Computer Engineering at University of Canberra). Around the year 2000 some musical-instrument acoustics research was included. This background gave me a strong focus on analysing problem situations.

I am, and was then, an active choir singer (president and secretary of one choir) and orchestra instrumentalist, one among hundreds of each in the ACT.

## Introduction to submission

I wrote to Chief Minister Katy Gallagher, Minister Joy Burch, and MLA Mary Porter on the matter which is the subject of the Enquiry in May 2011, mainly stating a case for shared use of the largely unmodified Fitters' Workshop building by the graphic and the performing arts communities.

In August I wrote again about it to Minister Burch and other Ministers and MLAs, comparing the likely public interest and involvement (in my view) between :-

- its occupation, after major alterations, by Megalo Print Workshop, and
- on the other its shared use, without major alteration, on a timetabled basis by that art printing group and the numerous performing arts (music and stage) groups in or visiting the ACT.

This submission addresses all of the four Terms of Reference for this Enquiry, using mostly material from those letters in the first three. In the fourth ("any other relevant matter") some troubling aspects of the debate are noted.

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Term (a) : The best use of the Fitters' Workshop taking into account the acoustic qualities, heritage value, its location, cost and community demand of the building.

Term (b) : Options for alternative venues for use by a range of community music groups

These two Terms of Reference are taken together because they both involve the same four factors : **1. acoustics**, **2. space for performers**, **3. facilities and purposeful structures**, and **4. flexibility**. For brevity venues are abbreviated as **FW** (Fitters' Workshop), **AH** (Albert Hall), and **LH** (Llewellyn Hall).

It could be efficient for the Committee to include also performing arts groups, and professional music groups, under Term of Reference (b). I refer to them occasionally below.

### 1 Acoustics

- a) With its flat walls and shallowly arched ceiling **FW** has a very bright acoustic, meaning that higher pitch notes reach the rear clearly, notably so for such a large space. Choirs, chamber groups, and small to medium orchestras are extremely well heard there. It was Pro Musica, presenting the Canberra International Music Festival in 2009 to 2011, which discovered and amply demonstrated these qualities to enthusiastic audiences. (The Committee should note that the notably long reverberation-decay time of the building when empty must be damped by an audience in order for this clarity to become apparent – in the empty building the echo can defeat conversation!)
- b) Comparison has been made of **FW** and recent renovations to **AH**. The latter is much larger, but as no significant acoustical work, only cosmetic, has been done, it still does not even approach **FW** in brightness and clarity. The small front arch of the stage and its small capacity mean that most orchestra, choir or stage productions must move to the front of the audience space, with or without using risers, for adequate space and to avoid loss of sound behind the arch. (The amateur orchestra in which I play regularly has used **AH** for about 10 concerts and so I speak from personal experience here. Playing from the hall floor, the stage curtains behind the orchestra still absorb sound rather than reflecting it).
- c) **LH** is larger still and despite extensive acoustical aids is not as bright – not as kind to small groups – as **FW**. Also, it can only be afforded by large groups which have a good chance of filling it. Canberra School of Music students find the huge space, when almost empty for assessed student recitals, rather intimidating.
- d) The only other Canberra venue with acoustics which I know to be nearly comparable to **FW** has (I believe) recently been acoustically upgraded : John Lingard Hall, significantly smaller, at Canberra Grammar. One of the Rehearsal Rooms at **LH** has also been upgraded acoustically but its audience capacity is smaller still and I have not been there since the upgrade.

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## 2 Space for performers

- a) At present there is no dedicated space for performers (nor any stage) in **FW**. This is not a major problem for music but would hinder stage productions.
- b) **AH** has, as already noted, a small, rather cramped stage, only suitable for small groups and still problematic, especially as in a recent concert with the theatre organ console brought forward and taking one third of it. The stage is simply too small for most orchestras or larger choirs. Such larger groups have to spread out on its front floor, with or without risers, as at **FW**. Its space backstage is also cramped.
- c) **LH** has plenty of space on and off stage.

## 3 Facilities and purposeful structures

- a) Any permanent public role for **FW** must involve installing toilets, heating, lighting, curtains, and subsidiary rooms within and/or outside the existing hall. This is not, as might appear at first sight, irrelevant to the usage debate. The present excellent acoustics could be destroyed by internal structures added without acoustic consultation - for example, the flat wall at the northeast (lake) end is undoubtedly important. Importantly, its parallel walls and high curved ceiling, which no longer support maintenance of large machinery, but support the bright acoustics instead, could be called purposeful too.
- b) The acoustical qualities of this **FW** space, and most of the overhead space itself, would be unused by art printing. Display (gallery) area for finished print works is needed, I gather, but surely not at the cost of architecture notably suited for music; see also under **4 Flexibility**. **FW** contains another purposeful structure, the gantry crane, for which only limited and occasional use in installing the largest printing apparatus can be envisaged. The light from the large windows must have prompted the call for part of **FW** to be turned into a display gallery, but any building can have large north-facing windows, whereas few buildings have excellent acoustics.
- c) The stage itself, backstage spaces, and stage lights and curtains of **LH** are obviously purposeful structures, which give best support to large-scale musical performances. (Since usage patterns for **LH** are well established, efficient, and unlikely to change, it is not discussed further here).
- d) In **AH** the stage, its lights and curtains, and the theatre organ are, similarly, purposeful structures, though useful only for those smaller groups that can use the small stage and can manage with rather ordinary acoustics. Use of the hall floor space, exemplified by amateur orchestras and by the recent Opera by Candlelight productions, is a feasible but inconvenient compromise.

## 4 Flexibility

- a) **FW** is still almost infinitely flexible, despite the crane, the windows, and the music-oriented acoustics, and despite the lack of normal comfort facilities. It is close to two other useful buildings, the Kingston Markets (reportedly having some little-used space upstairs) and the Glass Works (of which the cafe and toilets were used by the Canberra International Music Festival but have no all-weather connection to **FW**). Outdoor space around them could usefully be "infilled" for a print display gallery, a (shared) foyer, and toilets etc.
- b) The flexibility of **AH** is reduced by its inferior acoustics but it does have working public toilets and a kitchen or small hall, plus performer spaces backstage, and it is bigger. When not in use the theatre organ (like the **FW** crane) does not impede other usage.

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Of the above four factors, it is **existing purposeful structures** and **flexibility** which have been ignored by proponents of the Megalo solution and, since about May, emphasised by the musical community in the ongoing debate.

Obviously, two public spaces for the arts, having differing positive qualities, are better than one. Obviously, more benefits will be available from retaining the **flexibility** and acoustical excellence of **FW** than from dedicating it to a single non-musical purpose. Toilet and comfort facilities, if added outside the existing hall, would not interfere with any artistic usage or properties and would provide the currently lacking **purposeful structures**.

Multiple use of **FW** would be assisted by time-sharing. Dr Helen Moore has written in the past giving one example of an annual usage schedule for **FW** which would support usage as a print gallery, a performance venue for a variety of types of music, and (with the addition of other **purposeful structures** in the shape of a minimal raised stage, curtains and lights, but no restrictive front arch) a variety of the other performing arts.

#### Term (c) : options for alternative purpose built accommodation for Megalo Print Studio

It should be possible for a non-architect, non-graphic-artist like myself to list the main requirements for accommodating Megalo Print Studio. These appear to be :-

1. space for printing machinery, some of it heavy and bulky;
2. a safe space for processes which involve fumes and/or hazardous substances;
3. a public gallery space with good light;
4. teaching and studio spaces, some of them public, some private;
5. a library;
6. toilets;
7. access-control entrances and exits.

There is no characteristic feature of **FW** which makes it ideal for any of these. In principle any existing or new space with windows providing adequate natural light would do. There would have to be adequate separation of 1. and 2. from the other activities for health and safety – so, why not in a separate nearby building?

Shared usage of **FW** by performance arts and print gallery would require, for the latter, only movable display partitions to support the works on show, and some acoustic treatment of these and adjacent walls to control the echo.

It has been recently asserted by Megalo staff that they plan to provide public viewing. This is questionable, surely. Compare it with the glass-blowing demonstrations at the nearby Glassworks, which as public spectacles are fascinating because of the danger and the beauty of some glass products, but hardly enthralling or suspense-filled or for mass audiences. My second communication to Minister Burch suggested, I believe justly, that by comparison even with this, print-making demonstrations would be a flop. The creative process is undoubtedly enthralling for the artist but deadly slow for a watcher.

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There is considerable un-assigned space not far from **FW**. With \$3.8 million allocated essentially for Megalo accommodation, I feel sure that a new purpose-designed building or building cluster, close to the Glassworks and **FW** so that mounting and dismounting gallery exhibitions are facilitated, would serve their purposes better than sole occupancy of a much altered, acoustically spoiled **FW**.

The mismatch is so great that one is tempted to speculate that the assignment of **FW** to Megalo may have resulted simply from someone asking "Where is there some unoccupied space?"

Term (d) : any other relevant matter

The tone of this debate, as seen in public, has been sadly adversarial and at times personal. The public has seen a report of an amazing abusive outburst from ex-Chief Minister Stanhope when this Enquiry was announced, and publication of abusive letters from Megalo supporters in the "Canberra Times" letters column. In this situation, the fairness of the decision process and Minister Burch's refusal to reconsider the matter fall open to question.

It has also been apparently deliberate that the music community has been belittled by always being referred to as choral musicians only, whereas the Canberra International Music Festival (though restrained in public debate) has been the prime example of musical use of **FW**. This belittling is visible in a letter to the "Canberra Times" as recently as today's date (p.18), although the tone was otherwise milder than in many others.

Minister Burch is either misinformed or unwilling to listen to information in relation to alternative music venues. It has been most frustrating to read her assertions of the adequacy of other music venues in the two letters to me which are attached, when I know from personal experience the pros and very definite cons of those venues.

So it is essential that the Assembly's resolution to approve funding for professional expertise in preparing the Committee's report must extend to investigation of the acoustic claims and the space and Megalo accommodation issues. That would be, at last, a proper response to both factions.