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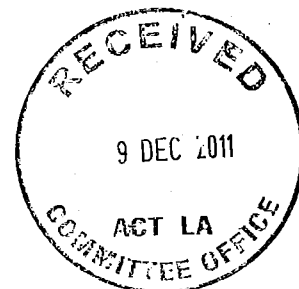
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Ms Amanda Bresnan (Chair)
 Standing Committee on Education, Training, and Youth Affairs,
 Legislative Assembly of the ACT
 GPO Box 1020,
 Canberra, ACT, 2601



Dear Ms Bresnan,

I should like to submit the following in response to the call for submissions to the Inquiry into the Future Use of the Fitters Workshop in the Kingston Arts Precinct.

In my submission I refer to the published Terms of Reference:

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;

A1: The "discovery" of the "unusual acoustic quality" of the Fitters workshop is cited in the Terms of Reference as the primary reason for this Inquiry. There is hardly any aesthetic quality more subjective and variable than acoustics. Experts notoriously disagree. I recommend that the following aspects be specifically investigated:

- Subtle changes to the material fabric of a space are said to alter the acoustic effects significantly – and the material form and fabric of this space will necessarily be altered to allow for its long-term use as a music venue.

I suggest the Inquiry seek expert opinion on such matters as: What effects will such necessary modifications (changes to the spatial arrangements, seating, lighting, floor and wall coverings, insulation, heating and cooling apparatus etc.) have on the "unusual" acoustic qualities observed in the space in its current form?

- It is said that different modes of musical performance cause different (better or worse) acoustic perceptions in members of the audience. What does expert opinion have to say about such the acoustical effects of different modes of musical performance in this space?

- It has been observed that the acoustical qualities of this space vary according to the listener's position in the space. What does expert opinion have to say about this factor – both in relation to the present circumstances of the building as well as after necessary modifications are made?

A2: The heritage value of the building is much more closely aligned with the workshop functions of Megalo than any of the alternative uses proposed.

A3: The location within an Arts Precinct with a "visual arts focus" (Conroy Report) perfectly suits the Megalo proposal. Megalo proposes a 7 day a week activity which perfectly suits the equivalent activities of the Glass Centre, and which has the capacity to enhance the attractiveness of the precinct for the purposes of cultural tourism – specifically in conjunction with the proximity of the NGA. By contrast, a performance or multi-purpose space will be closed most of the time.

A4: The costs of the approved Megalo proposal are known and quantified in budgetary provisions. Considerable expenditure has already gone into planning over the past three years – for which additional provision will need to be made if an alternative location is proposed.

- The budget for modifying the existing building is \$3.8m. Any suggestion that the same amount of funds could cover the design and construction of an entirely new building makes absolutely no sense, and if pursued, would necessarily result in a smaller and more limited venue.

- Such a proposal would cause delays of two or three years. Megalo's existing commercial rental costs are rising each year. The duplication of planning costs by Megalo staff would be another unfunded cost factor to be taken into account, with a negative impact on Megalo's ongoing programs and capacities.

- The Inquiry should recognize and quantify the costs of *not* proceeding with the existing proposal. This should include: the costs of architectural design, planning and delay inherent in providing an equivalent new venue to the same standards as that proposed; the costs inherent in design, planning and delay to both Government agencies and to Megalo; the costs of planning, architectural design and reconstruction of the building to bring it up to acceptable standards as a performance venue; the implied (and necessary) ongoing commitment to costs of servicing, management, and maintenance of this (additional) new performance (or multi-purpose) venue; the costs to Megalo of maintaining its programs in its increasingly expensive existing venue until a new building is constructed.

A5: If by "community demand of the building" is meant the claim to the building by an alternative community group, I suggest that this is not a factor worthy of consideration. Given the long-term and transparent application process that has already been undertaken in good faith by those concerned, this last-minute intervention calls into question the motives and ethics of those concerned.

Otherwise, what is the community to make of the principles inherent in the process that has already been undertaken, on which planning and budgetary decisions have been made, which are applicable no matter what the purpose of the expenditure?

Due process (open, competitive, in good faith) is in itself a superior community value to last-minute sectarian intervention.

B. options for alternative venues for use by a range of community music groups;

B1: I suggest it is appropriate for the Inquiry to survey how many alternate musical venues already exist in Canberra, and to ascertain:

- Can the purpose of choral or other musical performance be accommodated, and at what cost?
- What does expert opinion say of their acoustical qualities? If inadequate, why?

C. options for alternative purpose built accommodation for Megalo Print Studio;

C1: As I have observed elsewhere in this submission, the costs of purpose-built accommodation will inevitably be significantly greater than the current proposal, if the range of printmaking activities are to be maintained, let alone enhanced and developed in a new facility. Planning will incur additional costs. Delays will incur additional costs. I recommend the Inquiry seek expert opinion to quantify the totality of these costs prior to any decisions or recommendations.

D. any other relevant matter.

D1: There has been considerable discussion (in the press and elsewhere) that the Fitters Workshop could be redeveloped as a multi-function space - for meetings, exhibitions, as well as musical performances. Just like a country town hall. Even this option would involve considerable modification to the existing space to bring it to appropriate standards for public use, and for the proposed multiple functions.

In addition to the considerable planning and capital costs of such modifications (for which no estimates or budgetary provisions have been forecast) there would be ongoing administrative, staffing, services and running costs entailed for such multiple purposes. As such, this would imply an open-ended budgetary commitment. I recommend such factors be estimated and taken into account before a decision to not proceed with the Megalo plan be considered.

D2: In addition to the financial aspects identified in D1, if alternative uses of the building are proposed, I suggest that a scientific study should be undertaken to determine the consequences for the acoustic behaviour of the space as a result of the necessary changes to the material character and fabric of the space.

D3: In addition it should be recognized that due process has been carried out over a number of years, and in good faith. This in itself has a positive community value. The current and belated recognition of an alternative

"community demand" – outside of due process – suggests values and political procedures which are objectionable in principle.

D4: For the reasons outlined above, I suggest the Megalo proposal maximizes the use-value and cultural relevance of the Fitters Workshop. I suggest it will enhance the character of the precinct as a destination for the purposes of cultural tourism.

D5: I suggest the Inquiry should specifically recognize the high degree of compatibility between The Glass Centre and Megalo, with its potential for developmental synergies and educative potentiality.

D6: I suggest the Inquiry should recognize the historical significance of Megalo. As an organization it has many of the qualities by which the ACT would wish to be known: It is nationally-significant, professional, contemporary, creative, and forward-focused, building on 30 years of development and voluntary community input. It fosters innovative creative practices, and is an incubator for technological developments. The high standards of its activities and its national reputation may be measured by the significant number of Megalo-produced works which have found their way into the collections of the National Gallery of Australia, and other State Museum collections.

D7: By contrast the activities which have resulted in the alternative (recently recognized) sector of "community demand" is amateur, reiterative in its repertoire, retrospective in its practice, unfunded, and irrelevant to the larger Precinct objectives, as outlined in the Conroy Report. By contrast, Megalo is a hive of activity, supporting more independent professional practicing artists, and represents the greater use-value for the space.

In summary: I make this submission from a perspective of 23 years residence in Canberra, with a widespread participation in its cultural affairs. I am a practicing visual artist, an art historian and curator, an arts educator, and as such I bring a national and international practice and reputation to my submission. I have served on ACT Government and ACT arts organizations committees, as well as the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council. I am a Fellow of the Foundations of the National Gallery of Australia, and the Queensland Art Gallery. I have no formal or informal association with Megalo.

This is the first time I have felt compelled to make a submission of this kind. Why? I have never seen such a blatant affront to due process in relation to cultural development, let alone democratic principles, which is based on such flimsy and subjective evidence, and as a consequence of such opportunistic and sectarian influences.

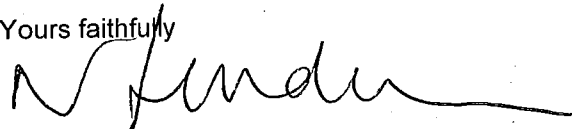
It is my belief that the Inquiry is an opportunity to bring some objective sensibility to the two key questions I have addressed:

1. The argument against the Megalo proposal hangs on the suggestion of a singular factor of an accidentally discovered acoustical quality, subjectively asserted, and of an unquantifiable and unspecified character. Further, the supposedly unique qualities of the space will be vulnerable to the potential negative consequences of converting it into a stable situation appropriate for public use as a performance space, or as a multi-purpose venue. That this "unusual" "discovery" has superceded every other value affirmed in the open cultural planning process already taken to arrive at the Government's support for the Megalo proposal is, in my opinion, an extraordinary and retrograde decision on the part of our public representatives.

2. Should the Inquiry find against the Megalo proposal, not only would that be a fatal blow for the organization itself, but also for public confidence in the processes of community consultation, of tendering and the cultural planning processes of the ACT Government more generally. It would also set in process a cascade of additional hypothetical funding obligations which would inevitably result in a budgetary stalemate.

I urge the Inquiry to take all of the matters mentioned into consideration.

Yours faithfully



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