

25 November 2011

ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry

into the future use of the Fitters' Workshop in the Kingston Arts Precinct

The following information is a compilation of five brief letters sent to the Canberra Times but not printed in that publication. Prominent public personalities have better access to promote news, views and opinions. I am surprised acoustic engineers have not commented publicly, given the outrageous claims made by some.

Anyone who has attended functions at the Fitters' Workshop should have noticed by now that naturally amplified noise levels make this space unpleasant for the users. As a workshop the sound of rasping files, punching, riveting and blacksmithing must have been deafening. Substantial acoustic treatment or modification to the volume of the space will be required for any future habitation.

The acoustic problems relate to the geometry of the space, the building materials and the reverberation time. Reverberation time is the time it takes for noises to stop echoing. Dense smooth hard surfaces in the Fitters' Workshop (glass and masonry) keep reflecting noises that bounce between parallel surfaces for many seconds. New sounds (and or musical notes) that follow just add to the developing cacophony. Venues with a long reverberation time are not suitable for musical performances.

For both untrained voices and untrained ears the 'giant bathroom effect' of this space modifies the sound of very ordinary choral work to beyond earthly reality. Serious musicians and others involved with musical performances in these types of venues always complain bitterly that they can't hear each other and that professional sound recording of any event is impossible.

Whenever an audience is entertained at the Fitters' Workshop there are usually half a dozen safe venues, idle and empty, a few minutes away. Some even have heating, tiered comfortable seats and indoor dunnys. Taxpayer funded performance spaces are usually empty for most of their existence with a flurry of activity on an occasional Saturday night. To maintain the fabric of any building for a few performances each year is a woeful waste of taxpayers' money. To maintain this space empty and idle is a waste of an interesting old brick shed.

I have an ongoing professional design interest in the acoustics of performance spaces but my specialization relates to doors & hardware for safe buildings. There are no escape doors that meet the requirements of the Building Code of Australia for safe escape for an audience in the Fitters' Workshop.

Howard Styles