

Christchurch's 'edgy' strategy needs a home for edgy artists

George Parker ·
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JOHN KIRK-ANDERSON

George Parker on the stage set for the Free Theatre's production of Franz Kafka's Amerika, in the Gymnasium building, Arts Centre

OPINION: The Christchurch City Council recently approved a new visitor strategy to transform Christchurch into an "edgy 21st century city with a

most popular

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difference".

However, if the ongoing plans towards a new Performing Arts Precinct (PAP) are at the expense of local contemporary arts organisations, a vital contributor to those aims is missing.

The proposed tenants of the PAP will provide mainstream entertainment. Perhaps sensing the need for change and to foster post-quake expectations for alternatives, it was these contemporary arts organisations that pushed for a key driver for the PAP to be the "new artistic identity" of Christchurch – more experimental and unconventional.

While this primary driver was adopted

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by the authors of a vision document for the PAP, released in February, current contemporary performing arts organisations that could speak to how this might work were not involved in consultation.



STUART LLOYD-HARRIS

A rehearsal for the Free Theatre's Kafka production in 2014.

Also missing were important organisations such as the Arts Centre. Its own vision document features contemporary performance spaces as a core part of its future. This has already begun with the creation of The Gym, home to my own company Free Theatre, the first professional theatre organisation to return to the central

city in September
2014.

When theatre organisations, including my own, were finally invited to take part in conversations around the PAP in May, it was to ascertain how we might use a new "black box" theatre proposed for the precinct. While it has not been established who would run this venue, it is clear to see this space would be more suited to touring companies with pre-existing work. But what's missing is an awareness of how to foster local artists to develop "edgy work".

With planners and reports overlooking those working on the ground, we now

face the rather crazy situation of a plethora of presentation venues, run by venue managers, and a lack of places to create work.

Building an entirely new PAP with public funds means that the role of the Arts Centre is being displaced, a site that can provide a diversity of small to medium spaces in which a variety of artists can collaborate to develop and present new contemporary work.

The benefit of the space and facilities that the Arts Centre can provide is that experienced artists can work alongside emerging artists to create truly contemporary work, which is largely inter-disciplinary,

building a conversation, a continuum, with multiple education outcomes and cultural and artistic diversity.

The relatively cheap creation of The Gym shows what is possible with an artist-driven space that has a focus on contemporary performance in the Arts Centre. In partnership with the Arts Centre, CCC, CreativeNZ and The Rata Foundation and a range of sponsors and in-kind supporters we have created a flexible space that provides unique, immersive experiences for audiences and a beautiful, quality venue for festivals and events.

If the aim is to create a new city

"with a difference",
this sort of activity
in the Arts Centre
should be nurtured
as an essential
component of a
wider strategy and
as complementary
to the larger venues
and mainstream
companies.

Fostering
performing arts
organisations that
produce genuine
alternatives, mean
the boundaries of
what is possible are
expanded, catering
not just for
audiences of
contemporary
performance, but
building new
audiences and
allowing the
mainstream to
evolve with more
modern work.

While a number of
visual arts spaces
and projects are
funded to provide
alternatives to the

central art gallery,
the performing arts
are monocultural –
theatre funding in
particular is
monopolised by a
single, large
commercial entity.

Unfortunately, the
experimental or
avant-garde here is
seen as a space for
the young to blow
off steam before
joining the
mainstream. But
cultures that truly
value a diverse,
vibrant urban social
life subsidise non-
commercial
contemporary art
theatres as a key
part of the
ecosystem, allowing
them to take risks
and break new
ground with work
that is relevant to
the time and place.
Creating unique,
diverse experiences
for locals to
participate in, is

more likely to engage visitors than a one-stop shop in a performing arts precinct.

The Arts Centre is the perfect engine room to foster a distinct local culture. Integrating the old and new, the Arts Centre can provide a base from which artists can enliven the city. With a central indoor market that can also be used for a diversity of performances, a range of hospitality providers that are empathetic to the site's unique heritage and artistic, cultural and educational aims, the Arts Centre can build on the extraordinary restoration process that has taken place.

But without a clear

strategy devised between artists, the Arts Centre and key players such as CCC and CreativeNZ, an essential part of the puzzle towards creating an exciting city is missing. With the focus on a new PAP and no arts-based plan to nurture alternatives, we face the prospect of continuing to lose the talent (and the young in general) that could make this a bold, fresh thinking "city with a difference".

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