

Venue Access – Good Practice Models
THE CONCOURSE, CHATSWOOD
(formerly Chatswood Civic Place), Willoughby City Council

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PLANNING AND DESIGN

Ten years ago Willoughby City Council embarked on a project to build a community, performing arts and Library complex that is to serve the northern region of metropolitan Sydney. The project has proved to one of the most – if not the most - significant undertaking by a local Council anywhere in the country at a total project cost of approximately \$162 million. Like any major project, it has been a long journey. The construction is now 50% complete and if you visit Chatswood you will be able to see the complete rebuilding of almost a whole city block that is to become the heart and soul of the North Shore. Completion is just 16 months away in July 2011.

The planning and delivery of regional performing arts and cultural facilities is a daunting task for any local government authority. The hurdles are high: the scale, complexity and cost of the project, the competing community and political interests, the maze of legislative challenges, and the expectation that “best practice” in social, environmental and economic areas will be achieved, prevent many projects from even starting.

If these projects do get underway, how then does local government also address its many planning, design, management and operational policy objectives?

Council realised that it had the opportunity to create a community place unlike any that currently exists in NSW, perhaps in Australia, with facilities that could be truly accessible – in design, programming, pricing and attitude. It was a very real goal to create a place of inclusion and welcome.

The basic principle of equitable access has remained a fundamental goal from the outset of the project in 2000. Although it has been challenged by a raft of competing

interests, the outcome, to date, remains virtually uncompromised. We believe that, on completion of the building works in 2011, the new Chatswood Civic Place complex, now known as “The Concourse”, will offer the most accessible performing arts and cultural facilities in Australia.

When considering equitable access to services and facilities, a public authority needs to be brave enough (yes brave!), and determined enough, to identify and respond to the needs of all whose access to cultural and community facilities is limited in some way.

I want to take you through the journey experienced by Willoughby City Council in attempting to achieve this goal.

User needs

The building of community and cultural facilities can come about for many reasons. In Willoughby’s case it was because the Civic Centre in Victoria Avenue Chatswood was aged and inaccessible; it no longer could accommodate community needs and the land on which it was located could be used far more effectively for cultural and community purposes than simply refurbishing the existing building. The Library needed to be three times larger to meet population requirements and community demand for services.

In the earliest stages, Council considered that the new Civic Place should be “*for everyone*”. The concept and vision, and the policy of “inclusion” meant of course that Council had to consider who “everyone” in fact was. Yes, “everyone” did include the 1 in 5 people in the Willoughby Local Government area and the broader north shore region who identified themselves as having a disability.

In the case of Civic Place, irrespective of age or ability, the users may be “categorised” as follows:

- Participants in community celebrations, events and gatherings
- All Library patrons
- Performers
- Audiences
- Carers
- Paid employees
- Voluntary staff
- Visitors and users of retail facilities

Within all these groups there are people whose special needs or limited abilities and access requirements must be acknowledged and addressed if Council was to achieve its goal that the Concourse will be “for everyone”.

It was clear that equitable access to the proposed facilities meant going beyond good building design. We understand that barriers to access also exist for people with intellectual, sensory or psychiatric disabilities whether temporary or permanent, obvious or not. Unaffordable levels of ticket pricing for those on a limited income, while lack of public transport and inadequate signage, also make access difficult or impossible. For artists and performers with differing abilities, appropriate design and building management policies are critical. As Accessible Arts has said, “removing barriers, therefore is not as simple as providing ramp access for people in wheelchairs.” At every level of building design and building operations consideration has been given to ensure equality of opportunity.

Venues and facilities

The Concourse will provide new, purpose built performing arts venues and specialist facilities:

- **1000 seat concert hall** with raked seating and choir stalls, superb acoustics, full back of house facilities, green room, assembly and off stage areas, new and flexible technology suitable for school assemblies, performances, music festivals, youth concerts, band performances, training, cultural and community events.
- **500 seat theatre** with full dressing room and off stage facilities, suitable for musical performance, shows, drama workshops, masterclasses, band performances, dance, cultural displays, festivals.
- **Flat floor Civic Hall** suitable for cultural events, masterclasses, educational training, displays, performances, examinations, art shows, and with catering facilities, it will be available for large family and private events
- **Rehearsal and meeting spaces** for entry level performance space, training, workshops and seminars, band, drama and other rehearsals
- **Art Exhibition space**
- **Outdoor spaces designed for performances and other activities**, mixed media performances, outdoor concerts, films, jazz, dance, bands and cultural events.

- **Places to meet** friends and be safe. A variety of comfortable seating, water bubblers, place for children to gather, space for strollers, bicycle racks, lockers, tables and seating independent from paid café seating, good outdoor lighting.
- **Close to all transport.**

Existing Access Policy

From the early 1990s Council introduced and developed policy approaches to accessibility, making a commitment to adopting and implementing strategies which aimed to ensure that Willoughby became an accessible community for all people regardless of their abilities/disabilities.

At that time Council also established an Access Committee comprising community representatives, practitioners and others noted in relevant fields, to be involved in the development and application of any strategies requiring implementation in relation to Council's Access Policy Statement.

The reality

In relation to Civic Place, the testing of Council's policy approaches to access began when the earliest planning to replace the existing facilities commenced. The reality commenced when we had to work out how to ensure that the Access and Equity policy objectives were met in the design, delivery and operation of the new Civic Place. Undeniably the challenge in implementing the policies is really in the doing of it!

Step 1: The first practical step was to include the requirement for equitable access in the Masterplanning Brief for consultants. The first briefing for architectural design teams interested in tendering for the Masterplanning and subsequent design work included advice on the existing access policies and Council's objectives. The Masterplanning Brief required compliance with Council's DCP for Access and Mobility.

Step 2: Work with Accessible Arts

In 2001 Accessible Arts worked with Council staff to develop a much greater understanding of the opportunities in the arts for people with disabilities. The

process instilled in Council staff a determination to follow through with a commitment to achieving fair access wherever possible.

Step 3 The preparation and exhibition of the site Masterplan (2003)

During the *preparation* of the site Masterplan in 2002-2003, consultation covered the broad spectrum of community needs. Throughout the Masterplan *exhibition* period community information sessions devoted completely to issues of accessibility were conducted to allow community members to bring forward ideas and comments regarding the proposed design and suggestions for future use.

By the time the site Masterplan was completed the fundamental site access requirements had been included and had been developed in the context of proposed legislation.

Step 4 Architectural design

When the site Masterplan had been completed and approved, the architectural design commenced and was to continue for the next three years. The appointment of an Access consultant during this phase to work with Council staff, the design team and Council's Access committee was a terrific move. The Access consultant has assisted with review and comment throughout all subsequent phases, bringing a focussed and balanced perspective in a much larger architectural context. This work also ensured that the building design was both comprehensively considered and that access needs were not trounced by the sometimes competing provisions of other legislation such as the Building Code of Australia.

During this period, aside from more general community consultation, Council conducted an industry workshop to review the draft concept plans for the performing arts facilities. The emerging design was reality tested by representatives from the disability sector.

I won't detail all the design features that will add to the comfort and amenity of users and carers, but the following will give you an idea of the range of elements that have been included in the final design:

- All front of house and back of house facilities provide full wheelchair access, include wheelchair access from auditorium seating to stage in both concert hall and theatre. The bars and box office, and Library service desks have

wheelchair accessible counters. Back of house dressing rooms have hanging spaces at wheel chair heights.

- The concert hall and theatre have removable seating and wheelchair seating in a range of seating positions.
- Fixed seats in the auditoria are of different widths to accommodate different body sizes.
- All fire stairs have wheelchair refuges and communication systems.
- Clear external and internal signage, including Braille, has been designed to suit visually impaired patrons, and hearing augmentation has been included in all public venues.
- Video screen monitors with adequate text size, throughout the foyers of the building to assist in way-finding and performance messages, program and event marketing.
- Adjustable desk heights have been included wherever possible to accommodate employees in wheelchairs.
- Amenities include electronic doors, an adult change table, parents' room, a small urinal and toilet for children, protruding buttons on toilets, mirrors and hooks at suitable heights.
- There is convenient lift access to all floors (front and back of house), to enable full participation by people with disabilities, including employment; and to the open space areas which includes comfortable outdoor seating for the elderly, slip-resistant paving, carefully considered outdoor lighting.
- Affordable performance spaces for entry level hiring opportunities for new arts groups in a culturally significant building
- The detailing of carpark ticket dispensing machines to provide adequate reach for users, tickets cut as a single ticket, help button in easy reach, hearing augmentation.
- Transport access is easy with a major transport interchange just 150 metres away, 400 carspaces on site and 7000 spaces within two blocks. There is accessible parking on site, as well as bicycle racks, lockers and public showers.
- Accessible points around the Civic Place site for safe Taxi drop off.
- Provision of Willoughby City Council – Council Cab program that provides an affordable taxi service for the local community.

OPERATIONS

Ten years has now passed from the initiation of the project to 50% completion of construction, however the work is far from complete. The further implementation of a “culture of inclusion” requires Council to consider its operations, including:

- The appropriate marketing of Civic Place to ensure that the opportunities it offers are communicated to the disability sector.
- Comprehensive staff training at every level to ensure that both attitude and process supports the culture of inclusion.
- That hire agreements convey the requirement for inclusion and accessibility in all performances and events. Council is keen impose the provision of alternate forms of performance and experiences for audiences on hirers as a standard condition of hire.
- That tickets are available at affordable prices for people on limited incomes.

EMPLOYMENT

Council has now started to explore the opportunities for the employment of people with disabilities – both on a casual basis and on a voluntary basis.

Currently Council does employ people with disabilities but is now looking at possible roles and responsibilities within the new venues: such as box office, usher positions, program sellers and other front of house staff, and positions offering assistance and involvement at community events. Council is consulting with firms specialising in the employment of people with special needs.

PROGRAMMING

Back in 2001 the first version of the Civic Place Cultural Facilities Business plan was prepared. The Plan has been updated as the design work has progressed, and again has been tested against community need. The plan provides for programming to be developed over the next three years (while the site is under construction) with an emphasis on the opportunities available for significant participation from performers, and attendance by patrons with disabilities and their carers.

Willoughby Council intends that the content and type of programming and events, and the way in which programs and opportunities are marketed and managed, will

be with a significant degree of input from those directly involved with performers and audience members with disabilities, their carers, and organisations representing people with disabilities.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. The benefits of continually seeking input from the community and from the disability sector in assisting Council in every way.
2. Prejudice and a lack of understanding even within the public sector, when an organisation attempts to achieve excellence in the arts. It is clear that there is a long way to go and that the striving for excellence is not always a shared goal.

This is well illustrated by the following response from a bureaucrat to a grant funding application made by Council:

“The application states that one in five residents have a disability, but of those how many require the state of the art facilities to access the Centre? Wouldn't many of these people still be able to access the centre with the standard facilities provided for people with disabilities? The application doesn't clearly show that Council has established a need for these state of the art facilities for people with disabilities.”

3. The need for champions

The Concourse is to be a place of genuine welcome and inclusion. Management policies will require a range of practices which are exceptional - in relation to language, signage, carer considerations, ticketing availability, advertising, print and other communications media, to appropriately accommodate wide ranging abilities and needs. Council and project staff will continue to work with peak bodies, professionals in the disability sector and with individuals, to secure every opportunity to achieve the goal of true accessibility.

Through experience Council has found that a project like The Concourse and the achievement of excellence in accessibility in building design and in all operations does require the support of champions.

One of these champions is Renee Goossens, arts practitioner and author, and a patron of The Concourse. I would now like to introduce Ms Goossens who will speak about her experiences as a user of performing arts facilities.

Ms Renee Goossens

Medical Researcher / Media / Teacher / Patron, The Concourse

NSW Delegate to current Health Reforms

Possibly other people who look forward to going to the theatre, a concert, an opera or just an evening out simply jump in their cars and take pot luck. People with any type of disability have never had that luxury.

We are hoping with The Concourse to make the entire venue so easy to negotiate that we will be able to join them, and be at least a little more spontaneous than we used to be, although naturally, as with all other ticket bookings, a venue will only hold so many patrons, so it is possibly wiser to book your tickets and packing well in advance.

What we shall all find both in the Theatre and the Concert Hall, as well as the Library, is a venue which we can explore spontaneously, knowing for sure that access needs are fully catered for. Those of us in wheelchairs have been very fortunate indeed. But it is not only those in wheelchairs who suffer from disabilities – we are just easier to spot. For us the chair lifts and accessible lifts, as well as larger accessible toilet facilities will be a boon. But those who suffer from hearing impairment have also been considered and for them there will be the choice of a hearing loop in major locations equipped with the best technology of the day – also there will be tactile indicators and good signage. Drama theatre will have the possibility of specialist sign language interpreters so that the hard of hearing may appreciate what is being said on stage.

It is not only the audience which has been considered but importantly, and rarely, performers have been catered for with full back of house accessibility to dressing rooms, rehearsal rooms and to the stage itself.

So when you come to The Concourse you know that there will be lifts between levels, ramps where needed even to the turfed open space areas and to staff, children's and public areas. There will also be dedicated accessible parking spaces.

Willoughby Council is also examining the option of arranging special maxi taxis or accessible buses to collect residents from nursing homes and those who have difficulty getting to the venues. Phone the switchboard during normal working hours or when booking your tickets, enquire about these facilities which you may wish to use.

Through Community participation – the volunteer and councillor staffed Access Committee plus various Access Groups, we have endeavoured to meet all the needs of accessibility. What we don't have on Day One, should that be the case, we shall see if it can be included as soon as possible, budget permitting. Naturally we have special Fire safety regulations for emergency evacuation for all patrons, particularly those with access needs, has all been budgeted for and considered well in advance as the building progresses.

THANK YOU