Chapter 4: International trends in arts and cultural production and consumption

The re-visioning of arts and cultural policy has occurred to varying degrees across the international stage. Partly, this has been in response to trends in cultural participation and consumption, as well as changing approaches to strategies of support. In particular, a number of trends are characterised by trade-offs between the following factors:

- the ability to be financially self-sufficient or non-reliant on government largesse;
- the ratio between the costs of cultural practice and production, and ability to generate revenue;
- the size and market profile of audiences and consumers of arts and culture; and
- the degree of cross-form transformations of cultural practice.

Cultural Consumption

When these relationships are investigated, it is clear that artistic and cultural forms that rely most heavily on government support are those that are least popular. Moreover, these are the artforms consumed by audiences with the greatest capacity to purchase the culture they desire, namely, that segment of the population with high incomes and high cultural capital (and who are older, more likely to be female and live in inner-city areas). Conversely, those artistic and cultural forms that rely least on government support are consumed in greater quantity, are more likely to have a mixed consumer base and tend to offer greater choice (Australia Council 2000; 2003; Hill Strategies 2005c; Keane 2004; Lee 2004). Cross-cultural comparisons show similar patterns (e.g. Mandel (2006) on cultural participation in Germany).

Consumer spending on cultural goods and services in developed countries has increased, in aggregate terms, by almost half in less than a decade. A closer look at expenditure data reveals, however, that a significant proportion of spending has been concentrated on the consumption of books, live performing arts (broadly defined), and admission to museums and heritage sites/national parks-botanic gardens. The most popular cultural goods and services are movies and DVDs, popular music and CDs, street markets and community fetes, festivals, and art/craft hobbies. Without incentives, only a minority of ordinary people choose to spend money on traditional arts and culture. Yet, despite the low demand, the number of professional artists has more than tripled over the same period.
In other words, there is a dramatic over-supply of cultural practitioners particularly in the least popular cultural forms (meaning, these practitioners have low incomes and contingent earnings).

The rationale of provision rather than consumption has supposedly been endorsed by statistics showing that people generally support cultural venues whether or not they are themselves customers. As one might expect, and customers might know, libraries are the most supported cultural facilities. Museums, performing arts venues and art galleries are supported to a lesser extent. While support certainly increases with use, only a minority of non-users support the need for generous government support for culture as a broad category. At best, statistics on usage have been used to justify continued funding for art and culture. But when we look at patterns of cultural consumption they show that people continue to prefer ‘popular’ cultural activities to ‘high culture’ ones.

**Australia**

Australians typify this pattern, consuming, in rank order of preference: cinema, botanic gardens and libraries, followed by animal and marine parks. Way below come museums, popular music concerts, and opera or musicals. At the bottom end of consumption come other performing arts, theatre, dance and classical music concerts (Craik, Davis & Sunderland 2000: 194).

Moreover, as the *Nugent Report* (DCITA 1999: 199-200) found, the development of new forms of performing arts — musical spectacles, festivals, opera and dance spectacles — as well as film forms, DVDs and CDs — has provided ‘intense competition’ for traditional performing arts, especially opera and dance. However, a review of the major performing arts companies in 2003 (MPAB 2004) found that — despite an extensive rescue package with guaranteed ongoing funding, management support, more touring, more paid audience revenue, more new works and greater sponsorship — aggregate losses have increased by 74% over the period of review, suggesting a dramatic decline in their financial position and likely viability.

Yet, when we focus on ‘who should pay’ for cultural activities and organisations, familiar arguments are still used to justify continued government underwriting of the high end of the arts and cultural sector. The classic ‘special pleading’ position to justify supporting the least sustainable forms of culture is a mixture of arguments about the need to support forms of cultural excellence, maintain international competitiveness and enrich national culture. As the above analysis indicates, such arguments depend on a hierarchy of art and cultural forms where the least viable are located at the top of the pecking order despite being the most marginal in terms of popularity. This should prompt a radical rethink of the philosophy of arts and cultural policy. So, what realistic alternatives are available?
Canada

A Canadian study, for example, analysed expenditure on books compared with expenditure on other cultural items, revealing that Canadian households are high cultural spenders:

The $1.1 billion spent on books is fairly similar to overall spending on newspapers ($1.2 billion) and movie theatre admissions ($1.2 billion) and amounts to more than double the spending on live sporting events ($451 million). (Hill Strategies 2005a: 2)

In all, 63% of Canadian households spent money on newspapers, 61% of households on movie theatres, 54% of households bought magazines and 48% of households purchased books. Households were much less likely to spend money on ‘art, antiques and decorative ware’ (only 29% of households), on ‘live performing arts’ (36% of households), or on ‘admission to museums’ (32% of households). And only 19% of households bought tickets for ‘live sports events’ (Hill Strategies 2005a: 2).

Of the book buyers, there appears to be a relationship between high expenditure on books and expenditure on other cultural activities (performing arts, museums, art/craft and live sports). This appears to demonstrate that a high level of cultural consumption provides an indicator of high cultural capital (Hill Strategies 2005a) thus adding support to the concept of ‘cultural omnivore’ mentioned earlier. Moreover, high cultural spenders have the following distinctive demographic and lifestyle characteristics: they have high incomes, they are middle aged, they are twice as likely to have no children, four times as likely to have no teenagers, and live in a one or two-person dwelling. High cultural spenders are also most likely to be homeowners and live in large cities.

These figures show that expenditure on books is a good indicator of overall cultural expenditure: ‘high spenders on books have much higher spending on other arts, entertainment and sporting items [including children’s camps, sporting equipment, toys, games and hobbies, and photographic goods or services] than non-spenders’ (Hill Strategies 2005a: 12). These figures are similar to research in the United States that showed that:

Book lovers tend to frequent a number of different types of arts and sporting activities. In fact, arts museum and performing arts attendance were found to be ‘significant factors in literature participation, even adjusting for education, ethnicity, race and other factors’. (Hill Strategies 2005a: 12)

In sum, ‘76% of highest-income households spent some money on books, compared with 23% of lowest-income households’ yet ‘the financial commitment required to buy books is much more significant for low-income households than for high-income households’ (20). The figures on book-buying illustrate the
selective and elitist nature of cultural consumption and the policies underlying cultural policy. Financial well-being is an important factor in cultural consumption. So too are educational levels, cultural and social capital, normative household structure and locational profile. Given that books are one of the more highly consumed cultural products within a population, it is possible to extrapolate even more skewed consumer profiles for other arts/cultural forms.

These observations are consistent with Savage et al. (2005) in their study of cultural capital in the United Kingdom which found that, despite new cultural forms and wider opportunities for cultural consumption, there were ‘marked patterns of differentiation in tastes, many of which appear familiar from long term historical patterns’ that confirm the correlation between high cultural capital and wealth and education. This evidence, to some extent, challenges the proposition that cultural omnivores are transforming patterns of cultural consumption (cf. Peterson and Kern 1996).

One of the movers and shakers in the nexus between cultural policy and planning in recent times has been Richard Florida (2002, 2005) who has attempted to establish a link between the cultural indicators exhibited by a community or locality and measures of quality of life and wealth. He has contended that city and regional economies facing economic pressures and de-industrialisation should look to establishing cultural industries to spearhead a revitalisation. To this end, Florida developed the ‘Bohemian index’ as a measure of high ‘cultural competence’ against economic potential and well-being. This model has received international acclaim yet its assertions have largely been untested. In one of the few studies that has attempted to evaluate this model, Hill Strategies (2005b) compared ‘the bohemian index ranking with two indicators of cultural spending in 15 Canadian metropolitan areas: per capita cultural spending and per capita spending on art works and events’. They concluded that:

> Overall, it appears that the cultural occupations variable (bohemian index) and the two spending indicators do not follow a consistent pattern. Victoria, Calgary and Ottawa rank fairly high on all three indicators, but the largest metropolitan areas — Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver — rank higher on the bohemian index than on the spending indicators. The reverse is true for Edmonton and Regina, areas that rank higher on the cultural spending data than on the cultural occupations data’ (Hill Strategies 2005b: 9).

**Creative Economies**

Nonetheless, as Cunningham (2006: 17) notes, Florida ‘has highlighted the wider economic significance of creative human capital [by correlating] population diversity, high-tech output, innovation and human capital’. According to Florida’s index, ‘Global Sydney’, ‘Melbourne Inner’ and the Australian Capital
Territory are the most creative and internationally competitive locales in Australia. For his own part, Cunningham has developed a ‘creative trident’ measure of:

... creative occupations within the creative industries (‘specialist’), plus the creative occupations employed in other industries (‘embedded’), plus the support occupations employed in creative industries. (Cunningham 2006: 20)

On this basis, the number of creative practitioners and the calculation of the contribution of creative activity to the Australian economy is far greater than official figures show, suggesting that there is greater potential for creative work to be recognised as part of the overall economy than is currently the case.

Detailed studies, such as these, need to be replicated in other countries and cities in order to test many of the assumptions underpinning contemporary arts and cultural policy. At a macro level, there is a need to interrogate levels of government spending on arts and culture via international comparisons and to examine the emerging forms of support for art and culture (cf. Florida 2005). Despite difficulties in making international comparisons (Madden 2004), McCaughey (2005) has attempted to compare Canada with other countries in terms of arts funding. Despite Mark Schuster’s cautionary note that ‘countries with smaller populations will have higher per capita expenditures because of their difference in size, not their difference in policy’ (quoted by McCaughey 2005: 3), figures show that in the Northern European states and Britain, expenditure per capita is much higher than in British settler states (Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Singapore) and that all are much higher than the United States. Countries with small populations seem more likely to commit to cultural funding than those with large populations.

It is also interesting to examine the operation and performance of different funding models. Countries with direct government funding, as opposed to arms’ length funding (via arts councils), tend to spend considerably more on culture. This suggests that countries (and governments) who adopt an ‘architect’ or ‘engineer’ approach to arts and culture have made the arts and culture a higher policy priority than governments who have adopted more ‘hands off’ nurturer or facilitator approaches. Where mixed policy models are adopted, such as elite nurturer or parameter-shaping models, higher relative expenditure on arts and culture can be shown.

Overall, McCaughey’s study reveals a gulf between governments who regard arts and culture as a core priority for government policy and expenditure (e.g. Germany, Netherlands, Austria, France and Scandinavia) and those for whom it is a footnote or marginal responsibility (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Switzerland). There is clearly an historical element here. Countries
with a long tradition of supporting arts and culture have maintained support at substantially higher levels. However, even in countries with long traditions of generous government support, there is an emerging crisis as governments pull out of longstanding commitments. The arts and cultural sectors have been pushed to seek alternate sources of funding, such as sponsorships and partnerships, even in countries like Germany (Hausmann 2006), Italy (Comunian 2006), Austria (Hunjet 2006), Scandinavia (Lindqvist 2006), the Netherlands (Segers 2006) and Japan (Kobayashi 2006). Countries in the former eastern block are similarly affected (Obuljen 2006).

Although there is evidence that these strategies have produced the sought-after responses, there appear to be limits to the potential for an expansion of private support and the kinds of cultural organisations or activities sponsors will invest in. There also appears to be a clear relationship between the economic prosperity of a nation and the likelihood of securing sponsorship (Segers 2006; Lindqvist 2006). Concomitantly, there is less evaluation of the efficacy of expenditure in the higher-funding countries than in those where cultural support is regarded as a budgetary footnote or extravagance.

What does this mean for current trends internationally in arts and cultural support and likely futures? While traditional forms of arts and cultural support have persisted, they have been required to adapt to new conditions of governance, globalisation and changing patterns of cultural consumption which has, in turn, created acute challenges for arts and cultural policy making.

ENDNOTES

1 A study of cultural participation by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2002 showed that annual cultural consumption by Australians occurs in cascading proportions: the most popular are cinema (69.9%); libraries (42.1%); botanic gardens (41.6%); and zoological gardens (40%). Next come popular music (26.4%); other museums (25%); art museums and galleries (24.9%); and other performing arts (20.4%). Less than one in five Australians attend music and opera (18.7%) or theatre (18.0%) and only one in 10 attend dance (10.9%) or classical music (9%) (ABS 2004b).