BRANDING BOHEMIA: COMMUNITY LITERACY AND DEVELOPING DIFFERENCE

Tara Brabazon* and Stephen Mallinder♥

Abstract

The literature on city imaging and creative industries emphasize the success stories, the urban environments that have rebranded, refocused and reconstituted themselves for the information age and the knowledge economy. Less evident in the literature are those locations and strategies that have failed, stalled or been more ambivalent in their results. To open out this issue, this paper investigates a fringe urban suburb of the most isolated capital city in the world. Focusing on Mount Lawley, positioned on the city fringe of Perth in Western Australia, we investigate the role and function of popular music and popular culture in intervening in the history of cities. Mount Lawley is part of Perth, a city trapped by time and space, but its example and model may intervene just in time.

Keywords: city imaging, creative industries, popular music, urban regeneration, Perth, Australia

Introduction

We certainly take it for granted now ... that music is everywhere, that we can surround ourselves with the sounds we love at home and create our own mobile soundscapes outside (in the car or on the walkman), and that, whether we like it or not, we will spend much our time moving through other people’s sonic programming (in shopping centres and bars, in airports and offices). If music is one way we define who we are and where we are, it is an increasingly confusing definition, a whirl of private and public sounds, of local and global noise (Simon Frith, 1999).

Music is ubiquitous. It is brokered between local and global critics, fans and governments. While digitized platforms render music mobile and permeable, this paper has a more precise, grounded and analogue focus. The goal of this article asks if popular music industries can initiate and develop commercial potentials and opportunities while also occupying a pedagogic function, teaching local community literacies about sound and space. To establish a dialogue between these social and economic forces, the structure of this paper’s argument is disruptive of the conventional pattern in the literature.

* Tara Brabazon is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Brighton. An author of ten books, including The University of Google, Thinking Popular Culture and From Revolution to Revelation, she is director of the Popular Culture Collective, Visiting Professor at Edge Hill University and Programme Leader of the Master of Arts Creative Media. t.m.brabazon@brighton.ac.uk.
♥ Stephen Mallinder is a founder member of pioneering electronic act Cabaret Voltaire. He moved to Australia in the mid 1990s, establishing Off World Sounds in 1996, and recorded under the names Sassi & Loco and The Ku-Ling Bros. Concurrently, Stephen Mallinder has held consultancy positions for Sony Music Australia and Mushroom Music. He has been Talks Producer for RTR-FM. Returning to the United Kingdom in June 2007 to take up the post of Project Manager in the Subject Centre for Art Design and Media at the University of Brighton, he has recently finished a national subject profile of Media Studies. He is currently conducting a creative-industries infused project for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, with attention to the role of media practitioners in university teaching and learning. s.w.mallinder@brighton.ac.uk
Creative Industries articles inevitably follow a predictable morphology: presenting general strategies and theories, mentioning Florida (2002a), Leadbeater (1999) and Putnam (2001), and then applying these ideas to a city that initiated successful creative industries policies. Actually, it is the mistakes, errors and mis-steps that are more interesting and revealing about the flaws and inconsistencies in third way ideologies. For every Preston’s National Football Museum, there is a Sheffield Centre for Popular Music (Brabazon and Mallinder, 2006). Therefore, we cut through the (often) neo-liberal inflected creative industries strategies, to show how community initiatives and readings of the landscape can transform and critique local, regional and national policies.

What’s in a brand?

Bohemia creates an attractive city of coffee and conversation. It is term of marketability and manageability. What Florida’s books *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002a), *Cities and the Creative Class* (2005a), *The Flight of the Creative Class* (2005b) and *Who’s Your City?* (2008) have achieved is to prioritize questions of urban renewal for the purposes of economic development, along with a recognition of the ‘competition’ for well educated, hyper-mobile workers. A key concept in his argument is the Bohemian Index, which measures the presence of ‘high bohemians.’ This term describes a diverse social, economic and occupational grouping. At its most specific, Florida argues that particular social groups signify - or more debatably correlate - with economic development. This group, including a high proportion of gay and lesbian citizens, workers in technological sectors, musicians and artists, creates a web or tissue of social, political and economic connectiveness that assembles a dynamic, open and interesting environment for ‘the creative class’ in which they can conduct business and reside. Florida’s focus is not on economic development primarily, but creating the framework where the workers who enable economic development would like to live. That is why his attention is placed on architecture, shopping centres and portals for consumption and infrastructure such as museums, sporting facilities and galleries.

Florida took these assumptions and created a series of rankings. These included the “diversity index,” the “gay index” and – of most interest in this paper – the “Bohemian Index.” The “Creativity Index” aligned the creativity ‘rank,’ the ‘high-tech’ rank, the ‘innovation’ rank and the ‘diversity’ rank. What makes Florida’s work interesting and controversial is that he is focused on cities retaining a group of workers – the self-styled creative class – believing that where they live, economic development follows. At its most basic, he argues “places that succeed in attracting and retaining creative class people prosper; those that fail don’t (2002a, 4).” The focus is on the “labour-centred view of the arts economy” (Markusen, 2006). Florida focuses on a “new geography of class” where there is a “sorting” and “re-sorting” of people within urban environments (2002a). The regions where new arrivals can connect with a community and express their identity are particularly attractive, along with strong recreational environments and active street cultures composed of cafes, restaurants and experiences. Indeed, the characteristic of this group seems to be a quest for authentic and authenticating experiences.

This authenticating desire is what makes the Bohemian Index important. The workable definition for this term was established by Gertler, Florida and others in a 2002 paper.

The Bohemian Index is defined using employment in artistic and creative occupations. It is a location quotient that compares the region’s share of the nation’s bohemians to the region’s share of the nation’s population (2002).
Politics, dissent and activism were not incorporated into the definition. The occupations incorporated into this model include writers, musicians, actors, directors, craft practitioners, dancers and photographers. While the popular circulation of this phrase and argument is beyond the academic literature, with over 55,000 blogs in a Google Blog Search mentioning the Bohemian Index in January 2009 (Google Blog Search, 2009), a more subtle rendering of the concept was found in the Florida refereed article “Bohemia and economic geography” (2002b). In this piece, a more careful tether is offered between the geography of bohemia and the development of ‘human capital’ and high technological industries. Bohemians become ‘human capital’ that draw the creative class into urban centres.

Such a concept and argument has been influential in the urban studies literature. There is a reason for this impact (Florida and Mellander, 2009; Isserman, Feser and Warren, 2009; Ho, 2009; Knox-Hayes, 2009; Weller, 2008; Florida, Mellander and Stolarick, 2008; Sands and Reese, 2008; Wojan, Lambert and McGranahan, 2007; Thomas and Darnton, 2006; Markusen and Schrock, 2006; Ottaviano and Peri, 2006; Polese, 2005; Pollard, 2004). There is a generalizability of these variables, particularly showing relevance in Canadian cities and city-regions (Gertler, Gates, Florida Vinodrai, 2002). There has also been an influence in Singapore policy making (Ho, 2009). Even the often labelled ‘most isolated capital city in the world’ in Perth Western Australia, there is a desire to invest in the central business district and create ‘excitement’ if not activism. Peter Newman diagnosed the ‘problems’ confronting the city: “if we’re just suburban I think we’ll be a very nice place to retire to and we’ll lose our young people (2009, 9).” In an age of city modelling and Bohemian Indices, the suburbs are demonized as boring, old fashioned and antagonistic to ‘our young people.’ Such labels of ‘young people’ can overlap with the creative class. But K.C. Ho realized that the strategies and models for development have a “wide and unruly side” that provides both diversity in ungentrified parts of inner city Singapore and also creates the opportunity for new working styles (Ho, 2009, 1187).

There are also critiques. The Bohemian Index is a proxy, making a case for a correlation between the number of artists in the city and the capacity for growth rates. The creative class is too generalizable a phrase to create a casual relationship between the presence of a particular group and economic development (Markusen, 2006, 1661-1686). Certainly there is a casual connection. Causality is much more difficult to prove. Ann Markusen and Greg Schrock in particular probed the link between “arts and culture as an economic panacea” (Markusen and Schrock, 2006, 1661). Because of an inability at worst, or difficulty at best, to measure the economic impact of artistic and cultural products in terms of import and export capacity, it is also difficult to map over actual or predicted trends of growth. Obviously there are a range of fascinating and important casual relationships between ethnic and racial diversity, employment and housing. Gianmarco Ottaviano and Giovanni Peri found “a very robust correlation,” showing that “US-born citizens living in metropolitan areas where the share of foreign-born increased between 1970 and 1990, experienced a significant increase in their wage and in the rental price of their housing” (Ottaviano and Peri, 2006, 9). Such links are important to note, but are often self evident and commonsensical, or the variables are so diverse and dispersed that they are impossible to isolate for a causal study. The critique of this body of literature on economic and urban development is that it tends to be descriptive, rather than analytical. The interpretation built – and the models developed – on the foundation of these descriptions are based on correlations that may be correct or inaccurate. Certainly the attractions of Florida’s arguments are clear. They appear, particularly in their reified form, intoxicatingly simple and easy to apply. For example, Emily Eakins from the New
York Times asked crucial questions that stem from his work: “Should Pittsburgh recruit gay people to jump-start its economy? Should Buffalo another fiscally flat-lining city give tax breaks to bohemians?” (Eakins, 2002).

From this review, it is clear that bohemia as an ideology is larger, wider and more complex than Richard Florida’s ‘Bohemian Index’ may suggest. There are particular attributes that enable the creative industries, but radical politics, dissent and activism against particular models of modernity and capitalism are not as relevant to his modelling of economic development. The gay community, coffee drinking and the music industry create a pleasant and conducive environment for the ‘supermobile’ creative class to live. The demonstrations, dissent and question of corporatization are less marketable and malleable in theories of economic and urban development.

In Defiance of the Desert Drones

Perth in Western Australia has been a maelstrom for creative industries initiatives. A litter of Taskforce Reports, ‘strategies’ and ‘plans’ clutter up the web and governmental departments. Premier Geoff Gallop was the great hope of a Blairite third way approach in the state of Western Australia. Yet on January 16, 2005, he resigned from the Premiership to be treated for depression. This illness seemed to be a metaphor and a sign for all those who tried to dislodge the staunch binary of culture and commerce, art and economics. A shock jock journalist Paul Murray described Gallop as a “spin doctor to the end.” The cause for his political impotence was clear.

While there’s a view that New Labor can exist without the unions, the current reality is that unaligned politicians find the real power deals are done around them … relying on media performance is not enough (2006, 19).

While Murray took the well-trodden path to blame the unions for Labor woes, there was a sludge of conservative vested interests that quietly maintained cultural power in state-based art institutions through phrases like “peer assessment,” and “heritage funding.” Endless taskforces, reports, strategies and white papers tried to shake the complacent policies for screen, music and fashion. They failed. In 2004, there was an attempt to create an integrated creative industries initiative through the Creative Industries Taskforce. It did not dislodge vested interests and creative arts funding models. Through this structural inertia, local resistance has emerged without political leadership or policy change. Therefore, we investigate the cultural specificity of the city of Perth, the failures of formal creative industries policies and the potential for community intervention and transformation of media, art and culture.

Answering the often used but highly effective rhetorical question – “what would future generations decipher from our cultural footprints?” - Perth resident and entrepreneur Haydn Robinson surmised, in the case of Western Australia, it would indicate worker ants lost in the myths of the agrarian and proto-industrial revolution. The state’s primary industry – mining - has created a regional identity that denies the economic potential of culture, media, music or design. In every sense, Western Australia has emphasized and exploited its natural resources, decentring social and cultural products and practices as the trickle-down consequences of exploiting the land. In a city searching for community and identity, let alone a branded touristic formation, Robinson captures the view that, “the likelihood of finding a statue would probably mean it was of a kangaroo” (2005). The region has spawned a public that in his words merely “looks at things, such as rocks in the desert” (2005). Wealth generated by rich mineral reserves has provided an adequate buffer against the State’s environment shortcomings, such as a lack of water or salinity. The policy makers and politicians have reciprocated by placing the
natural environment in totemic primacy. Consequently tourism initiatives for the state have focused on beaches, wineries, sunshine and more beaches. Despite a growing centralized population in the capital city, Western Australia policy makers and advertisers deny urbanity, relying on nostalgic representations of rural, desert and coastal cultures to distinguish it from intra-national counterparts and competitors like Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide.

Sydney and Melbourne have focused on metropolitan images constructed around modernity and multiculturalism. Perth’s utilitarian advertising iconography, built on industrial practices and residual wealth, has reduced its advertising palette to surfing, red rocks and cold beer. Australia Day in Perth features an annual million dollar firework display. This seemingly egalitarian gesture enables many of the city’s residents to engage with their built environment whilst a considerable portion of the metropolitan budget goes up in smoke in under an hour. In what appears to be a form of collective agoraphobia, those who wish to experience urban culture are encouraged to head to the ‘real capitals’ of Sydney and Melbourne, or venture on the European trails well worn by the Blundstones of post-war Australian tours. This narrow range of economic and social options is stifling community literacies.

Within this media-constructed and government-facilitated configuration of white beaches and sun bronzed surfers, Perth policy makers adhere to a conservative ideology of a city of startling weather and a safe place to raise children. Democratic access to the region’s natural facilities, beaches and parks operate as an unvoiced counter-weight to the State’s exploitation of its natural resources. Geographical isolation protects Perth’s citizens from the shortcomings of urban dysfunction.

As physical and natural factors provide the primary infrastructure for the region’s economic development and constructed environment, Perth has witnessed its key growth around the Swan River estuary and along its coastal strip. It offers a marked contrast to New Orleans, which in August 2005 experienced the social consequences of an estuary-centred city built below sea level. Its wealthier citizens lived a safe distance from the river and ocean. Conversely, Perth’s concentration of wealth is in suburbs of coastal proximity. South Perth, Nedlands and Peppermint Grove ring the river whilst Claremont and Cottesloe represent the more elite coastal suburbs. Urban sprawl has pushed the city northwards along the traditional routes towards the goldfields and mining communities and along the extreme coastal strip of newer cities: to the extreme north (Joondalup) and south (Mandurah). The subsequent low-density population, which defines the city’s demographic structure, has placed considerable emphasis on transportation policy and mobility. Clusters of commercial activity ring Perth’s CBD, developing nighttime economies servicing this suburban spread. The suburbs of Subiaco and Leederville have developed economies based around bars, restaurants and cinemas in accordance with their geographical proximity to the accessible river and ocean-centred population.

In contrast, Mount Lawley’s evolution was built upon an established transport infrastructure, specifically by its links to the northerly mining route from the city, consolidated by the post-war growth of the northern suburbs. Its proximity to the CBD, within two kilometers, has contributed to the suburb’s recent growth. Mount Lawley’s inner city iconography, imaging and branding has evolved through the ability to simply look up and see the city.

Considering this positioning, in this article we remain interested in what Jim Shorthose described as “everyday kinds of cultural resistance … in the way people use cultural spaces, and in the new ways in which people are developing ownership and authorship of their own DIY culture, as an actively-produced aspect of their lives rather
than as a series of passively-consumed cultural events” (2004, 4). In focusing on Mt Lawley, local resistance in the midst of policy inertia is evident, unusual and creates a rebranding of a city in time, and a city and time.

**Pineapple Bay and Lady Lawley’s Dilemma**

A little history can go a long way and Western Australia’s frontier heritage invariably paints a colourful image of locations that a cursory glance could dismiss as banal. The region’s colonial injustices transform into a short and inconvenient rupture in the Noongar indigenous history. However in its urban narrative, Western Australia’s late settlement by European colonists saw the Mount Lawley region appropriated in the 1830s for dairy farming (Yiannakis, 1986, 5). Despite being approximately fifteen kilometres from the Indian Ocean, the area was known by its colloquial name ‘Pineapple Bay,’ a tribute to a popular brand of rum of the time (Yiannakis, 1986, 5). A sober twist would occur when the suburb was renamed in the early 1900s in honour Lady Lawley, who would only agree to the use of her name if there was a guarantee no licensed premises would be opened in the area (Village Voice, 2000, 14). The nature of the area’s re-imaging through night time and cultural economies has – ironically considering this history - placed considerable emphasis on restaurants, clubs and bars, compounding this historical irony of abstinence.

Mount Lawley’s development as a commercial hub was a direct consequence of the transport infrastructure that evolved through the late 19th Century gold boom. The northern railway was constructed between 1879 – 91 (National Trust of Australia, 1990) and passed through the region, which offered free camping ground to traveling prospectors. Tramway lines begun in 1900 and were fully established by 1930. They intersected at what is now regarded as Mount Lawley’s commercial core at the junction of north-south Beaufort Street and east-west Walcott Street, and by 1915 noted as “one of Perth’s earliest concentrations shops along a transport route” (City of Perth and City of Stirling, 1992, 5).

If the contemporary practice of city imaging is founded on cultural capital, then Mount Lawley offers a distinctive pathway through this literature. As an urban centre, it began with a theatre, Alexander’s Lyceum Theatre, in 1911 with adjacent commercial buildings designed in a compatible Edwardian style by Simon Alexander in 1911 (Village Voice, 2000, 15). However following the First World War, the area was remodeled as a display of colonial optimism. In 1937, the Beaucott Buildings were constructed in authentic art deco style followed by a remodeling of the theatre and adjacent buildings in 1938 (Village Voice, 2000, 15).
The renamed Astor Theatre and surrounding buildings were given distinctive art deco facades, which despite being lauded by many as examples of Australian art deco and a mechanism to brand the distinctiveness of Mount Lawley as architecturally iconic, it is merely affect. However it is significant to note that this theatre has also become a venue for live music, with bands such as Little Birdy creating a live event in the venue.

Re-Imaging the Mount Lawley Cluster

A 1992 commercial precinct study of the Mount Lawley area reported that it displayed “an intense, multifaceted and vibrant atmosphere,” with “a wide variety of nationalities, ages, occupations, incomes and backgrounds” (City of Perth and City of Stirling, 1992, 4). Its development arched not only beyond the coveted ocean and riverside suburbs, but also as a bureaucratic anomaly situated on the cusp of two municipalities, the City of Perth and the City of Stirling. This community liminality ensured a lack of overtly systematic growth and policy development. The subsequent expansion in the area has been a result of organic commercial growth, attributable to its demographic make up and immediate community needs. Direct intervention from local businesses has ensured the ‘bottom up’ development of a nascent cultural quarter that has succeeded in spite of - rather than as a result of - policy implementation at government level. If the boundary incongruity left the area in Robinson’s words “as an excuse to do nothing” (2005), by 1995 the suburb came under the jurisdiction of the Town of Vincent, although the City of Stirling still incorporates part of the area. This administrative relocation left Mount Lawley without access to the City of Perth’s richer purse and was
placed under the control of a smaller local government who had budget pressure from
established shopping centres and commercial zones, plus a continued inability to address
entrenched transport infrastructure issues. Despite a growth in the number of bars and
restaurants, the existing road network is unable to accommodate raised walkways,
resolve the issue of traffic cameras to either facilitate or decrease traffic flow to the
northern suburbs.

Robinson, a resident and self-proclaimed Mount Lawley visionary, has been
central to the suburbs regeneration both literally and metaphorically. Unintentionally
although perhaps providently, he has systematically expanded his business from its
Mount Lawley apex and through subsequent leasing arrangements encouraged the area
to be colonized by creative commerce and cultural initiatives. In classic creative industries
terms, one group’s work place has become the basis of another group’s leisure. While
there have been forecasts of ‘the leisure age’ – facilitated by the reduction of the labour
force through increased technology – what has emerged has been described by Chris
Gratton and Peter Taylor as “increasing work and reduced leisure” (2004, 85). However
Mount Lawley has created a hub, home and homage to the potential of leisure in an
accelerated age.

Wary of both local government naivety and corporate collusion Robinson, along
with other recent local businesses, has provided an informal and uncoordinated buffer to
incursions by larger chains and corporations. Such a space could be categorized as
“micro-level zones of autonomy” (Shorthose and Strange, 2004, 43). Robinson also sees
the shortcomings of a populist, but inexperienced local government. He described, “the
tendency is to be overrun by larger developers in situations like this. There’s a need to
control growth to get the infrastructure in place before this becomes a trend and we lose
the organic growth and smaller character outlets” (Robinson). The fear of smaller
businesses being at the mercy of chains and larger outlets gives rise to concerns of a
suburban pattern of enforced gentrification accompanied by higher rates and competitive
practices. This difficulty in Mount Lawley has also been revealed within the city imaging
and creative industries literature. Charles Leadbeater and Kate Oakley stated that,

One of the main findings of this research is that there is a large ‘missing middle’
in public policy at a national level and also, critically, at the regional and local
level, where it most counts. Policy-makers know little about this new generation
of entrepreneurs – how they work, where they come from, what makes them tick,
their distinctive needs – nor how to interact with them (1999, 12).

What is clear from Leadbeater and Oakley’s research is that cities require these
local entrepreneurs to survive and revive. Music and popular culture not only provides
employment and profit, but a sense of place and identity.

Commencing business in 1990, Robinson was keen to access and facilitate Mount
Lawley’s demographic configuration. As the coffee strip in the area began to grow,
studies revealed a settlement pattern of younger multicultural residents – a high 20-29 age
group with a visible European, Vietnamese and Lebanese population (City of Perth and
City of Stirling, 1992, 11).
In close proximity to the Edith Cowan University campus, which incorporates the West Australian Academy of Performing Arts and School of Contemporary Arts, the area accesses a younger student population along with a vibrant gay and lesbian community. Hyde Park falls within the Mount Lawley boundary and holds the annual Gay and Lesbian Pride Fair. In this respect, the region fulfills Florida’s Bohemia Index in its entirety. In consideration of this demographic, music is a crucial factor in the cultural development of the area. In Robinson’s view “it’s the glue that holds everything together” (2005). Music’s visceral nature gives it the capacity to link social, spatial and temporal variables whilst its applications can be vital to the creative and nighttime economies. Bars, clubs, restaurants, shops all have activities built on music. Robinson stated that music is “what I wanted to do when I moved in” (2005). This motivation emerged despite Robinson acquiring a reputation for leasing and selling independent and art house films. Robinson saw it as merely a matter of time before his Planet Video store expanded to incorporate popular culture’s most ubiquitous retail form.

The Branding of a Suburb

The growth of Mount Lawley’s most established popular cultural business is in itself a semiotic tale. Planet Video seems an ironic allegory of suburban evolution given that the embryonic concept was simply a ‘sign’. Robinson recalls, “The symbol came before the name or the business, the area was pretty dowdy and slow moving so we just thought what would look good in neon – Saturn with the rings around it!” (2005). A visual thorn in the suburban flesh and plagiarized from a Sydney nightclub mural, it became a beacon transmitting and receiving beyond an insulated Perth suburbs. This symbolic interstate appropriation expressed Robinson’s views on the need to learn from others and to incorporate models of urban regeneration through creative industries and nighttime economies. Originally from the state of Victoria, he views the application of Melbourne’s successful methods of regional identity as highly suited to Perth’s growing
clusters. Rather than adhere to parochial principles and make costly mistakes, by adapting Melbourne’s proven paradigms he argued local government could guide urban renewal through proven cultural policies. The capacity of local governments in Victoria to communicate and develop compatible suburban identities seemed appropriate to Mt Lawley. Given Perth’s policy makers’ fascination with Melbourne’s perceived ‘livability,’ an understanding, if not wholesale incorporation, of the city’s cultural blend seemed logical. Chapel Street’s image of boutique commercial outlets, Fitzroy as grunge, rock and marginal and St. Kilda as a multicultural art and food zone offers contemporary urban configurations within an Australian context. This labeling of suburbs is reified, but these designated areas have enabled constructed identities. Robinson’s leasing of property to the city’s main community radio station RTRFM, offering workshops to young designers and a recent bookshop development have been an attempt to incorporate a Melbourne aesthetic into the area’s existing paradigm of a self propagating cultural quarter.

The Town of Vincent has developed a policy for the area, “Vincent Vision 2024,” and has applied Steven Ames, American Planning Association’s award-winning handbook A Guide to Community Visioning. Given that such strategies are broad policy statements, the development of the Mount Lawley area will continue in an ad hoc fashion and as a direct response to community growth and service requirements. The lack of a specific policy paper for the area and absence of any coordinated business pressure groups suggests a disjointed pattern of urban regeneration and city imaging. The energy and funding of individual entrepreneurs and collectives will require community and local government support to maintain the area’s continued growth through its creative and service sectors or suffer the consequences of increased incursions of national and global chains and corporations.
Community Literacy

Richard Rodgers, the great visionary of British cities, has been critical of “the sterile mindset of British institutions … [and] the apparent indifference of the government” (Rodgers in Hetherington, 2006, 1). He notes an ideological blockage involving what the current government and public service configures as ‘good culture,’ and how the patrons of that culture appear and behave. Similar tendencies have been observed in Western Australia. Kathryn Locke generated a fascinating study of the night-time economy in Perth and how a curfew in Northbridge was part of an attempt by the state government to create a safe, middle class environment in the restaurant and entertainment district (2005). Young people are positioned as troublemakers who must be moved along by the police so that businesses may make money.

What is lacking is a political will that initiates the development of both an effective export strategy and an innovative local market. Manchester – and increasingly Brighton – is solving these problems of population size by developing a tight and dynamic relationship between government and universities. The lack of buildings, pubs, clubs and studios is the problem and structural blockage. The regulation of the night-time economy in Perth in particular is preventing new, edgy and innovative communities emerging because they may involve drinking and young people participating in leisure culture unsanctioned by restrictive and often class-based biases in ‘the arts.’

Western Australia is not an ideal location to embed a set of creative industries policies. Governments rarely become active in changing policies unless it will assist them in being re-elected for another term. Creative Industries strategies always take longer than one election cycle to initiate. There is no immediate economic advantage for the state. The state budget is fuelled by mining, gas production and agriculture. Yet the first industrial nations in the world - Britain, Germany and France in particular - simply could not compete in the manufacturing of cheap goods for the global market as the twentieth century concluded. These nations never held the natural resources possessed by Western Australia. Therefore they had to look for other economic opportunities. Creative Industries – or the living on thin air of copyrights, designs, patents and the service sector (Leadbeater, 1999) – provided these opportunities.

Inevitably though, the (Western) Australian economy will have to change. The international ‘credit crunch’ and the collapse of the banking sector may increase the momentum on this transformation. Perhaps Mount Lawley provides the model for this change. The recent credit crunch has challenged the ability to sell natural resources at a viable and sustainable level. Either the resources will run out, environmental damage will become a more destructive political issue, or there will not be enough employment in urban centres to keep citizens/consumers occupied and paying tax. The skilled migrants entering the state to be employed in natural gas and nickel production, from the United Kingdom, Aotearoa/New Zealand and South Africa in particular, are often male engineers. What happens to the wives, partners and children of the men employed in these primary industries? Mining is not labour intensive. Few workers run enormous production and refining facilities. A simple economy based on a few industries cannot create a complex matrix of post-Fordist employment. The service sector – of which creative industries are a part – are dominated by both young workers and women. Five universities are releasing scholars into the state’s economy each year. If there are few opportunities for graphic designers, web designers, musicians and film makers, then they will leave Western Australia because they are not supported and valued for their ‘creative’ contribution and economic role in the region. The national competition for these graduates is intense. Cindy Tillbrook, of Graduate Careers Australia, reported that
“graduates have a labour market advantage … the most recently available ABS data show that just 2.8 per cent of those in the general population with bachelor degrees were unemployed” (2006, 32). With the market for graduates increasing, there will be fewer workers in Western Australia who are prepared to wait through the years of neglect and conservative policy ‘development.’ Mike Kent’s article in AQ (2006, 4-10) demonstrates the consequences of decades of neglect in Australian universities and the impact of relentless cycles of crisis management on both economic growth and social inclusion strategies in the next decade.

The mechanism for transformation is to take local initiatives, entrepreneurialism and expertise seriously. Certainly many of the arguments encircling creative industries rely on local knowledge to develop workforces and encourage consumerism. In learning what has worked elsewhere including Mount Lawley, Perth’s policy makers may be more prepared to recognize an opportunity when it is presented. Yet the maintenance of a grants-distribution policy ensures that those in power have it reinforced. For example, Contemporary – rather than ‘Popular’ - Music became the focus of state government attention. A Contemporary Music Panel was formed. Music is ‘assessed’ and ‘funded’ in the same way as painting, sculpture and literature. What would have been the problem with developing a Popular Music Panel, allowing the development of economically viable and sustainable businesses for DJs, hip hop producers, venue owners and bands? The problem would have been that the older notions of quality art would have been undermined, along with the ‘qualifications’ of ‘peers.’

The ‘Arts’ is based not only on questions of value, but power. Dick Hebdige offered a way forward in deploying tentative, risky, outward, local initiatives in a conservative and inward and insular environment. He described this process as, learning how to listen and to laugh as well as how to speak with ‘authority’, to judge, to condemn; learning how to question our own practices, to watch what we say and do and how we say and do it without falling into stuttering self-cancellation, learning how to question not just for the sake of questioning, overthrowing, under-standing, but so as to produce a space around ourselves in which we can live and learn to find a voice, to find ourselves without damaging those who are around us and closest to us, without silencing their voices” (1988, 242).

Throughout its history, popular music has provided an opportunity for citizens of colour, migrants, the working class, youth and women to occupy spaces and claim ideas outside of the narratives of the great, the powerful, the loud and the successful. Yet with attention to a small suburb in the most isolated capital city in the world, music has become a way to be heard and to cut through the silencing of alternatives. The key is to recognize that in spite of uninspired governmental policy, community entrepreneurship is some way ahead of ‘top down’ initiatives. Mount Lawley has an opportunity to reposition the City of Perth in time, and perhaps just in time.

References


Kent, M. 2006. Not dead, but maybe extinct: The University in Australia, AQ, November-December, 4-10.