

Big dreams are needed for new theatre district

Paul Nicolaou



When it dreams, Sydney has a reputation for dreaming big. Think of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Sydney Opera House.

Sydney had a population of only one million people when the Bridge was conceived.

Our population barely scraped two million when Premier Joe Cahill launched the international Sydney Opera House design competition and came up with Joern Utzon and his elegant concrete sails.

Now with a population of more than five million, we should be able to dream big enough for Sydney to have a world class theatre district of its own.

A theatre district to rival the West End and Broadway is Arts Minister John Graham's laudable ambition. There is a way for it to happen.

The big question is where to build it? There is no vacant property in the CBD that is an obvious site awaiting redevelopment.

Yes, there is the prospect of new theatres if plans for two proceed at the Star Entertainment complex.

But that would still leave Sydney with a largely scattered network of stages, not really a concentrated theatre district.

The strength of the West End and Broadway is that their theatre districts are relatively compact with a range of stages offering something for everyone. They're a people magnet.

The obvious location for Sydney is the Entertainment Quarter at Moore Park, which is crying out for imaginative — big dream — redevelopment.

Business is more than keen to support EQ's potential as a game changer for Sydney. EQ's backers have a new vision to transform it into Sydney's premier arts and cultural community, creative, entertainment and media district within a world class sporting and entertainment precinct.

The potential vision is to create a world-class precinct that will be the envy of the planet. A district that will be a destination for locals and tourists alike. A place where visitors can experience everything from the latest blockbuster movies to live music, theatre, comedy and sports events, all in one convenient location.

A bold new vision for EQ can concentrate on complementing and elevating its existing on-site arts and film industries and sporting precinct.

EQ's rejuvenation would elevate Sydney's reputation as a world-class city, attract new investment, generate jobs and boost liveability and open space access for the local community and for all Sydneysiders. In partner-

ship with adjacent facilities, a NSW Government led move to revitalise the EQ precinct would play a vital role in enhancing Sydney's global attractiveness for investors, students, tourists and visitors, as well as Sydney's diverse communities of residents and workers.

A new vision for EQ would not be complete without a focus on community. It would create a place where people can come together, have fun and create lasting memories.

A revamped EQ should be committed to supporting local businesses, hosting community events and providing opportunities for young people to get involved in the arts and cultural world, entertainment and media industry and sporting opportunities.

There are other areas around the city such as White Bay, Pyrmont and Barangaroo that can house arts and cultural facilities but Chris Minns' Government needs to do a number of things if Sydney is to be the arts and culture capital.

It should appoint an Arts and Culture Commissioner to bring all interested parties together to reinstate Sydney as the preeminent arts and cultural city in Australia and the Asia Pacific. And it should promote Sydney's arts and cultural offering locally and internationally, and align government, cultural, commercial and business community needs through a Sydney Cultural Strategy.

This could identify, value and develop cultural opportunities of econ-

omic significance. We must also define the value proposition, establish and promote a new cultural Sydney brand, to elevate the city's cultural offerings.

Funding is also needed to build collaboration between the cultural and commercial sectors to underpin Sydney's arts and cultural sustainability.

Over time, governments of all political complexions have committed funds to arts and culture. Only recently, Minister Graham committed more than \$4 million.

Other activities in recent years include the Walsh Bay Precinct, the new extension of the Art Gallery, the new Powerhouse and the announcement to save the Roxy Theatre in Parramatta. Business has for many years sponsored and donated millions of dollars to the arts and cultural sector. Businesses and governments have done so because they believe that when the community participates in art and cultural activities it enhances the quality of our lives.

It is a catalyst for personal enjoyment, enriching perspectives, intellectual stimulation, and opportunities for our diverse involvement.

If, with a population of just two million, Sydney could dream big enough to build the Sydney Opera House, just imagine what we could do now that we are five million strong. We owe it to our forebears to emulate their ability to follow their dreams.

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