

An assessment of the proposal for a 'Burnie Cultural Centre' (Document 2)

Peter Mercer

Shortcomings of the Draft Business Plan

I have studied with interest the Draft Business Plan Report prepared by Hirst Projects and Michael McConnell and Associates for a proposed Burnie Cultural Centre. Although it has some good points and an interesting collection of demographic and financial statistics in tables and graphs, it is, in essence, largely statistic material taken from the former grander idea that has now been rejected. This plan smacks of a purely 'penny pinching' money saving exercise that, like the Makers' Workshop, will surely fail. It has been tailored at the Council's bidding to suit their 'pocket' for the present with no thought given for the future. The provision of skeleton staff and a severe drop in volunteer support and interest for what is regarded as an unpopular change of plan by an overwhelming number of people will make it ultimately unsustainable.

Two good points that I agree with are to make the entrance to the building open onto the Civic Plaza and the provision of a café, bar and rest rooms. But that is it. The bad points are numerous. Let me list them:

- The first is the proposition of the Museum and Art Gallery becoming 'legacy institutions' (p.50) and losing their identity under a new brand of 'Burnie Cultural Centre'. This chills me to the bone and must never be allowed to happen.
- This business plan completely rejects and disrespects the many years of hard, selfless labour, that caring and visionary people have given of their own free will, to nurture these institutions and give the Coastal region and Burnie a soul.
- The fate of the proposed North-West Museum and Art Gallery was decided arrogantly by nine representatives elected by the public and this new scheme has been proposed without any prior consultation with the public.
- Under this new scheme, with everything mixed in together, and the Museum and Art Gallery no longer separately identified as such, who will be enthusiastic enough to volunteer and support them.
- The new staffing proposal which suggests that the new Executive Manager of the BAFC should also be in charge of the Museum and Art Gallery, which will no longer have a Director at the helm. This is a step back into the 'dark ages' and a very short sighted and retrograde move. The activities of the BAFC and the NWMAG do not mix. Except for a minor affiliation they most certainly do not go together. One will invariably disrupt the operation of the other. The reinstatement of a Director, with good qualifications and experience is mandatory. I am appalled with the idea of having one curator and one collections officer (p. 43) to care for two very distinct and valuable collections. This also will produce an unmanageable situation and very disrespectful to the quality and size of the holdings. I am also concerned that without the services of an exhibitions officer it will be almost impossible to mount exciting and meaningful displays. In coming up with these miserable staffing figures and saving money at all costs, it

is obvious to me that little consultation has taken place with true museum professionals. Having been the Senior Curator of History at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery for 23 years (1976-1999) as well as having overall management responsibility for six other large and valuable collections, each with a Curator or Honorary Curator, and mounting numerous major and minor exhibitions during that time, I am well aware of shortcomings. I also have visited and studied many museums throughout Australia and many of the great museums in the UK, Europe and the USA. So I know what I am talking about.

- In the proposed rebranding of the BAFC 'Burnie Cultural Centre', to me, the name is uninteresting and toxically parochial. Why not call it 'North West Cultural Centre' or 'Coastal Cultural Centre' and in this way welcoming the entire Coast to use and support this excellent facility as a venue for all major entertainment and convention purposes, not a Museum and Art Gallery.
- If this proposal does take place, is the name 'Cultural Centre' going to attract tourists and encourage other visitors to find and look at the exhibitions embedded in its space? I very much doubt it. How will they be made aware that there is a Museum and Art Gallery? No matter what publicity it receives, as a conglomeration of different and diverse disciplines, it will never be a hit tourist attraction, particularly when mixed up and in with crowds at conventions, meetings and musical and theatrical entertainment.
- Where is the Museum part of the complex going to go? Its exhibition space will need to be at least the same size as the Art Gallery and there has long been a dire need for good spacious storage and work areas. I really cannot see room for this in the BAFC complex without considerable extensions that could well have been done for the Museum building as originally planned.

An historical background to a failed BCC enterprise.

The present situation revisits the extraordinary proposition that existed with the creation of the Makers' Workshop. This was the permanent closing down of the Museum decreed by Council in 2009 when, in place of the Museum, exciting, dynamic and changing local history exhibitions in this new facility were supposedly going to take its place. Despite the high rating, in museum professional circles, of the Federation Street as the finest recreation of its type in Australia, a 'path shower' and something any town or city would be very proud of, this was not so in Burnie. The Federation Street was, unloved and unappreciated by Council, and, with parts of it to be used for exhibition in the Makers' Workshop, it was destined to be torn apart. Fortunately this never happened. People from the entire Coast protested at a huge meeting in the Civic Theatre and it was saved. The full story can be found in my book *The Power of Purpose*.

Almost complete lack of Council community consultation beforehand resulted in the once much touted and supposedly self-sustainable Makers' Workshop, becoming a complete financial failure costing buckets of money in costs. This eventually brought about the writing off by the BCC of the \$5M+ it cost to build. It opened with a flourish, grossly overstaffed, and ended with a fizzle brought down by unrealistic expectations and bad financial management. I believe that it was the structure of its management that brought it down. If the business case

had been community based, it could still be a thriving asset to the Coastal community serving the most important role it had, and still could have, as a first class visitor and information centre. But it was put in the 'too hard basket ' and given away. After the pandemic is over the cruise ship industry will undoubtedly come again and where now is there a comfortable place for visitors to be greeted, assemble and be organized for excursions?

The main reason why the Makers' Workshop concept has failed to me is obvious. It managed instead of renting out. The project was initially planned to provide a permanent home for that excellent Council initiative, Creative Paper. With the closure of the paper mill it was also decided to rebrand Burnie with a clean green image as the City of Makers, provide a place for them to work and provide interest and entertainment for visitors. But, in the planning process, the craftspeople of the region were never consulted about what they wanted and the 'pods' or booths the Council provided for them were consequently infrequently used. All creative people like to work in private, not in the public gaze and if in attendance they would have liked the opportunity to sell their products direct to the customer, which, to the best of my knowledge, they could not. If this had been the case, working in the booths would have been much more popular. Instead, their output and many other unconnected foreign goods were sold in a souvenir shop, which should have been privately operated.

Initially the new Makers' Workshop had a large paid staff and at the same time the Museum, escaping by the 'skin of its teeth' and coming out of closure, had one person on half time! Sub-letting for the Makers' Workshop did not seem to be a Council policy. They had to have full control. If the café had been operated privately, not by the BCC, this alone would have been a different story. 'Farmng out' the resources and rental income would have kept Council expenses to minimum and the facilities it provided could still be viable. As for the dynamic, exciting changing museum exhibitions, after they were installed the only alteration they have received was to downsize and degrade them in favour of expanded commercial innovations such as the cheese bar. I worry about what is still there. These objects are a very important part of the BRM collection and, if the Makers' Workshop is now closed, they must be retrieved without fail.

Where are we today?

Twelve years on we are confronted with a not dis-similar scenario involving the Museum and again the very existence of the Museum's distinct identity is at stake.

In 2019 a visionary proposal to construct a purpose-built museum and art gallery for the entire Coast was embraced with wide public support and expectations. It was going to happen, with a \$5M Federal grant to start it off. This was an exciting project and I hope common sense will prevail and it will become a reality.

We all thought that things were proceeding well and much ground-work had been covered until we had the 'bomb shell' disclosure that, because of financial

problems in the council, the Arts had been severely targeted and plans for the NWMAG had been scrapped.

A long shelved and not very bright idea has now come to the fore again. It has apparently been decided to revisit a scheme first put forward in 2014 to amalgamate the Museum in with the Gallery in the Burnie Arts and Entertainment Centre, again, purely as a financial expediency. The consultants indicate on (p. 7) that much of the investigation process that has taken place was for the NWMAG project. The statistics and other findings in this document, released on 24th June, are apparently largely from this effort. This explains the speed with which it was released.

I have carefully analysed the business plan and believe that it will do nothing to improve the financial situation in Burnie. The business plan in the draft report to me is speculative and largely based on projections that can never be reached and, if they can, at the expense of the future of the Museum and Art Gallery, which are the city's major cultural tourist attractions.

The proposed Burnie Cultural Centre is a small town 'patch-up' solution that will do nothing to encourage more people to make Burnie their home or even want to visit the city, for there will be little here to see and enjoy. The dire prognosis (p.52) for further decline in population and closed businesses in Burnie, outlined in this Draft Business Plan, will surely continue. Who would want that? For all those who really care about the future of Burnie and its fine collections in its Art Gallery and Museum, the North-West Museum and Art Gallery must become a reality.

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