Redefining Places for art
Exploring the dynamics of performance and location

... and the implications for audiences, artists, administrators, marketing professionals, arts policy, funding, and infrastructure
Observing an apparent shift in the relationship between place and performance in both creative work and audience behaviour, *Redefining Places for Art* explored whether, how, why, and to what extent artists, administrators and audiences consider place as an essential aspect of the twenty-first century performance experience.

Using the vibrant and emerging cultural life of Queensland as its principal site of investigation, the project focused on seven clusters of arts organisations, from ‘flagship companies’ to small regional arts initiatives. Between them, they represent a broad gamut of approaches: conventional theatre spaces, recommissioned industrial buildings, outdoor festivals, touring, and site-specific work.

Extensive interviews with artists and administrators formed the core of the research, complemented by an analysis of print sources and statistical data, which were subsequently checked against the outcomes of focus group discussions with audience members across the State. This provided revealing insights into drivers and obstacles for striking a creative balance between place and performance, between tradition and innovation.

Important outcomes and insights include an increasing desire among audiences to curate their own experiences, the search among artists and administrators to negotiate between production values and flexibility, and the realisation that arts policies and funding may not yet fully reflect the current dynamic relationship between place and performance.

In this way, *Redefining Places for Art: Exploring the dynamics of performance and location* offers a framework for understanding the drivers for flexible relationships between performance and place, and insights which can yield practical strategies to optimise reach for the performing arts in Australia: in creation, production, marketing, framing policies, and funding structures.
In order to structure research into the relationship between performance and place among the performing arts in Queensland, *Redefining Places for Art* identified seven case clusters of arts providers. For each of these, an in-depth case study was chosen to illustrate the most striking characteristics of the cluster:

1. **Key urban and regional arts venues**
   - This cluster featured *Queensland Performing Arts Centre*, with *Brisbane Powerhouse*, the *Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Art*, *The Empire Theatre*, Toowoomba; and the *Riverway Arts Centre*, Thuringowa. This cluster also considered *Karnak Playhouse* near the Daintree, and touring tents - the mirrored *European Spiegeltent*, and its Queensland sister the *Q150 Shed*.

2. **Flagship companies**
   - *Opera Queensland* was the major study in this cluster, surrounded by *Queensland Ballet*, *Queensland Symphony Orchestra*, and *Queensland Theatre Company*. All consider the QPAC their artistic ‘home’ for performance, but each has at least one other alternative place in which they perform, most of them in what might be called their physical ‘home space’.

3. **Major festivals**
   - The state-wide *Queensland Music Festival* was the focus of this cluster, in parallel with the *Brisbane Festival*, and the *Australian Festival of Chamber Music* held in Townsville.

4. **Small-to-medium Brisbane-based organisations**
   - The contemporary circus company *Circa* dominates this cluster, which also considers the contemporary music companies *Clocked Out* and *Topology*, dance company *Phluxus*, and the ‘reimagined orchestra’ *Deep Blue*.

5. **Small-to-medium (S2M) regional organisations**
   - *Just Us Theatre Ensemble (JUTE)* in Cairns is the focus of this study of S2M regional organisations, which also examines the contemporary multimedia practice of *Crossroad Arts* (based in Mackay), and the work of *Tropic Sun* (now Full Throttle Theatre Company) in Townsville, all members of the touring network *Theatre to the Edge*. The cluster also includes the contemporary dance company *Dancenorth* (Townsville).

6. **Community-focused festivals**
   - *Woodford Folk Festival* is the featured study in this cluster, which extends to *The Dreaming* (also held at Woodford), the *Laura Dance Festival*, and the Indigenous youth festival *Stylin’ UP*.

7. **Experimental and online events**
   - This cluster features *Straight Out of Brisbane*, a youth festival which no longer exists, a point of interest in itself. Other experimental festivals in this cluster are the *2High* and *On Edge* festivals, and some individual virtual and online performances, including the ‘iPod opera’ *iOrpheus*.
Physical and perceived access is a key factor in attracting audience to venues of any kind. Access applies not only to awareness and ease of reaching the venue, and meeting the cost, but also to barriers of mindset related to artistic practice or specific venues. Access is not only relevant to audience, but also to performers facing logistical barriers in certain places, including production requirements, workplace health and safety, communicating with audiences, and costs.

Engagement with the audience contributes to the transformation of place through performance. Performances have the potential to be catalysts for change in the relationships between art and place, but simply being in a particular place is not enough. Examples show that embedding a performance in local interests, local culture, local stories and local people can have a more transformative effect on place, on the artform, and on the community.

The facilities available at any place are filters through which the audience experiences the performance. Extending the performance through complementary experiences assists in creating an enduring imprint on the audience. The constellation of elements, which may include well-designed foyers or outdoor locations, related to how the audience approaches, receives and responds to a performance and in turn may have an impact on the performance itself.

There is a growing differentiation between consuming and curating live performances. Across the gamut of performance styles and formats, this study confirmed a decisive shift from ‘art for art’s sake’ to ‘art for the sake of the experience’.

The research shows convincingly that Queensland audiences, no matter what their experience with the arts, are highly discerning in their opinions about what they like about divergent places and why. Strikingly, these views largely align with both the vision and the constraints under which artists and organisations create and present their work in Queensland, but less with the policies and funding structures that support the performing arts; particularly the latter tend to favour the status quo.
**Drivers & obstacles**

Although initial data gave some indication to that effect, the research did not find a wild flight from conventional performance spaces to alternative ones. It rather identified a new balance arising from the interplay between creators, organisations, audiences and governments. A number of key drivers and obstacles for these dynamics were identified:

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<tr>
<th>Drivers</th>
<th>Obstacles</th>
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<tr>
<td>- The creative, exploratory and innovative nature of art and art forms</td>
<td>- Risk-averseness, organisational survival, and sustainability</td>
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<td>- Passionate, creative individuals who think and act ‘out of the box’</td>
<td>- Consolidating artistic and organisational philosophies and management styles</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Exploratory artistic and organisational philosophies and management styles</td>
<td>- Very high costs to realise demands of production of most artforms</td>
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<td>- No to low hire costs for many non-conventional spaces</td>
<td>- The desire for ‘a place of one’s own’</td>
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<td>- Excitement of exploring new places</td>
<td>- Established cultural identities</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Exploring cultural identities</td>
<td>- Focus on a single aspect of excellence</td>
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<td>- Recognition of diversity</td>
<td>- Expertise at creating high quality recurring experiences</td>
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<td>- Capacity to think, create, negotiate, and organise the new</td>
<td>- Loyal group of followers with fixed set of expectations / preconceptions</td>
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<td>- Engagement with wider community and changing constituencies</td>
<td>- People being able to find, used to, and comfortable with a place</td>
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<td>- Combining experiencing performance with exploring a new place</td>
<td>- Workplace health and safety laws, liability, and other restrictive legislation/regulations</td>
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<td>- Flexibility in expectations; audience/participants looking for new experiences</td>
<td>- Marketing imperatives that demand substantial audience numbers</td>
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<td>- Untested creative visions that often attract small discerning audience</td>
<td>- Majority of funding in flagships</td>
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<td>- Preferential funding for innovation</td>
<td>- Inflexible edifices and capital development/investment models</td>
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<td>- Flexible design of space customised for specific performances/events</td>
<td>- The new becoming staid over time</td>
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<td>- Continuing flexibility</td>
<td>- Limited access to high–end new technologies across locations</td>
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<td>- New technologies enabling new performance formats</td>
<td>- There is no fixed formula for the outcomes of such complicated interplay, nor is there a need for a preconceived desired outcome. It is important to note that there is no inherent value judgment in the degree of flexibility in dealing with place: this is driven by a wide range of factors both within and beyond the control of artists, organisations and audiences.</td>
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The research makes clear that there is no single recipe for success. However, there appears to be a strong link between flexibility and sustainability. Artists and administrators that have the skill to engage with a variety of places have a greater chance of continued success.

As the connection between place and performance is strong in defining the quality of the experience of performing arts audiences, a greater awareness of this force in planning, marketing and realising performances is highly desirable. This awareness is needed across the spectrum from highly conventional to highly experimental places, from major performance venues to individual online experiences.

While a wealth of statistical data is gathered related to the performing arts, very little can be used to understand the influence of place on performance and success. For this to be done effectively, acquittals, annual reports, and surveys (including those of the Australian Bureau of Statistics) should generate dependable data on diverse, flexible and creative use of place, in addition to their current focus on artforms.

Forward planning is becoming increasingly important, as we see major changes in technology, demography, and new generations growing up with different frames of reference and ways of accessing art experiences. In related sectors (e.g. the recording industry) we have seen the need for radical change in business models.

One of the least flexible aspects of the relationship between place and performance is the dedicated performance venue. In terms of quantity, design and anticipated longevity, it is important to consider trends in city development and map out implications for town planners and architects before making major investments in arts infrastructure, which may include more flexible outdoor spaces and creative hubs.

In the cyclical review of arts policies and funding structures, the dynamic interaction between place and performance, and shifting preferences over time, can be included much more robustly. This can lead to reinvigorating staid performance formats, creating space for new artistic expressions, engaging audiences and a greater return on investment.
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To order a paperback copy of the book Redefining Places for Art with the full report within Australia: $34.95 (includes GST and freight). Overseas: AU$49.95 (includes air freight). Email qcrc@griffith.edu.au to place an order.

The complete Redefining Places for Art report can also be downloaded for free as a PDF from www.griffith.edu.au/music/queensland-conservatorium-research-centre/resources/redefining-places-for-art-final-report

Other QCRC publications in the area of cultural practice and policy include Sound Links: Community Music in Australia, Encounters: Essays, Images, Interviews and Cultural Diversity in Music Education.

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