

Contemporary design of Arts Centres in Australia - Influences, impact on audience engagement and new strategic directions

Tim Long, Hawkridge Entertainment Services

Abstract

This article examines the contemporary design of arts centres in Australia, exploring the evolving influences, strategic directions, and impact on audience engagement. It highlights how modern arts centres transcend their traditional roles to become vibrant cultural hubs that integrate community interaction, participatory design, and innovative technologies. The discussion highlights the role of flexible, multi-functional spaces, informal and inclusive environments, and the incorporation of Indigenous art and storytelling as critical factors in creating culturally rich and engaging venues. Examples such as the Sydney Modern Project and Brisbane Powerhouse illustrate how arts centres are adapting to the changing expectations of younger and diverse audiences by fostering collaboration and inclusivity. Furthermore, the strategic use of digital technologies, such as projection mapping and interactive installations, demonstrates how arts centres can appeal to new demographics and enhance visitor experiences. By balancing tradition with innovation, contemporary Australian arts centres are positioned as essential connectors within the cultural landscape, ensuring their relevance in a dynamic and increasingly participatory cultural environment.

Keywords: Arts Centres, Contemporary Design, Audience Engagement, Participatory Design, Digital Technologies, Cultural Infrastructure

Introduction

Arts centres in Australia have consistently played a pivotal role in cultural innovation and community engagement, reflecting the evolving dynamics of artistic expression and audience interaction. Over the years, these venues have transformed into architectural and cultural landmarks, embracing contemporary design to meet the changing needs of artists and audiences alike. The focus on creating spaces that foster participation, interaction, and inclusivity underscores their importance as vibrant hubs for community and creativity (Radbourne et al., 2009; Walmsley, 2019).

Modern arts centres are more than performance venues—they are platforms that integrate cutting-edge architectural vision with functional and experiential design. These spaces merge traditional artistic elements with innovative approaches, fostering deeper engagement and accessibility. For example, the emphasis on collaborative environments and multi-functional spaces aligns with audience desires for participatory cultural experiences (Barker, 2013; Walmsley, 2016). The strategic use of digital tools further enhances these venues, creating immersive experiences that appeal to diverse demographics, particularly younger audiences (Burland & Pitts, 2014; Pitts & Gross, 2017).

The design of arts centres draws from various influences, including cultural heritage, global trends in architecture, and the need for operational flexibility. This balance between tradition and innovation enables these venues to act as both artistic showcases and community spaces (Radbourne et al., 2013). As arts centres continue to evolve, new strategic directions focus on enhancing audience participation, digital integration, and inclusivity, ensuring their relevance in a dynamic cultural landscape (Walmsley, 2018). This article explores the contemporary design of arts centres in Australia, analysing their influences, strategic directions, and impact on audience engagement, with an emphasis on the role these venues play as cultural connectors in society.

Influences on contemporary design in arts centres

Contemporary design in arts centres is shaped by a blend of global architectural trends, cultural identity, and the evolving needs of arts organisations. Barker (2006) highlights that audience expectations have shifted toward participatory and immersive experiences. Modern audiences value spaces that encourage social interaction and collective engagement, pushing arts centres to adopt open, fluid layouts. The balance between traditional grandeur and contemporary needs remains a vital consideration in their design.

A significant example of flexible, multi-functional design can be seen in the redevelopment of the [Sydney Opera House](#)'s Joan Sutherland Theatre. The upgrades incorporated innovative staging and seating systems to support a wide variety of performances, ranging from operatic productions to contemporary dance and community-focused programming (Burland & Pitts, 2010). This design prioritises both acoustic excellence and adaptability, allowing the venue to meet the needs of artists and audiences alike.

Furthermore, the integration of multi-purpose spaces at Queensland's [Brisbane Powerhouse](#) demonstrates how flexible design enhances engagement. Originally a power station, the space has been transformed into a dynamic cultural hub with areas for formal performances, exhibitions, and informal gatherings. This adaptability fosters audience interaction across diverse programming, from large-scale festivals to intimate workshops (Walmsley, 2018). Burland and Pitts (2010) argue that such adaptability in venue design encourages diverse programming, facilitating deeper audience engagement by bridging formal performances with social experiences.

The integration of local cultural narratives, particularly those rooted in Indigenous art and storytelling, is a vital aspect of contemporary arts centre design. Such integration enables venues to serve as custodians of cultural heritage while creating meaningful and engaging visitor experiences. According to Vargo et al. (2008), value co-creation in service-oriented spaces hinges on how effectively they reflect the cultural and emotional needs of their audiences. By embedding Indigenous art forms and narratives, arts centres provide a "servicescape" (Bitner, 1992) that fosters emotional connections and amplifies the authenticity of visitor interactions.

[Bunjil Place](#) in Narre Warren, Victoria is an example of how Indigenous art and narratives can inform the architectural design of a contemporary arts centre. Inspired by the story of Bunjil, the eagle creator spirit in Aboriginal mythology, the design incorporates curved, flowing forms and natural materials that echo cultural themes. The concept of co-creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) is central to the successful integration of these narratives. Through collaborations with Indigenous artists and communities, arts centres not only honour cultural traditions but also ensure the representation is dynamic and relevant to contemporary audiences. This aligns with Gilmore and Pine's (2002) differentiation of experiences from mere services, underlining the role of authentic storytelling in creating memorable and transformative engagements.

Bitner et al. (2008) highlight the role of physical design in shaping customer perceptions. In the context of arts centres, incorporating Indigenous motifs and storytelling elements into architectural features can significantly enhance the sense of place and belonging, resonating with both local communities and tourists. These practices not only celebrate cultural identity but also position arts centres as inclusive spaces that invite diverse audiences to participate in shared cultural experiences.

The incorporation of digital technologies is also a key factor in contemporary design. Venues increasingly accommodate immersive digital experiences, such as projection mapping or augmented reality installations, which have been highly effective in attracting younger audiences (Turner & White, 2020). Adamou et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of creating spaces that foster shared experiences through digital enhancements, such as interactive installations and accessible information platforms. These technologies transform traditional arts centres into dynamic hubs that integrate physical and digital interactions.

Behr (2017) underscores the role of design in shaping audience perception, arguing that overly formal spaces may alienate younger and first-time visitors by creating an intimidating or uninviting atmosphere. Formality in architectural design, while often associated with prestige and cultural gravitas, can unintentionally signal exclusivity, deterring those who may not feel aligned with traditional perceptions of high culture. Younger audiences, in particular, tend to seek out environments that are accessible, informal, and inclusive—qualities that resonate more with their cultural and social expectations.

The rigidity of formal design can also reinforce pre-existing stereotypes about arts centres being elite spaces, a factor that alienates potential audiences who are not familiar with such environments. For instance, spaces that comprise grandiose foyers, strict seating arrangements, or ceremonial atmospheres may inadvertently create barriers to participation. Vargo et al. (2008) suggest that value creation in cultural spaces is increasingly tied to how well the environment fosters comfort and participation, making the audience feel at ease and included.

Conversely, arts centres that incorporate flexible, open, and welcoming designs are more likely to foster engagement with younger and first-time attendees. [HOTA \(Home of the Arts\)](#) in the Gold Coast, Queensland has a design that incorporates flexible indoor and outdoor spaces that blend seamlessly with the natural surroundings. The precinct includes a green lawn amphitheatre and casual public areas alongside formal performance venues, creating a balance of structured and informal spaces that resonate with a younger demographic.

This approach aligns with Burland and Pitts' (2010) assertion that adaptable spaces encourage diverse audience engagement by accommodating both traditional performances and less formal, participatory activities. By prioritising such inclusivity in design, arts centres can appeal to broader demographics and foster a more accessible and engaging cultural experience.

The impact of contemporary design on audience engagement

Contemporary design has a profound impact on how audiences engage with arts centres. The design of foyers and entry points, in particular, plays a critical role in shaping the initial experience. Research by Bailey (2020) highlights that grandiose spaces, while architecturally impressive, can often feel intimidating or unwelcoming to younger audiences. In contrast, venues with smaller, more inviting spaces create a sense of belonging and encourage casual visits.

Contemporary design directly impacts how audiences engage emotionally with arts experiences. Egermann et al. (2011) explore how physical space influences collective emotional responses, demonstrating that intimate, acoustically optimised environments foster deeper connections between performers and audiences. Similarly, Pitts (2014) examines the role of audience motivations, noting that thoughtfully designed venues enhance both the aesthetic and social aspects of cultural participation.

Barker's (2013) research on live streaming illustrates how digital technologies enhance accessibility, particularly for younger audiences accustomed to virtual experiences. This approach has been effectively implemented by arts centres that integrate live streaming capabilities within their designs, broadening audience reach while preserving the communal aspects of live attendance.

Interactive and adaptable spaces also drive engagement. For instance, the incorporation of digital walls and touchscreens in the [Museum of Contemporary Art Australia \(MCA\)](#) provides visitors, particularly younger demographics, with opportunities for direct interaction, transforming passive viewing into active participation. Such spaces allow visitors to engage with exhibits on their own terms, fostering a stronger connection to the venue.



Another key factor in audience engagement is the integration of informal social spaces. Research shows that young people prefer venues where they can socialise, relax, and interact with others. The [Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art \(QAGOMA\)](#) achieves this by incorporating cafes, open seating areas, and flexible event spaces that facilitate social interaction alongside artistic exploration.

New strategic directions in the design of arts centres

New strategies in arts centre design are increasingly focused on creating spaces that prioritise interaction, collaboration, and community engagement. Traditional notions of formality are giving way to more inclusive and accessible environments that cater to evolving audience expectations. Open foyers and public areas are being reimagined as versatile gathering spaces that encourage visitors to linger, interact and participate, blurring the boundaries between performance, exhibition and social engagement.

The [Art Gallery of New South Wales' Sydney Modern Project](#) demonstrates this shift. The design includes expansive, light-filled public spaces that invite exploration, conversation, and active engagement. By integrating green spaces, outdoor terraces, and immersive gallery layouts, the project positions the gallery not only as a site for viewing art but as a civic hub for dialogue and interaction. This approach reflects the growing trend of arts centres serving as dynamic, multi-functional venues that attract diverse audiences, rather than traditional, passive art-viewing spaces (Walmsley, 2016).

Another significant trend is the incorporation of interactive and immersive experiences through digital technologies. Venues such as [The Lume Melbourne](#) exemplify this with large-scale projection art installations that envelop visitors in visually stunning and participatory environments. Warmsley (2016) argues that the use of digital technologies to create engaging experiences such as the projection art installations has proven particularly effective in capturing the attention of younger audiences. As Lin (2004) outlines, creating “servicescapes” that evoke emotional and sensory responses is key to enhancing visitor satisfaction and long-term engagement.

Conclusion: The future of contemporary design in arts centres in Australia

The evolution of arts centre design in Australia is increasingly characterised by its focus on accessibility, audience engagement, and cultural inclusivity. These centres have shifted beyond their traditional role as performance venues, emerging as community and cultural hubs and precincts that blend artistic innovation with social interaction. By embedding flexible, multi-functional spaces and integrating local cultural narratives, including Indigenous art and storytelling, contemporary arts centres foster deep connections with diverse audiences (Bitner, 1992; Vargo et al., 2008).

The future of arts centre design lies in its ability to foster inclusivity and innovation. As Conner (2013) notes, the shift from passive spectatorship to active participation has redefined the role of arts venues. Incorporating feedback loops and co-creation opportunities into venue planning ensures that arts centres remain relevant to contemporary audiences, particularly younger demographics who seek interactive and collaborative cultural experiences.

New strategic directions prioritise open, informal designs and participatory environments that attract younger audiences. Similarly, digital technologies such as projection mapping and augmented reality enable immersive experiences that engage audiences in innovative ways. These digital enhancements align with Lin's (2004) framework of “servicescapes,” which highlights the importance of creating sensory and emotional connections for visitors.

Design strategies are also shifting toward dismantling barriers created by formality. Behr (2017) affirms that overly formal spaces can alienate first-time and younger visitors, creating a sense of exclusivity. Conversely, venues such as Brisbane Powerhouse embrace informal, adaptive designs that facilitate a balance between performance, social interaction, and community engagement (Walmsley, 2018).

As contemporary arts centres continue to evolve, their ability to balance architectural excellence with inclusivity positions them as dynamic, relevant spaces for cultural participation. By aligning with evolving audience expectations and integrating elements of co-creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), arts centres in Australia redefine their role as vibrant cultural connectors that celebrate heritage while embracing innovation.

References

- Adamou, A., Brown, S., Barlow, H., Allocca, C., & d'Aquin, M. (2019). Crowdsourcing linked data on listening experiences through reuse and enhancement of library data. *International Journal on Digital Libraries*, 20, 61–79. doi:10.1007/s00799-018-0235-0
- Barker, M. (2006). I have seen the future and it is not here yet . . . ; Or, on being ambitious for audience research. *The Communication Review*, 9, 123–141. doi:10.1080/10714420600663310
- Barker, M. (2013). Live at cinema near you: How audiences respond to digital streaming of the arts. In J. Radbourne, H. Glow, & K. Johanson (Eds.), *The audience experience: A critical analysis of audiences in the performing arts* (pp. 15–34). Bristol: Intellect.
- Behr, A. (2017). Where the snowman meets the sunshine: The tensions between research, engagement and impact in cultural policy. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 14(1), 352–375. Retrieved from www.participations.org/Volume%2014/Issue%201/21.pdf
- Bitner, M.J. (1992). Servicescapes: the impact of physical surroundings on customers and employees. *Journal of Marketing*, 56(2), 57–71.
- Bitner, M.J., Ostrom, A.L., & Morgan, F.N. (2008). Service blueprinting: a practical technique for service innovation. *California Management Review*, 50(3), 66–94.
- Burland, K., & Pitts, S. E. (2010). Understanding jazz audiences: Listening and learning at the Edinburgh Jazz and Blues Festival. *Journal of New Music Research*, 39, 125–134. doi:10.1080/09298215.2010.493613
- Burland, K., & Pitts, S. E. (2014). *Coughing and clapping: Investigating audience experience*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- Chathoth, P., Ungson, G. R., Harrington, R. J., & Chan, E. S. (2013). Co-production versus co-creation: A process-based continuum in the hotel service context. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 32, 11–20.
- Conner, L. (2013). *Audience engagement and the role of arts talk in the digital era*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Egermann, H., Sutherland, M. E., Grewe, O., Nagel, F., Kopiez, R., & Altenmüller, E. (2011). Does music listening in a social context alter experience? A physiological and psychological perspective on emotion. *Musicae Scientiae*, 15, 307–323. doi:10.1177/1029864911399497
- Gilmore, J.H., & Pine, B.J. (2002). Differentiating hospitality operations via experiences: why selling services is not enough. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 43(3), 87–96.
- Lin, I. Y. (2004). Evaluating a servicescape: The effect of cognition and emotion. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 23(2), 163–178.
- Pitts, S. E. (2014). Musical, social and moral dilemmas: Investigating audience motivations to attend concerts. In K. Burland & S. E. Pitts (Eds.), *Coughing and clapping: Investigating audience experience* (pp. 21–33). Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- Pitts, S. E., & Gross, J. (2017). 'Audience exchange': Cultivating peer-to-peer dialogue at unfamiliar arts events. *Arts and the Market*, 7(1), 65–79. doi:10.1108/AAM-04-2016-0002
- Prahalad, C.K., & Ramaswamy, V. (2004). Co-creation experiences: the next practice in value creation. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 18(3), 5–14.
- Radbourne, J., Johanson, K., Glow, H., & White, T. (2009). The audience experience: Measuring quality in the performing arts. *International Journal of Arts Management*, 11(3), 16–29.
- Radbourne, J., Glow, H., & Johanson, K. (Eds.). (2013). *The audience experience: A critical analysis of audiences in the performing arts*. Bristol: Intellect.
- Vargo, S.L., & Lusch, R.F. (2008). On value and value co-creation: a service systems and service logic perspective. *European Management Journal*, 26(3), 145–152.

- Walmsley, B. (2016). From arts marketing to audience enrichment: How digital engagement can deepen and democratize artistic exchange with audiences. *Poetics*, 58, 66–78. doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2016.07.001
- Walmsley, B. (2018). *Audience engagement in the performing arts: A critical analysis*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Walmsley, B. (2019). Deep hanging out in the arts: An anthropological approach to capturing cultural value. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 24(3), 272–291. doi:10.1080/10286632.2016.1153081