

THE ART HOUSE, WYONG



Transforming the town centre with a great public building

Better for community:

As well as being an excellent performance venue, the Art House is a multipurpose public building contributing to the civic precinct of Wyong town centre.
Image: Tim Brand Photography.

QUICK FACTS

PROJECT TYPE:

Performing arts theatre and multipurpose public building as part of the Wyong Civic and Cultural Precinct Master Plan

LOCATION:

Margaret Street, Wyong, NSW

REGION:

Central Coast

ABORIGINAL CUSTODIANS OF THIS COUNTRY:

Darkinjung people

CLIENT:

Central Coast Council (formerly Wyong Shire Council)

PROJECT SCALE:

Medium: 500-seat theatre

SITE AREA 4070 m²

GROSS FLOOR AREA 2700 m²

PROJECT COST:

\$12.7 million construction cost, funded by council

YEAR:

Wyong Civic and Cultural Precinct Master Plan started 2006; completed 2016

PROJECT TEAM:

ARCHITECTURE

Tonkin Zulaikha Greer

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

JMD design

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Wyong Shire Council

THEATRE DESIGN

Tony Youlden; Schuler Shook

THEATRE TECHNOLOGY

The P.A. People

CONSTRUCTION

North Construction

PROCUREMENT PROCESS:

Lump sum tender

AWARDS:

2016 Master Builders Association Newcastle Building Awards: Winner, Best Public Building

Taking advantage of the multiple opportunities provided by building a venue for performing arts, the Central Coast Region has gained more than just a state-of-the-art theatre complex.

The Art House at Wyong is the culmination of an ambitious public building project that has made the most of a limited budget by providing spaces that can support a range of cultural activities. The theatre complex is a much-needed large-scale venue that brings national and international shows to the Central Coast. It also caters for professional and amateur local performances, as well as providing flexible spaces for the local community.

Revitalising the town centre

Sensitively designed in response to its urban surroundings in the centre of Wyong, the venue is a lively and welcoming building that has become an important social hub and an integral part of the town centre. As well as the 500-seat theatre, the complex provides spaces for both formal and informal gatherings and a year-round program of activities including community meetings, workshops, and exhibitions.

The Art House is located on the site of the former Wyong Memorial Hall, replacing a modest post-war community building which had reached the end of its useful life. The project is part of a cluster of public buildings and spaces in the town centre which together define a civic precinct, including Wyong Court House, Frank Ballance Memorial Park, Club Wyong RSL, and the council chambers and fire station.

Developing as part of a wider master plan

The Art House was identified as a key opportunity in the implementation of the Wyong Civic and Cultural Precinct Master Plan (2011). The development has been one of the triggers for the revitalisation of the town centre and the rebranding of Wyong as the “Central Coast’s cultural hub”. The Art House building, the public spaces around it, and the activities it supports have provided a focal point for a range of incremental but coordinated investment in buildings and public spaces across the town.

This investment from both the public and private sector has been delivered over an extended 10-year period. Key projects include:

- Frank Ballance Memorial Park (\$3m)
- Wyong town centre drainage development (\$6–7m)
- Wyong Police Station
- urban renewal of Alison Road food hub
- use of the historically significant Chapman Building as a recreation hub
- Love Your Lanes Festival.

Responding to surrounding streetscapes

The Art House occupies a prominent corner site within the town centre with three street frontages. Each street elevation has a different scale and character, carefully designed to respond to its context. The long Margaret Street frontage consists of a number of intermittent house-sized “boxes” that reduce the perceived scale of the facade so it sits comfortably in the residential streetscape. The walls are clad with vertical battens that subtly change colour depending on your point of view. The Anzac Avenue frontage is expressed at a far grander scale, raised above the footpath with inviting steps and double-height glazing that ties in with nearby larger public buildings. In contrast, the building’s Pauline Lane frontage is understated, providing loading facilities and back-of-house functions.

The main entry is located at the corner of Margaret Street and Anzac Avenue, set back from the footpath to create a public outdoor meeting space. The building reaches out to the street edge with a brightly coloured cantilevered roof that creates a sense of arrival and anticipation. Above the main roof, the projecting fly tower is finished in a dark, recessive colour and is treated as sculptural part of the roof form.

Further along Margaret Street the building reduces in height and opens out to a publicly accessible courtyard. This sunny, sheltered, landscaped area links back to the foyer, café and meeting room, extending these areas with an intimate outdoor space. A pedestrian link through the site connects Margaret Street with Pauline Lane.



Better value:

The development of the Art House has been a catalyst for the renovation of the Chapman Building, another anchor in the cultural precinct. The building and public spaces provide a venue for a range of activities and the Love Your Lanes Festival. Images: Mitch Lee.



Better for look and feel:

Council investment in the Art House has been a catalyst for further investment across the town. This walkway has been upgraded to be an engaging, inviting, and attractive space for visitors to the centre. Image: Mitch Lee.

Better for community:

The creation of new and enhanced public spaces has supported activation of the centre and the night-time economy. Image: Mitch Lee.

Creating a new public space by presenting the foyer to the street and the community

The Art House foyer serves as a multifunctional public space for the Central Coast community. The foyer is a tall, airy space filled with natural light. It wraps around the box-like theatre space and serves to turn an otherwise inward-looking building outwards to the street, encouraging the community to engage with the building. At night, the foyer glows like a lantern, acting as a beacon for the events taking place inside. The manager’s office, box office, staff room, amenities, bar, kitchen and meeting room occupy lower volumes along the western perimeter, also providing some protection to the foyer from the western afternoon sun. White walls allow the foyer to double as an exhibition space for community and school shows.

Providing a state-of-the-art theatre facility

The main performance space is a 500-seat proscenium-arch theatre with an automated five-storey full fly tower and a 12-m wide lyric stage with a scene dock to the side. The theatre can be configured to cater for all manner of events including dance, opera, musicals, and drama. The auditorium is enveloped by a sculpted ceiling of angled timber planes, rich purple walls, and a bright crimson floor, making an exuberant and memorable interior. Elevated side galleries hover above the stalls, their lines directing attention towards the stage. There are no columns and all circulation is at the perimeter, providing the two stalls of purple upholstered seating with uninterrupted view lines to the stage.

The Art House also has a flexible, multipurpose studio with retractable seating. This flat-floor space is capable of hosting smaller performances, or can be used as a rehearsal space, or can be digitally connected to the theatre as an orchestra room with live streaming. This facility allows the project to cater for a broader range of performance groups, as well as being able to host community activities. The dressing rooms are located between the studio and the theatre and shared by both.

The team of designers – architects and theatre specialists – worked together to ensure the technical fit-out was well-coordinated, met industry standards, and was the best that could be afforded. Innovative digital audio systems saved on infrastructure costs, while a dimmable LED lighting rig reduces energy consumption. The building was designed with longevity in mind so that equipment can be removed and upgraded as requirements change without damaging the superstructure.

Unlocking potential with a focus on creating “great places”

This challenging project took 10 years to realise. An early master plan identified the need for a performing arts centre, but lacking a clear implementation strategy the plan didn’t go ahead. However, the project later gathered momentum and commitment after council charged its team with the vision, responsibility, and accountability for creating “great places”.

Adapting the design to fit the budget

The original design was for a much larger facility to the value of \$42 million. This scheme was then scaled back to \$24 million, with council committing \$8 million, and seeking matching funding from State and Federal governments. Lobbying for these funds was unsuccessful, but council remained committed to the project. The scope was reworked to suit a smaller construction budget (\$12.7 million) and additional funds raised, enabling council to realise the project on its own.

Gaining greater value through flexibility

The much-smaller budget meant the approach to the building had to be extremely cost-effective while extracting maximum value from all aspects of the project. Durable and versatile spaces allow the building to be used constantly and for many different purposes. Materials used are conventional, however their handling and detailing has been designed to bring joy and enliven the building’s appearance. The theatre features LEO lighting, an advanced LED lighting, one of the few in Australia. The project was also future-proofed, building in provision for features like a large window between the studio and the courtyard that can be added when further funding becomes available.

Design objectives for NSW

Seven objectives define the key considerations in the design of the built environment.



Better fit
contextual, local
and of its place



Better performance
sustainable, adaptable
and durable



Better for community
inclusive, connected
and diverse



Better for people
safe, comfortable
and liveable



Better working
functional, efficient
and fit for purpose



Better value
creating and
adding value



Better look and feel
engaging, inviting
and attractive

Find out more
ga.nsw.gov.au



Better fit: The Art House has been designed in a way that reduces the scale of the building, so it fits comfortably within its context – a residential street. Each street frontage has a different scale to respond to the context. Image: Tim Brand Photography.

Good process: establish an agreed vision, set ambitious goals, and insist on the highest design quality for public spaces and facilities

Council's ambition and determination, a galvanising cultural planning consultation process, experienced project managers, a good local builder, and a proactive consultant team all contributed to the project's success.

The design brief for the Art House was the result of many discussions with multiple stakeholders. Other theatre facilities and arts organisations were consulted to understand touring groups' requirements and what draws them to certain venues. Which acts could be attracted, and the ticket prices that could be charged for seeing them, were essential to the business case. The project team determined that the fly tower and 500-seat capacity were a must. Even though the fly tower absorbed a significant proportion of the budget, it was correctly seen as vital to the integrity of the theatre and has become a main point of difference between this and other venues.

Key considerations

Good design can achieve a lot with relatively little. This project overcame considerable budget constraints, still delivering an attractive and highly functional building. Clever adaptability of spaces can allow a building to provide a greater range of offerings within a smaller area, to the benefit of the community.

Better working:

Multipurpose foyer space can be used for functions, exhibitions, and meeting space. Image: Tim Brand Photography.



A respectful and thoughtful contextual design approach can help a public building to fit in with the local character of a street or precinct and belong in its location, reinforcing a sense of place.

An agreed vision and master plan can support the case for individual projects and help prioritise and identify opportunities for both public and private sector investment. It can also ensure that projects reap benefits beyond the boundary of the site.

One or two well-designed projects can dramatically change the perceptions of a place and attract further visitors and investment.

MORE INFORMATION

GANSW policies:

Better Placed: An integrated design policy for the built environment of NSW

GANSW guides:

Urban Design for Regional NSW

Integrating Urban Design

Design Guide for Heritage

Movement and Place

GANSW advisory notes:

How to develop a design brief

How to select design consultants

Implementation plans

This case study has been developed in conjunction with the Urban Design for Regional NSW guide.

1. Horton D (creator) & AIATSIS (1996), AIATSIS map of Indigenous Australia, Aboriginal Studies Press, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), and Auslig/Sinclair, Knight, Merz.