

Communicating a creative vision

The following is an edited transcript by Lisa Havilah on the importance of a creative vision when creating a strategic plan. The original presentation was delivered at a 2015 Strategic Planning workshop, jointly supported by M&G NSW and the Regional Public Galleries Association.

I have been asked today to speak to you about the importance of the clarity of the message particular to the values, benefits, mission, vision and purpose within a strategic plan.

On reflection I don't think there's really a wrong way to plan. I think that constant planning is an important thing but this is the process we followed at Carriageworks in 2012.

I don't believe that you can have clarity and the capacity to communicate "who you are" unless you have gone through a process to ensure that what you say you are, is what you are.

Our contemporary audiences across NSW are looking for authentic connected cultural experiences. Audiences, particularly younger audiences, are impossible to trick. You can't attract them, and you can't get them to return, unless you provide a high quality and connected cultural experience that matches or is better than the experience that we sell to them.

And every message that you give out about your institution needs to be consistent and coherent. Which means you need to be unrelenting in ensuring that the language, image and context meets what you are committed to achieving within your strategy. If you don't do this, audiences get confused, disengage and don't attend.

The vision that's written in your strategy needs to match exactly the experience for your visitor every time they walk in the door. From the way the visitor is greeted at the door to the experience they have in the bathrooms, and, of course, their art experience.

These things sometimes get separated when an institution stops changing. I don't believe you can ever be too old to take a radical turn in direction. As galleries and museums get older, not unlike people, they have a natural tendency to get more conservative and labour under the lower expectations of others.

It is critical that with any strategic planning process you start from a zero base, no matter how old you are, how much success you've had, and how much you don't want to mess with that success.

The central thing at Carriageworks that I instil in the culture of the staff is that change is the only constant, and this should be true for all institutions that are being reflective and engaging with the communities they collaborate with.

When I was developing the five year strategy for Carriageworks in 2012, I went through a very detailed process to ensure that the strategy that we wrote emerged from the history of the place, and was relevant and connected to the communities and stakeholders that surrounded it.

I'm going to talk you through some of that process.

The first thing that I did when I came to Carriageworks was to speak to about 50 or 60 stakeholders and asked them about what they thought Carriageworks should be. I was very lucky at that stage because Carriageworks was still a very young institution, so it was an easier conversation to have.

At the same time we commissioned Sydney-based artist Agatha Gothe-Snape to speak to 10 local community leaders and arts leaders individually to imagine our future for Carriageworks. This project was called Every Future Remembered and it was a creative process that resulted in ten artworks – essentially large scale mind-maps – that imagined a series of possible futures for Carriageworks.

These imagined futures were considered throughout the whole of the planning process, and I personally sat in on and listened, without interruption, to ten hours of conversations that Agatha had with those individuals.

From there I developed an almost sketch like document that formed the basis of the framework for the strategy.

What I wanted to communicate when I first presented it to my staff and Board, was that the new Carriageworks was going to be about location, and context was going to be core to everything we did.

Located in Redfern there's a nationally important Aboriginal history and so that was the starting point for any type of programing or activity.

And then of course there is the Carriageworks building which provided the context for the strategy as well. The building was built in 1890, it was the first place in NSW that employed Aboriginal people on an equal basis; it had over six thousand people working in it making trains.

All the homes and places and buildings around Carriageworks were built for the workers. There's a strong history of work, and it's that sense of work and practice that we wanted to include in our ethos as we developed as a cultural institution.

From there we developed these broad ideas:

- We are a contemporary art institution
- We are located in the Eveleigh Railway yards
- We have a commitment to producing contemporary work
- Our primary focus is to work with our urban Aboriginal community

- And that we produce a program that moves across disciplines, cultures and communities.

The other thing we had to think about is that we aren't a white box; we're not a gallery space. Instead we're in this beautiful and sometimes very difficult building– so we wanted to support artists to make large scale and ambitious work to meet the scale of the building.

We identified other artists we thought we had the capacity to work at that scale from India, China and America.

From this sketch or framework, we began to define what Carriageworks is or would be as an institution.

We define ourselves as:

- An Aboriginal place
- A place that reflects the cultural demographic of Sydney
- A place that acknowledges and engages with its history
- A place that is a conceptual meeting point between Sydney and Western Sydney
- A place that is ambitious in the scale of what it makes and presents
- A place that is community engaged
- A place that is uniquely multi-arts

One of the most important things that I feel that we need to understand is what we are doing and who are we doing it for.

What is distinctive about what we are doing? Always asking ourselves "How is what we offer different to other institutions on a local, regional and national level?"

And then define what we're not doing. Because really it's in the practice of managing any institution, on any scale, what you say 'no' to is always more important, than what you say 'yes' to.

This led us to define our vision: To be recognised as a multi-arts urban cultural precinct that engages and inspires culturally diverse communities.

That vision has four key pillars which are:

1. Contemporary multi-arts programing
2. Engaging new audiences
3. Developing innovative partnerships
4. Maximising the use and potential of our physical space

The next stage of our process was to audit all of the government policies –state, local and federal – that could potentially intersect with our strategy. And I don't mean only arts policies. In the new strategy we're writing, individual elements currently intersect with over 40 different government policies including social planning, housing, health, arts, tourism, disability, employment and international partnerships.

Never write your strategy to address government policy, instead write a strategy that is engaged with your community and addresses their needs directly, and if you stay true to this as an institution that will always intersect with government policies of the day.

Lastly I think the biggest mistake that we can make as institutions is to let others determine who we are and what we put into our galleries and museums.

I also think it's wrong of us to ask our audiences what they want to see and whether they liked it or not. It's a mistake to think they even know what they want. It is our job as institutions to provide leadership for our communities by producing and presenting exhibitions and programs that are socially and culturally relevant to the audiences engaging with them – to be consistently culturally relevant – and to reflect in our galleries, on our walls, in our theatres, the people that live on our streets and the everyday issues that are important to them.

Thank you.

Lisa Havilah, CEO Carriageworks