

So, you want to build a regional gallery?

Here's a checklist for what to consider and plan for...

Introduction

A public art gallery is an important cultural and social focus for any community. Its prominence and potential deserve to be represented by a building and functionality of the highest quality. To present dynamic programs, display and conserve collections, accommodate audiences and serve artists, it's branded identity should represent community pride and civic distinction. It also needs to be professionally run and operate to acknowledged standards.

In planning a new gallery, whether purpose-built or re-purposed from an existing structure, those involved should begin by asking themselves some basic questions:

- What are the goals and objectives of the gallery?
- What is the Vision?
- Have you liaised with local Aboriginal representatives to understand and incorporate their cultural and community storytelling?
- In the broadest sense, who will the gallery serve?
- Who is the audience?
- If there is to be a collection, what will its policy focus be and/or in what direction will it be developed? As it increases in size overtime, will enough space and resources be allocated to grow the collection?
- What exhibition policy will be pursued?
- What public programs will be provided and what are the options? Will programs be studio based or focused on the exhibition program and school-based learning?
- What funding has been identified and/or committed to the project for capital costs, programming and ongoing operations? What operational and budget constraints are envisaged, particularly in the establishment years?
- Would a staged development over several years be more practical and achievable?

- Have you considered other options, such as the community gallery model and/or a professionally managed artist studio facility?
- Will the building reflect civic pride and be distinctive in its form and function?
- What staff skills and knowledge will be required early on? Will an experienced and qualified person be appointed to lead the development?
- What architectural and engineering requirements, specific spatial needs and solutions, environmental and security controls are essential?

It shouldn't be assumed that an architect will know the answers that are crucial to a successful outcome and properly functioning public gallery.

A detailed functional brief, professional knowledge and experience will be necessary at the earliest planning stages. This paper does not attempt to provide solutions or lay down rigid guidelines. Rather, it simply identifies the various factors that need to be considered during the planning process to create a professionally run public/regional gallery. It also acts as a checklist for further action and debate.



Lismore Regional Gallery

Development strategy

For public gallery ambition to be successful, it is essential that strong interest and fundraising support are forthcoming from members of the local community. Historically, and understandably, government (at all levels) will be reluctant to help if there is not strong community and political support at a grass-roots level. Conduct surveys and focus group meetings and let the community inform the Vision.

Many local councils in NSW provide public/regional galleries, together with libraries, theatres, museums and sporting facilities as part of their lifestyle attraction and as important components of their recreational and cultural service commitment. Does the Vision fit with plans and policies of the local council? There should be a connection.

This support must be nurtured, continued and expanded upon, if a major building program is to be undertaken and programs are to flourish in subsequent years.

Therefore, in the local government context, it is essential that councillors and senior council staff have a firm understanding of the cultural, political and economic impact (born out of professional programming and artist support) that a public gallery can and will have on its locality and visitor economy.

Solid research and business case planning is essential to inform confidence and give life to any operational intent. Familiarisation with an established and respected gallery is recommended to enhance the process of developing your plan. Arrange a visit early on and take decision makers involved.

A gallery exists not only in the present but also into the future. It's important to consider during the planning process any scope for expansion of programs and to assess the impact that external conditions (e.g. shifts in population, development projects and economic growth or downturn) might have on the proposed gallery, over time.

The appointment of a suitably qualified public gallery professional, to lead the project early on is essential, to:

- Brief the architect and detail the scope of specifications
- Liaise with government and other funding agencies
- Undertake fundraising, commence a communications strategy, seek sponsorship and philanthropic support.
- Oversee employment of staff (refer <https://pgav.org.au/file/8046/3155> for suggested roles and staff structure) and undertake normal duties of program development, exhibition planning, marketing and collection management.
- Confer with the community and be entrepreneurial – to engage support and articulate the Vision.

There is also a trend to establish teams of art consultants with architects, retail/commercial experts and gallery staff, together with local government staff, to develop projects. Similarly, these teams are variously employed to deliver feasibility studies, masterplans and business plans to advise on design, fit out, policy, staffing, management processes and programs.



Wagga Wagga Art Gallery

Site and design considerations

The site for a new gallery – be it a new building or re-purposed structure – should fulfil the following requirements.

It is generally preferred for a public gallery to be located where the maximum number of people will have easy access during their daily activities. It is also important to attract residents, visitors and tourists to the gallery, that it is created to be a ‘destination’ and that it also incorporates principles of environmentally sustainable design.

On all counts, a site within the CBD and adjacent to shops, offices, pubs, parking and public transport is highly desirable, but not exclusive to a successful outcome being achieved.

The site should also be serviced by public transport and have adequate car parking incorporated or nearby. Facilities for staff and disabled visitor access should be identified on-site.

Ideally a public gallery should be designed with as few windows in exhibition spaces as possible to facilitate necessary environmental control of UV light levels, effectiveness of climate control and to maximise display space. If multi-level design is required, ground level is recommended for major temporary exhibitions spaces to avoid compromising easy access and the expense of installing elevators for the movement of packing crates, people and artworks between floors.

For many people, the gallery experience often begins before they reach the building, or on arrival. Careful consideration of branding, foyer and entrance areas, and the positioning of directional signage, placemaking and landscaping elements, such as plants, water features, commissioned public art or gardens, is essential. It is also important that the gallery is visually linked with the surrounding town/land scape and has, and maintains, a strong aesthetic appeal.



Glasshouse Port Macquarie

Gallery functions

The major functions of a fully-developed public gallery can be divided into seven main areas:

- Display, storage and conservation of art works
- Administration, curatorial and research
- Public programs/education, workshops, theatrette and gallery society/friends meeting room
- Merchandise sales (bookshop and café) and function spaces
- Entry, toilets and cloakroom
- Building security, engineering plant rooms, including aircon and environmental controls
- Loading dock and general stores

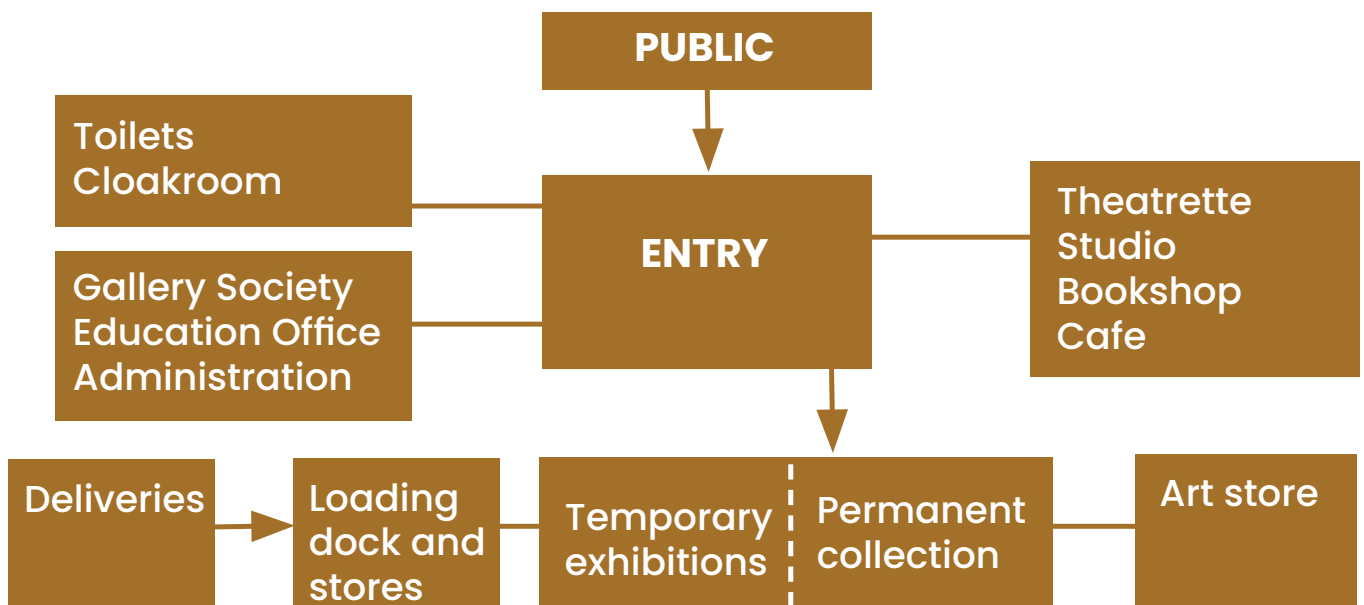
It is noted in the diagram below that the gallery friends/society, theatrette, studios, public programs office, toilets, cloakroom, bookshop and café/function spaces are all accessible from the main entrance and can be accessed out of hours – or when exhibition areas have been secured.

While it may not be possible to fulfil all the above functions, the following accessible spatial requirements are deemed essential:

- Exhibition area
- Office/s and full amenities for staff and volunteers
- Secure storage for artworks
- Toilets and amenities
- Secure loading dock and art crate storage
- Entrance area with reception and security point

The most important requirements for temporary exhibition gallery areas are:

- Security from touching, theft, vandalism, fire and flood
- Controlled lighting with the exclusion of UV light from artworks
- Flexible climate control
- Generous ceiling and door heights for large works
- Plywood backed gyprock walls with windows only where required and ability to darken as necessary
- Flooring strong enough to support heavy 3D works
- Proximity to the loading dock to enable easy delivery and installation of temporary exhibitions
- Some form of acoustic separation for video/film/performance art.
- Movable walls to provide additional/flexible running metres of wall space
- Ceiling mounted acoustic absorption to prevent echoes
- Polished concrete floors with recessed power and data points
- Access - limit barriers for people to attend temporary exhibitions - disabled visitors, parents with prams, older persons, the vision and hearing impaired.
- Flexibility and access to services – LED track lighting, lighting control, wifi, power and data.



It is also important that the visitors' attention be directed to the works of art on display, rather than the architecture or interior design. For this reason, exhibition areas should be finished as simply as possible, using plain neutral wall and floor colours, without distracting patterns or textures.

Security

Fundamental to good security is the overall building plan which should consider the location of public and service entrances, fire exits, windows and the interrelation of spaces. The control of access to storage areas is of singular importance.

Electronic security alarm systems are required by insurance companies and are a factor in determining the cost of policies. A wide range of surveillance and motion detection systems are available for monitoring both members of the public and the building itself. The alarm system should also be connected to the local police station and after-hours security service.

Fire prevention

Fire is the most lethal threat to artworks and therefore its prevention is imperative, even more so than theft and vandalism.

Building design, in both new and converted structures, must consider the containment of fire. Special attention should also be paid to the control of the air-handling system, while paints and flammable materials should be carefully stored in suitable containers and be separated from artworks.

An electronic fire alarm system using networks of thermal and smoke detectors should be installed throughout the gallery building. Furthermore, the alarm system should be linked directly to the local fire brigade who must be specially briefed on the use of water in exhibition and storage areas.

There must be several extinguishing systems available ranging from hand-held appliances to halon gas and sprinkler systems that can be used in public areas.



Anna Louise Richardson | *The Good*, installation view, Wangaratta Art Gallery 2024. Photo: Jeremy Weihrauch

Environmental control and lighting

Good conservation practice demands strict control of the lighting, temperature, humidity and dust levels in exhibition and storage areas to ensure the preservation of the artworks. Moreover, the comfort of audiences must be taken into consideration, while outside noise, interior noise and vibration must all be controlled as well.

To achieve the optimum environment for works of art, a gallery should be considered as a sealed, insulated box within which a precisely regulated micro-climate can be maintained by means of adjustable lighting and climate control. Within that box, there will be two zones: one containing works of art where the microclimate will be maintained 24 hours a day, 365 days a year; and another zone where no artworks are kept, in which the air conditioning can be switched on and off as required.

When art works are lent by one gallery to another, it is a standard condition that they will be displayed in climate-controlled surroundings with regulated lighting. Therefore, to attract good travelling exhibitions, it is essential that public galleries install climate control systems and proper lighting as a matter of priority.

See <https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/sustainability/practical-guide-sustainable-climate-control-and-lighting-museums-and-galleries/> for up to date sustainable lighting and aircon advice.

Power, data supply and wifi

Power and data outlets should be provided in exhibition areas for a range of artwork and display functions. In gallery space these are best located in skirting, track lighting and in covered flush recesses in the floor. Robust public Wifi should also be available, for use by visitors and, as required, to support artwork presentation.

Storage of artwork

The plans for a new gallery should incorporate enough storage space to accommodate the entire permanent collection, plus a margin of 50-75 per cent to cope with future needs. Where a collection is yet to exist, planning should ideally allow for space equivalent to 50% of the dedicated gallery display area.

Storage areas, like exhibition areas, must be secure and provided with controlled relative humidity, temperature and lighting. The works of art should also be easily accessible for research, documentation, digitisation, condition reporting and restoration.

Paintings are normally stored in padded timber racks or hung on wire-mesh sliding screens which can be stacked close together and pulled out as required.

Prints and drawings are best stored in their cardboard mounts, within solander boxes. These boxes, which are designed to exclude dust and vermin, can then be housed in lockable timber cupboards or in plan files. Metal cupboards and plan chests should be avoided as they do not offer any insulation against variations in temperature and humidity.



Primavera: Young Australian Artists, installation view, Blue Mountains Cultural Centre, 2025. Photo: Courtesy Blue Mountains Cultural Centre

Artwork care and conservation

The care and protection of artworks against theft, vandalism, fire and environmental degradation requires proper equipment, procedures, documentation, alarm systems, police and fire brigade support. All these considerations also relate directly to the basic architecture of the building in terms of its design and the materials used in its construction and finish.

Conservation is the process of protecting and repairing works of art. Every gallery must ensure that optimum environmental conditions are maintained in exhibition and storage areas, particularly when the gallery is exhibiting material on loan from other institutions or private collectors. Regular monitoring and recording of environmental conditions must be carried out to ascertain temperature, humidity and dust levels are maintained within recommended range and adjusted when required.

Education and membership

To ensure continued public patronage and support, and to actively expand the appreciation of art in the community, the exhibition program should be supported by public programs, workshops, talks, films and gallery friends/society activities.

While a theatrette is not essential, a gallery should have a separate space where films/videos and lectures can be presented. At a minimum, there should be enough seats to accommodate up to fifty people. Retractable tiered seating is preferred allowing the space to be used for other 'flat floor' purposes.

Theatrette

While a theatrette is not essential, a gallery should have a separate space where films/videos and lectures can be presented. At a minimum, there should be enough seats to accommodate up to fifty people. Retractable tiered seating is preferred allowing the space to be used for other 'flat floor' purposes.

Administration, curatorial and research

In a small gallery, staff will be directly involved with the public for at least part of the day (e.g. conducting talks and tours). Office areas should be located near the entrance of the building.

In a larger gallery, some staff will have less day to day contact with visitors and will be required to give full attention to management and administration. Their offices should be located well away from public view to attract as little attention as possible. Most galleries will also have a research library for the use of curatorial staff and the public, which should be located next to their offices, or within easy reach. In addition, the changing nature of arts practice means that there is a need for galleries and staff to be responsive to new technologies and 'next practice' engagement. Along with the high cost of technology and AV equipment such as projectors, digital media players etc, the capacity to sustain and facilitate ongoing staff training and expertise in this area is critical.

Gallery Friends/Society and Volunteers

In addition to its social and fundraising activities, an effective gallery support group can play a very important role encouraging patronage and community-based volunteer involvement. It's important to note, such groups do not have a formal management role and it is usual for such bodies to donate their fundraising to the institution, generally to support the purchase of art works approved by the gallery director. This group/s of supporters would require a meeting room and access to a kitchen area for catering (if there is a café, function catering would be negotiated with the operator).



Bowral Art Gallery

Entry, cloakroom and amenities

The entrance to the gallery is an important security checkpoint and should be kept under surveillance by responsible staff. Members of the public and school groups should be asked to leave umbrellas, bags and raincoats at a supervised cloakroom.

Umbrellas and selfie sticks can accidentally damage art works if allowed into the building, while bags and coats could be used to secrete stolen objects. Consideration should also be made for school groups to leave their bags and coats in a separate area away from the public cloakroom, particularly in wet weather. In addition to regular amenities, provide disabled toilets and baby change table facilities.

Café and merchandise outlet/shop

A gallery run merchandise outlet and café (run either by the gallery or leased to a private operator) are incorporated to provide amenity, destination attraction and income. Both should be in an obvious position at the entrance/exit area of the building. Ideally, it should also be possible for the café to remain open after the gallery has closed to maximise its trade. The café should be serviced separately to the gallery's secure loading dock/back of house areas.

Loading dock and general stores

The dock should be designed to accommodate a Pantech sized truck and enough manoeuvring space should be allowed for delivery vehicles. There should also be plenty of secure climate-controlled space adjacent to the dock to hold exhibitions, store crates and packing for temporary exhibitions. The dock and climate controlled space should be located close to the temporary exhibition area and provide level access to minimise handling risks when dealing with artworks and exhibition material.

Public address and audio systems

In larger galleries, it is recommended that a balanced sound system be installed to service a wide variety of public and professional uses. These could include formal speech-making, opening and ceremonies, the amplification of performances and replaying sound tracks. In smaller spaces portable equipment is advised.

Operational expenditure items and income opportunities

Expenditure

- Salaries and on-costs
- Operational expenses
 - Insurance
 - Electricity
 - Cleaning
 - Grounds maintenance
 - Services maintenance
 - Building maintenance
- Administrative expenses
 - Administration
 - Office expenses
 - Travel and accommodation expenses
 - Marketing, memberships and subscriptions
 - Merchandise
 - Comms and IT
 - Staff and volunteer training
- Exhibition programs
 - Freight
 - Artist fees, exhibition and copyright loan fees
 - Travel and accommodation
 - Installation, exhibition furniture and technology/AV
 - Casual staff
 - Research
 - Printed matter, EDM and design
 - Equipment and materials
- Community programs
 - Casual staff
 - Materials
 - Travel and accommodation
 - Artist fees
- Collection care and development
 - Acquisitions
 - Conservation materials and care
 - Freight

This list is not exhaustive and is intended only to provide an outline of cost centres to be considered. Any policy for developing a collection should be balanced against the need for expenditure on temporary exhibitions. With proper lighting, climate control and security systems, it is possible to borrow works of art from other galleries and institutions that it would be otherwise difficult to acquire.

Facility reports, detailing all aspects of the building, staffing, programs and services are required to be lodged with institutions prior to the loan of artworks and objects. See <https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/onlineresources/exhibition/facility-reports/>



Zanny Begg | *These Stories Will be Different*, installation view, Shoalhaven Regional Gallery, 2022. Photo: Courtesy of Shoalhaven Regional Gallery

Income

When determining potential sources of income, it is crucial to be realistic in assessing whether the source is to be one-off or ongoing. Public galleries do not charge an entry fee. Income is generated through:

- Admission (for special one-off exhibitions or programs)
- Merchandise sales – art and artwork related merchandise
- Annual fundraising events – art auctions etc
- Café lease or profit share
- Membership fees

Private support

- Corporations - sponsorship
- Private donations
- Philanthropic support

The Gallery should apply for Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status. A DGR is an entity or fund that can receive tax deductible gifts. There are two types of DGR endorsement: An entity that has DGR endorsement in its own right and an entity that is only a DGR in relation to a fund, authority or institution it operates. For more information visit; <https://www.fundingcentre.com.au/help/dgr-status>.

Galleries with DGR status can receive gifts under the federal governments Cultural Gifts Program designed to encourage people to donate cultural items to public art galleries, museums, libraries and archives in Australia, the Cultural Gifts Program offers tax incentives to donors. Donors can be an individual, company, trust or another type of taxpayer. This program is administered by the Department of Communication and the Arts. Visit <https://www.arts.gov.au/funding-and-support/cultural-gifts-program>, for more information.

Creative Partnerships Australia is a federal government initiative which facilitates partnerships between the arts and the private sector. They provide information and training to help arts organisations build private sector support. Visit: <https://creativepartnerships.gov.au/>

Government support

Funding is available through state and federal government grant programs to cover programming and capital associated costs. Grant programs are subject to change and guidelines vary between programs and jurisdictions.

Contact should be made directly with the relevant government agency for advice and details of respective grants and guidelines for applicants. Museums & Galleries of NSW is funded by the NSW State Government to provide support, resources and advice across a range skills and professional practice areas.

Visit <https://www.mgnsw.org.au> to contact or visit <https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/> for a range of online resources, including M&G's consultants register.

Examples of galleries:

Tweed Regional Gallery

<https://gallery.tweed.nsw.gov.au/Home>

Museum of Art and Culture Lake Macquarie yapang

<https://mac.lakemac.com.au/Home>

Bundanon Trust

<https://www.bundanon.com.au/>

Maitland Regional Art Gallery

<https://mrag.org.au/>

Campbelltown Arts Centre

<https://c-a-c.com.au/>

Lismore Regional Gallery

<https://lismoregallery.org/>

Hazelhurst Arts Centre

<https://hazelhurst.sutherlandshire.nsw.gov.au/>

You might also like:

Accessible Arts

<https://aarts.net.au/>

Create NSW

Funding and support

<https://www.nsw.gov.au/departments-and-agencies/create-nsw>

Creative Australia

creative.gov.au/

National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries 2.0

<https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/organisation-management/national-standards-for-australian-museums-and-galleries-2-0/>

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