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Sydney Morning Herald
Opinion:

Scrap the Powerhouse plan and use the \$1.5 billion to save Carriageworks

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Lord mayor of Sydney
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What is it about Australians that leads us to chronically undervalue our arts and culture? It has not always been so, but in recent decades, we have seen diminishing funding, dwindling federal and state support, a slackening of interest among our decision makers, and a sense almost of apathy about one of the most vital sectors of our society and economy.

The most recent funding cuts began in Joe Hockey's first budget of 2014, and have continued to the point where, in real terms, Australia Council funding has now declined by nearly 20 per cent from 2013.

[Carriageworks, the cultural centre in the historic Eveleigh rail yards, has entered voluntary administration.]

Even that miserable amount is largely taken up – as mandated – by the flagship companies such as Opera Australia or the Australian Ballet. With three-fifths thus allocated, there is precious little left for the local companies or individual artists. These are the seed-beds of our creative life; the people who go on to tread the boards of the wealthier institutions, play the music we listen to in the car or act in the Netflix series we are binge watching.

And now, our creatives are slipping through the cracks in the existing COVID-19 support packages, and our iconic institutions are being left to fall.

The news that Sydney's beloved Carriageworks has gone into voluntary administration is devastating, but hardly surprising. Ominously, it was reported in yesterday's *Herald* as "Sydney's first major arts company to call in administrators". It is unlikely to be the last.

The physical distancing regulations to prevent the spread of COVID-19 had their first and deepest impact in this sector as the new restrictions closed theatres, music venues, museums, galleries and cinemas overnight. This will likely lead to the

closure of many companies and the loss of many businesses supporting our cultural ecology.

The Grattan Institute has estimated that employment across the arts and recreation sector is expected to drop by 75 per cent, and that up to 25,000 arts and entertainment workers are now unemployed.

And yet in the federal government's stimulus package of almost \$200 billion, there is precious little for these workers. Many will not even qualify for JobKeeper payments, which do not cover the often temporary nature of employment in the creative sector.

It's beyond time the state and federal governments ended their abandonment of artists, performers and those administering the arts organisations. They are left with the impression their jobs are not "real" jobs, not important to our country like, say, mining or professional football.

Arts and cultural activities are worth \$110 billion a year in Australia and in Sydney, they underpin our tourism and hospitality sectors. Many of the 16 million visitors to Sydney last year spent their travel dollar on cultural activities.

But the arts can never be reduced to mere economic facts. There is the unquantifiable but very real role of the creative sector in defining us, in critiquing society and celebrating it. The arts enrich our lives immeasurably. This is why people are willing to buy theatre or concert tickets, patronise art galleries, attend lectures or seek out the work of local designers.

The City of Sydney has been working for many years to support and strengthen our creative sector – through grants to artists, establishing venues like the Eternity Playhouse, leasing city-owned properties to young artists and craftspeople and working with developers to provide creative and cultural spaces in new buildings.

This year we had budgeted \$4.8 million for grants programs to support cultural and creative organisations. In light of the disproportionate impact of the crisis on artists and creatives, we have increased that figure to \$8.3 million and may raise it further still. We are also honouring all existing grants, regardless of whether the recipient can deliver their intended program.

Governments can find the money to support the arts – but they have to want to.

The NSW government has committed \$1.5 billion to the incredibly unpopular and shortsighted plan to relocate the Powerhouse Museum. That is money that could be

better spent supporting Carriageworks and other organisations that are so vital to us all.

It is crucial such institutions are supported through this period – to ensure they survive and are ready to house the performances, shows and exhibitions that will fill us with light and help interpret the world we find ourselves in when we're able to move past the coronavirus.

Clover Moore is the lord mayor of Sydney.