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EDITORIAL

NSW must protect its crucial arts institutions



While many footy fans are angry about the prospect of a winter without their game, the financial collapse of Sydney's Carriageworks arts precinct has been a stark reminder that sport is not the only form of entertainment that has been put on hold by the pandemic.

The venue, situated in the historic Eveleigh rail yards in Redfern, announced on Monday it had called in administrators, highlighting the severe impact the coronavirus pandemic has had on arts and culture.

Everything from international shows at the Opera House to gigs in local pubs and from art galleries to craft markets have been cancelled as part of social-distancing. For culture lovers, who on some counts are more numerous than footy fans, the cancellation of this year's arts programs adds to the pain of self-isolation. They have to get their fix online and while the arts community is showing its creativity by finding ways to reach an audience, it's surely not quite the same. The Opera House, for instance, is offering a digital season reprising some past programs and has new footage from the archives.

The collapse of Carriageworks raises the distinct likelihood that some treasured institutions will not survive the next few months.

Since it took over the abandoned Eveleigh Carriage Workshops in 2008, Carriageworks has been a great example of how arts centres can enliven local communities and Sydney's wider cultural scene.

It attracted about 1 million visitors last year to a mixture of live performances and art installations, while the growers' markets on the site created a buzz at weekends. The eclectic nature of its program, however, seems to be part of the reason for its financial distress. Unlike say the Opera House, which receives regular annual funding, Carriageworks depends on grants for specific projects – which have all been cancelled indefinitely.

The future of arts and culture in our city should be just as much a matter of concern as the debate about when the football season can restart.

That applies both to the elite cultural institutions and to the grassroots community

and youth aspects of the arts.

Yet it could be many months, or years, before arts venues can get back to normal. While football codes are talking about restarting games for television in hermetically sealed stadiums, it won't be possible to restart events such as music concerts inside a bubble.

Governments, especially at the federal level, must think hard about how the arts and culture sector will emerge from this crisis.

Incomes have evaporated for tens of thousands of arts and culture workers and because many are casual they cannot benefit from the JobKeeper wage subsidies. The doubling of the dole, now called the JobSeeker benefit, is only a partial compensation.

Arts groups might need special help beyond that available to other small businesses.

The NSW government announced a welcome but fairly small \$6.35 million relief package for the sector, which included tax relief for venues such as Carriageworks. Clearly, for Carriageworks it was not enough. The Australia Council has promised a \$5 million national resilience fund for the arts.

Struggling NSW arts companies given \$6.35 million relief package

Some are calling for NSW to drop grand plans, such as moving the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta, and to use the money for grassroots programs that will create more employment in the short-term. For a start, NSW should appoint a new arts minister to replace Don Harwin.

There is still huge uncertainty about the road ahead but one thing is clear: Sydney will lose its soul without a vibrant arts community.