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OPINION

Prowling, empire-building Opera House must leave Carriageworks to create its own art

By Kim Williams

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As with many members of the broad arts community, I am in disbelief at the forced official administration imposed on Carriageworks directly as a result of the COVID-19 closure and the wilful decision of the NSW government to deny the venue its annual grant.

[The Sydney Chamber Opera at Carriageworks. *CREDIT: DANIEL BOUD*]

The grant denial was on the spurious grounds that the last grant had not been acquitted. When the closure was required by the virus, immediate staff stand-downs predictably ensued at the time the acquittal was yet to be completed.

In the meantime, the Sydney Opera House – a body I chaired for nine years – has been literally prowling, aiming to take over Carriageworks in an egregious piece of empire-building worthy of robber barons from the time of Carriageworks' 19th-century construction.

Culturally, the misfit between Carriageworks and the Sydney Opera House could not be more pronounced. These are polar-opposite spaces. The Opera House's designs for management control are indecorous, anything other than well-intentioned, and absent a spirit of goodwill and constructive engagement with Carriageworks and without any contact with its eight resident companies.

Those companies – Sydney Chamber Opera, Contemporary Asian Australian Performance, Erth, Felix Media, Moogahlin Performing Arts, Marrugeku, Force Majeure and Performance Space – are all at the cutting edge of distinct, innovative arts practice in our country. Each represents a group of remarkably talented people who are pioneers in their fields. Their diverse work in contemporary opera, dance, theatre, music, film and video media, and experimental visual arts have imbued Carriageworks with its unique personality and enlisted astonishingly wide and loyal audience support.

For those who do not know about Carriageworks it was an initiative of the NSW State in 2007 when the former Eveleigh Railway Workshops which were built

from 1880 to 1889 were redeveloped as a cultural precinct. Carriageworks is the most significant multi-arts centre in Australia today.

Carriageworks has a compelling history. It was one of the first places to employ Aboriginal people on an equal basis in Australia. It is also the place where generations of new migrants were first employed in a wealth of diverse engineering and maintenance roles for the NSW State Railways. In 1917, it was within Carriageworks that the "Great Strike" started, which saw thousands of workers march on NSW Parliament and, through sheer power in numbers, shut it down. A seminal moment in our political history. It is a place of energy, empowerment and vitality.

Not only does the work of the remarkable resident companies feature but it also acts as host to a cavalcade of events central to the artistic and cultural fabric of Sydney, NSW and Australia – ranging from the Sydney Festival, Sydney Contemporary Art Fair, Sydney Writers' Festival, Mercedes Benz-Fashion Week Australia, Kaldor Arts Projects, Semi-Permanent and Vivid Sydney.

Carriageworks provides an imposing set of genuinely majestic and inspiring flexible venues and spaces which can accommodate bespoke events, large-scale conferences, intimate or grand dinners (from a couple of dozen through easily over a thousand), photo shoots, professional screen production and a wealth of visual arts activities. Carriageworks uniquely earns more than 70 per cent of the revenue needed to operate independently.

This vital centre cannot be allowed to lose its independent operation, be denied its funding (through no fault of its own) and be suborned to the will of another body which is in comparison bureaucratic, indifferent and culturally alien to the welcoming free flow of ideas, users and audiences at Carriageworks.

Kim Williams, a former chairman of the Sydney Opera House Trust, is a supporter of the Sydney Chamber Opera, a resident company at Carriageworks.