

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/sydney-needs-more-than-beaches-and-the-opera-house-to-attract-tourists-20220810-p5b8tm.html>

Move over Melbourne: Sydney's push to be nation's culture capital



By [Andrew Taylor](#)

Sydney Morning Herald

August 14, 2022 — 5.00am

Sydney's tourism marketing needs an overhaul to revive the ailing CBD and knock Melbourne off its perch as Australia's cultural capital, according to the city's peak business chamber.

A report commissioned by Business Sydney says the harbour city is missing out on tourists and risks being a "second division" city because it relies too heavily on the Opera House, harbour and beaches, while downplaying arts and culture.



Inside the Art Gallery of New South Wales. *CREDIT:*

The *Creating Australia's Arts and Cultural Capital* report said Sydney did not "see itself as a cultural city and cedes that role to Melbourne. Sydney's brand doesn't reflect the maturity and sophistication of the city".

It also refers to an earlier report that said the global perception and identity of Sydney was narrowly associated with its tourism icons and natural

environment “while its distinctive people, histories, culture, diversity and creativity are less visible”. If culture was not made the focus of Sydney’s branding, the city’s reputation would diminish and “become permanently stuck in the ‘second division’ of cities,” the report added.

Business Sydney executive director Paul Nicolaou said Sydney had “relied too heavily for too long on icons like the bridge, the beaches and Opera House to lure tourists”. “By bringing together our arts and cultural attractions we can attract a broader mix of tourists,” he said.

The report said Sydney’s CBD was not a “destination of choice” for visitors from regional NSW or interstate following the resumption of travel as the COVID-19 crisis eased. “A shift in the emphasis and focus of Sydney’s destination brand appeal is needed,” the report said. “Historical over-reliance on the ‘icons’ (which appeal more to international visitors) has disconnected it from the things that motivate Australians to visit.”

Sydney is home to many of Australia’s leading cultural institutions such as the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Australian Museum, Walsh Bay Arts Precinct and the Sydney Opera House. Yet the report said Melbourne has long been accepted as the number one cultural destination in Australia.

Nicolaou said Sydney matches and exceeds Melbourne with its “mix of small and large performance venues that have grown since the removal of lockout laws and councils adopting more relaxed rules around entertainment spaces and trading hours”.

Anything Melbourne can do, Sydney can do better

Venerable public art museums: National Gallery of Victoria v Art Gallery of NSW

New cultural infrastructure: NGV Contemporary v AGNSW Sydney Modern wing and Powerhouse Parramatta

Facelift for performing arts venues: Melbourne’s Arts Centre v Sydney Opera House

Major arts festivals: [Rising: Melbourne](#) v Sydney Festival; Melbourne Writers Festival v Sydney Writers’ Festival; Melbourne International Film Festival v Sydney Film Festival; Melbourne International Comedy Festival v Sydney Comedy Festival

Major stage shows: *Hamilton*, *Moulin Rouge! The Musical*, *Come From Away* have or will be staged in Melbourne and Sydney

But he said the cost of parking and reliability of public transport needed to be addressed to attract visitors to the CBD – the business lobby advocates free

public transport on weekends and more night services from the city to the suburbs.

A spokesman for Arts and Tourism Minister Ben Franklin said the NSW government aimed to make the state the “premier visitor economy” in the Asia Pacific. “A key pillar to achieving this goal is investing in tourism, marketing and events programs that support and promote a thriving arts and cultural identity for Sydney as the nation’s capital for major cultural events,” he said in a statement.

Sydney’s art bosses said the city lacks a cultural brand and the creative sector “felt unsupported” by Destination NSW, the state government’s tourism agency.



Amyl and The Sniffers perform at the Enmore Theatre on August 12.

CREDIT: RHETT WYMAN

“There has been resistance, or at least minimal help, historically from DNSW although the sense is this has changed with new leadership,” the report said.

Powerhouse Museum chief executive Lisa Havilah said it was important to “put First Nations stories first and embed into our beautifully complex Sydney identity, culturally diverse, fine grain experiences – that reflect the true nature of our contemporary identity”. “It is these experiences that are compelling and distinctive to visitors,” she said.

Labor’s Arts spokesman Walt Secord said western Sydney should be included in the plan to attract repeat visitors. “The state government has lazily relied

on the international reputation of the Sydney Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge to attract one-off visitors,” he said. “They must be bold. We want international visitors to come back for a second and third time – rather than simply removing Sydney from their bucket list.”

The report calls for a Sydney Arts Precinct linking the city’s cultural institutions such as theatres, museums and major arts companies under an identifiable brand and collaborative body. “A primary aim of the Sydney Arts Precinct is to attract visitation to the CBD from Sydney and NSW residents using rich cultural content and experiences as the driver,” the report said.

Business Sydney is also calling for the appointment of a cultural economy commissioner to spearhead a cultural economy strategy to promote Sydney to locals and visitors as more than just a place for business and shopping.

David Beirman, adjunct fellow in tourism at the University of Technology Sydney, said it would be “crazy to ignore” Sydney’s global icons when promoting the city to domestic and international travellers.

However, state and federal tourism agencies had not given enough emphasis to the arts and culture in the past, Beirman said. “Effective promotion of Sydney’s cultural scene could add a day or two on the stay of a visitor’s stay in Sydney and each extra day benefits other tourism related businesses and the broader economy.”

Destination NSW’s *Feel NSW* campaign launched last year features cultural events as well as the state’s natural wonders.

“I think it is far more useful to enhance the profile of Sydney’s artistic and cultural attributes than to waste time and money on declaring Sydney as Australia’s cultural capital,” Beirman said. “Let the product do the talking.”