

Rethinking Hamilton, Creatively

How to develop a strategy to transform a city from a cowtown to a wowtown

Introduction:

Hamilton, New Zealand's 4th largest city, has a long-held reputation for being a cultural desert or "cowtown". That is all rapidly changing as a new strategy developed with the help of local thought-leaders marks an attitudinal change to a city that is vibrant, creative and energetic. However, having developed a new visionary Culture and Identity Strategy, the creative sector's expectations were not being realised so the sector itself imaginatively reengaged the city to deliver, creatively.

Summary:

In July 2007 a group of key business & creative strategists were invited to form a strategic think tank & engage with Charles Landry, the international authority on creative cities, in a 2-day conversation about Hamilton, New Zealand's largest inland city with the 4th largest urban population.

Hamilton is New Zealand's fastest growing city at the centre of one of the richest agricultural & pastoral areas in the world. The country's main dairy industry surrounds Hamilton along with significant ag-bio research, plus hi-tech manufacturing & engineering industries. With its strong agricultural roots the city has also developed a reputation of being a cultural desert.

The strategic think tank was a rich ideas-generating environment for a mix of minds from business, industry, local iwi, government, education & the creative sectors. As a member of the think tank, it was enriching to be involved in deep discussions about how we could foster creativity & innovation in our city. At the end of the 2 days we had high expectations that a seismic attitudinal change was taking place as our city was being transformed from a "cowtown" to a "wowtown".

Hamilton is at the cusp of the most exciting opportunity for creative transformation, an opportunity that will not be grasped by a 'business as usual' approach but through boldness & imagination. The resulting strategy has since been published by council as a visioning document reflecting this, with a set of core principles, 4 key theme areas, & a target of completing 40 projects over 4 years. We genuinely believed

that this new strategy would transform our city. But, nothing much happened.

The 1st key obstacle that slowed implementation was the failure of council to establish the forum to deliver the strategy. Our council had promised that the leadership developed in the think tank would be channeled through the establishment of a new forum that would harness the energy of the sector to deliver the strategy.

The 2nd key obstacle was the lack of ownership of the strategy within council. The council decided to disband its own arts & culture unit just as the strategy was being published so there was no one who "owned" it.

What to do?

The Hamilton Creative Sector Reference Group is a professional citywide industry stakeholder group that takes a long-term strategic view of the development of arts & culture in the city. We have been meeting regularly since 2004 with the aim of promoting & nurturing participation in the arts & culture sector across the city. As a group of professionals, we believe it's important for representatives from across our sector to be fully engaged with each other & work together for the long-term greater good of the city.

The group's members work as leaders, managers, creators, educators, producers, advisors, administrators & practitioners. We meet monthly throughout the year to network, collaborate, provide peer support & be proactively involved in supporting creative & cultural industries' development. We believe that a collaborative approach, along with consultation & dialogue with other sectors is vital to stimulating a vibrant creative city for the benefit of everyone.

Our group decided we would assist council to fulfill our sector's expectations. We developed a new annual arts & culture report, carried out our own audit & stock-take of the arts & culture sector, met the Mayor to present our findings, & collectively presented to Council. The outcomes to-date have included securing Council's agreement to undertake a deeper independent audit of the arts & culture sector with recommendations on capacity resourcing, plus an agreement to use our group as the missing forum to deliver the strategy.

As our city council told us, leadership from across the city is essential to initiate, champion & fund the 40 projects, & that there is a shared responsibility between council & those involved in creative sectors to make the most of opportunities. We're doing just that!

Cheryl Reynolds

Director Creative Industries Wintec

Bio:

As Wintec's Director of Creative Industries for the past five years, Cheryl has founded SODA inc: New Zealand's newest creative industries incubator, she has developed the annual international SPARK festival and she has established RAMP Press. She was previously Director Antenna Audio UK, Director Impressions Gallery York, and Founding Director Focal Point Gallery Essex. Cheryl serves on the advisory boards for a range of organisations and government agencies, and is a creative practitioner.

Notes:

Wintec's Centre for Creative Industries (CCI) aims to support the cultural and economic development of New Zealand's Waikato region through innovation projects for the creative industries sector. Since it was established in 2003, CCI has developed major new strategic projects that have wider economic and cultural benefit including SODA Inc – NZ's newest incubator for creative industries; RAMP Press – a new creative publishing house; and SPARK - Hamilton's annual international festival of arts media & design. By nurturing strong functional relationships with the creative industries sector, the community, industry and government agencies, CCI aims to develop new creative innovation projects for Wintec, industry and wider communities in the Waikato region in order to foster economic and cultural growth in New Zealand's growing knowledge economy.

For more info on Hamilton's Creativity & Identity Strategy go to:
<http://hamilton.co.nz/file/fileid/3929>

For more info on Wintec's Centre for Creative Industries go to:
<http://www.cci.net.nz/>

If this policy presentation is selected for Creative Clusters 2008, Wintec would be able to contribute 50% of the international and domestic airfares.