A regional QLD city has caught the eye of New York curator-influencers, who value its cultural programing as being richer than Melbourne’s.

Melbourne has long been touted as the cultural capital of Australia, but not all agree.

Recently elected NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian attempted to claim that title for Sydney. At the opening of The National exhibition she said: ‘Other States might try to disagree, but Sydney is well know to be Australia’s cultural capital.’

However, it is a regional Queensland city that might yet claim the crown – at least in the eyes of a pair of visiting cultural influencers from New York.

Sharon Louden, artist, author, educator and curator told ArtsHub: ‘I do a lot of research – it wasn’t random that I found Raygun Projects. I had a focus.’
She was talking about Toowoomba, located about an hour west of Brisbane and, in Louden’s view, a hotbed of regional cultural activity.

‘I was writing my current book when the funding cuts were announced in Australia. Raygun had lost 100% of its funding, and yet it is one of the few artist-run spaces that I have encountered that has an international program,’ Louden explained.

‘Not long after I was sitting on a panel with Mathew Deleget, of the New York gallery Minus Space (http://www.minusspace.com/) and Raygun came up, and he said “yeah I love them; you absolutely must go there.”’

Hrag Vartanian, Co-founder and Editor in Chief of Hyperallergic – an US online arts journal that receives one million visits each month – noted a further attraction for this pit-stop: ‘Toowoomba is such an awesome name.’

Louden and Vartanian chose visiting Toowoomba over Melbourne for their international book tour.

While the pair approached several Melbourne institutions to host a conversation with local artists, arts managers and makers, none were willing to pay a speaker’s fee. Given the publication was about helping artists to find sustainable models as cultural producers, it was an ironic oversight by the big institutions, who were unwilling to follow the rhetoric of supporting sustainability, in practice.

WHY TOOWOOMBA?

How does an online arts journal that gets over a million hits, and an artist who has been to invited to speak at over 60 art museums and educational institutions on her last book tour, find Toowoomba popping up on their radar?

Louden said her interest in the regional town was piqued when she found Raygun Projects while doing online research.

‘Two powerful women bringing artists in from outside of Australia to cross-pollinate with the magical Toowoomba community – those attributes, and the fact that it is one of the few artist-run spaces programming at that level, and that they lost all of their funding meant that I had to go,’ said Louden.

The Toowoomba leg of the tour was funded by The Ford Foundation (US), which is interested in marginal places and believes in artists creating opportunities, and NAVA, the national advocacy body for visual artists – who also lost their organisational funding last year.

And yet, two leading Victorian institutions and a major university didn’t value this important conversation for artists enough.

Raygun Projects has worked with over 90 artists towards solo exhibitions, and has hosted 28 artists in Toowoomba who have travelled internationally for the sole purpose of showing at Raygun.

Lawson added: ‘Since we have had Raygun’s funding cut there are two “patrons” in the community who just hand us some money every couple of months. They said to us, “We need you to run this, we need this to happen.”’

Others within the community leveraged their networks to promote the New York visit, or opened their homes and baked cakes. For a regional community, that is normal. But for an arts community, it is testament to the reach that a committed
group can have, and it is this kind of “ownership” across multiple levels – from councils to cook ups – that is the great lesson regional arts can teach the majors.

German-born artist Tilman visited Toowoomba from Brussels to create a site responsive work for Raygun, The Image Is In Your Mind (I Love The Way You Smile) in 2016. Photo: Salt Studio, Toowoomba

THE INTEREST LIES AT THE EDGES

Louden has a history of successes through “cold calling”, accounting for 80% of the things she has received. Her connection to Raygun Projects is another example of that kind of ballsy reach out and building bridges that her book, The Artist as Culture Producer: Living and Sustaining a Creative Life (http://carriageworks.com.au/events/living-and-sustaining-a-creative-life/), advocates.


It was lucky for Raygun Directors, Dr Tarn McLean and Dr Alexandra Lawson. ‘I am so with Sharon on the cold email; you just put it out there and see what happens,’ said Lawson.

McLean chimed in: ‘Sharon recognises that what we are doing in our community, with limited funds, is of value and for that we feel so privileged she chose to visit.

‘Over the last seven years we have spent time working on projects with some of the artists mentioned in Sharon's book. It is incredible the power Google can provide, a beacon of light that shines on key events and happenings, and these artists' names were magnified in association with us,’ she added.

Raygun proves that having a strong online presence is important, especially in a regional centre where it bolsters visibility on par with city-based organisations.

The visit showed the strength of regional arts communities in Australia: as dynamic, supportive and genuine hotbeds of cultural production.
'We have just been so stuck by Toowoomba and its energy,' Louden said. 'It is always really good to bring people in from the outside so they know about the assets of this place. Artists have been stuck in white walls for too long and when you are isolating yourselves you are not going to have integration. We have to do more for ourselves and get off of our arses.'

She added that while institutions like QAGOMA and Carriageworks – additional venues on this tour – were bringing in big name artists to their programs, she was interested in the other 99% and how a small town like Toowoomba was reaching them.

L-R: Sharon Louden, Tarn McLean, Vins Velega, Hrag Vartanian, Alexandra Lawson and Hyperallergic publisher Veken Gueyikian in the Raygun space, Toowoomba; Photo Artshub.

REGIONAL CULTURE PRODUCERS

Sue Lostroh, Director, Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery (TRAG) said of the visit: ‘This is not just a stop, it's a start’, adding that the Culture Producer book tour was a trigger for broadening conversations and activities.

TRAG is the oldest gallery in regional Queensland, and it has an ambitious program, mounting around 60 exhibitions across eight galleries annually. Lostroh is evidence of the tenacity that makes it happen.

When things get tough Lostroh tells her staff: ‘Today's an “undies” on the outside day,’ inferring that we can all be super heroes if we try.

Another local hero shifting Toowoomba's cultural landscape is Grace Dewer, described as the ‘solo flying young curator’ behind the First Coat Festival (https://www.firstcoat.com.au/), an independent production presented by Kontraband Studios & Analogue Digital Agency.

Over the weekend of 19 - 21 May 2017, it will bring a 30-strong line up of artists to Toowoomba, each adding a mural to the already extensive First Coat Outdoor Gallery. She said: ‘Projects like this have huge potential to reshape our community.’
The gallery currently contains over 80 urban artworks. It is one of the largest galleries of its kind in Australia and is a growing hotspot for arts tourism. 'It's a festival worth travelling for,' she added.

Deakin University did an interesting case study on the festival (http://regionalarts.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/First-Coat-Case-Study.pdf) that quotes ABC Open's Ben Tupas: 'Sometimes, it takes one-off events like these to shift community thinking about how we think about urban spaces and address issues like tagging and graffiti. The end product is a document that shows a regional town changing its colours.'

Dewer continued: 'There is a lot going on under the surface in Toowoomba which is “creative” and exciting. There are so many creative people coming out of Toowoomba with the University of Southern Queensland having an arts faculty as well as a TAFE offering visual arts and across creative industries.'

Toowoomba Regional Council has also been supportive of the festival.

Lawson told ArtsHub that Louden's book helped them locally to push their city relationships further. 'Discussions like this are empowering us to get in there with the council and slowly nurture them.'

The Toowoomba-New York event was attended by three politicians on a weekend morning: Federal member for Groom, Dr John McVeigh, State member for Toowoomba South, David Jenetzki, and Toowoomba councilor Geoff McDonald – testament to the commitment and passion for the arts in this town.

Lawson continued: 'This book enables people like me to say to Council, you want me to apply for these things, to do these things for the town, and to be on committees? Well, that expectation to give and attend meetings comes at a cost. Artists are professionals too and NAVA recommends a rate of pay.

'These are the hard lessons. I might not have stood up before, but Sharon has helped pave that road for artists to understand that they are valuable too,' she said.

McLean added: 'The emphasis in the book and in Sharon's ideology – we think she's like a prophet – focuses on the value of the artists’ practice, as positively shaping the face of each community.'

The take-hold-and-do mentality was also championed by Janet McDonald, Associate Professor, School for Arts and Communication, University of Southern Queensland, who has been another strong local advocate. She told Artshub: 'Participation isn't enough; it is participation and reification that is needed. To reify is to make it so.

'You can participate in a meeting, but unless you make something out of it it is not all that valuable. We are talking about artists who say "I participate in this and that and my CV looks pretty good," but were are they reifying that? You have to model it for it to be real.'

McDonald continued: 'Knowing what Council and government want, and what their language is, you then have to use that language to make sure they hear you.'

THE LEARNINGS ARE GLOBAL; THE OUTCOMES ARE LOCAL
Louden said that one of the great lessons she learnt from this trip to Australia, was a comment that came from artist and NAVA Deputy director Brianna Munting (https://www.facebook.com/brianna.munting): ‘There is a difference between organisations that speak for artists versus those who let artists speak. There certainly is – so well said,’ Louden added.


These things are not reserved for our cities.

Lawson said that discussions like this are empowering us all as artists, regardless of location or scale. ‘If you do it together – to stand up and value what you do – and get in there with the Council and slowly nurture them, than you can change things.’

McLean added: ‘Our community is so much richer for their visit. We will definitely continue to not so much look outside the box, but perhaps delve deeper inside of it as a way to continue making a difference to fellow artists and our communities. That Sharon noticed what we do, and reached out to us, reinforces we are committed towards not only living and sustaining a creative life, but are also dedicated towards original and important programming.’

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gina Fairley covers the Visual Arts nationally for ArtsHub. Based in Sydney you can follow her on Twitter @ginafairley and Instagram at fairleygina.