



Record arts funding, but is it in the right place?

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WA is pouring more money into arts and culture than other states, but is it going in the right places?

Carl Gopal has been trying to live off his art for more than two decades.

He has seen first hand the highs and lows of WA's arts funding and says mid-career is tougher than when he started out.

"We had affordable rents... Perth is almost as expensive as New York now," he said.

Mr Gopal says WA's high rents are forcing artists to give up their studios and galleries.

"There are a lot of people out there who are doing original work who are not [government] funded who need that infrastructure," he said.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the WA government spent a record \$614.4 million on arts and culture in 2011-12.

That is about \$260 per person in WA and the figure is higher than any other State, based on population.

The Department of Culture and the Arts' Alan Ferris says arts and culture funding has grown.

"It's an accumulate effect of the State Government's investment probably since 2008-09," he said.

"The State Government's invested a further \$81.9 million in culture and the arts and that's stimulated a whole lot of demand."

Arts infrastructure



PHOTO: A lot of recent arts funding has been spent on infrastructure like the State Theatre Centre. (Eva Fernandez)

MAP: WA

Mr Ferris says the Government has particularly focussed on building art and cultural spaces.

"There's certainly been from a capital perspective an investment in infrastructure, the State Theatre Centre, the Albany Entertainment Centre as being two recent examples," he said.

"That's going to continue with the new museum and the \$428 million investment the State Government's going to make."

The WA Chamber of Art and Culture's Henry Boston says the increased spending could reflect a coming of age in WA's art scene.

"Western Australia has changed significantly in the last 10 years and the discussion and debate about cultural vibrancy is a much greater one than used to happen," he said.

"Is that a maturity of the State? Perhaps it is."

But the majority of WA's art and cultural spending went on heritage projects, including buildings, national parks and museums.

Funding for areas such as dance, drama and visual arts dropped three percent from the previous year to \$130 million.

Mr Boston says the arts sector will suffer if the funding continues to dwindle.

Right model?

"The reduction of funding in the arts impacts so heavily because of how little money there is in the first place," he said.

"It's a bit like trying to take blood out of a corpse that's already had all its blood taken out."

He is calling for funding to be indexed to keep pace with costs but concedes it is unlikely, given the predicted tough State Budget.

Mr Gopal agrees, and added there could be a drought of new art and ideas if the funding model does not change.

"Creativity doesn't just happen, you have to invest in it pretty early on," he said.

"When you're talking about being innovative, you can't just pull that out of a hat, you need to nurture it."

He is hoping artists and consumers will show initiative.

"It's really important that the people of Western Australia get behind the artists and that artists reach out and make a partnership with people instead of waiting for funding... because I don't think that's going to happen."

Topics: arts-and-entertainment, wa
