

# The architecture of power

Dan Schulz

**For as long as there have been stonemasons, buildings have been a way to distinguish the sovereign from the subjugated, imbuing monarchs, priesthoods and the ruling class with power in the form of architectural spectacle. Churches, temples, palaces, monuments and civic buildings are representations of power, inspiring awe, fear and subservience in citizens.**

But there is another kind of architecture of sovereignty, designed to give authority, not to an individual, but to a collective. The town halls, public squares and trades halls of the late 19th and early 20th century are the architecture of democracy, where crowds could gather to be energized by the spectacle of solidarity and collective power.

Songs In the Round, a performance by nine musicians was given at Broken Hill's Trades Hall on Wednesday night, revisiting the architecture of unionism and the democratic spaces of the early 20th century. The night was the inspiration of Charlotte Buckton, known by her stage name as Charlotte Le Lievre, who has a personal connection to Broken Hill's labour movement. Her father is a retired miner and, from a young age, Charlotte has been fascinated with the spirit of unionism that burns deep within the heart of the Broken Hill community. "The labour rights we enjoy today came from Broken Hill and I think that legacy is an important thing to celebrate and honour. Using music to do that is really interesting and exciting," she said.

After gaining support from the Trades Hall Trust, Charlotte invited a close community of musicians, some local to Broken Hill and others who frequent its pubs, to share their songs about the land, its history and its people.

Broken Hill's 125-year-old Trades Hall building is the birthplace of the labour movement and was designed by architect, Tom Jackson, who took influence from the Arts and Crafts Movement, a movement that considered buildings to be works of art created by skilled workers, and opposed the architectural style of modernity which used industrialized production methods. The foundation stone of Trades Hall was laid by British Trade Unionist Ben Tillett in 1898 and the building was completed in 1905. Today it stands as one of the few surviving and prominent Victorian buildings in Broken Hill and has barely changed since its construction. Former Barrier Industrial Council President, Frank Murphy, described the Hall as Broken Hill's 'heart and soul' in a speech given at the building's centenary in 1998, describing its role as a rallying point during the decades of union activity in town.

On Wednesday night this history came alive in the main room of the Trades Hall building which reverberated with uplifting songs of solidarity, ballads of lost comrades, harrowing stories of genocide and death, and the contemporary struggle to protect land and country from corporate greed.

The main room of the Trades Hall building where the performance took place does not inspire awe or fear in its audience. It is not laden with gold such as the decorative gold inlays you will find in our state parliament houses, buildings where our democracy is supposed to take place. There is no heroic imagery or ideological symbols on the walls or ceiling of the Trades Hall main room. It is a soft pastel green and pink, with openwork timber beams and abstract geometric patterns that, while beautiful, are vernacular. Its design is reflexive and timeless, an unpretentious background and natural amplifier for the gathering of people that are the focal point of the space.



**Barkindji Elder Leroy Johnson sharing songs about his beloved river country and the history of his people.**

Such heritage spaces are rarely used for their original purpose, which was to inspire a crowd to action, but this erudite and passionate group of musicians conjured the spirit of its history using old stories of union struggle as metaphors for contemporary battles.

The nine musicians took turns to approach the stage, a box set upon the floor, and they sang into the 50-foot vaulted ceiling to an audience numbering a hundred, classic union songs such as Which Side Are You On? Written in 1931 by activist Florence Reece, wife of

Sam Reece, a union organizer for the United Mine Workers in Harlan County, Kentucky, were included with original songs such as those by Charlotte Le Lievre, whose song The Prospector, revisits the founding of DayDream mine by Joe Meech and his quest for a fortune to escape poverty. Mick Coates, a musician from regional Victoria shared a harrowing song, The River Was Flowing, written by Shirley O'Toole about the massacre of Wiradjuri people at Poison Waterhole Creek and nearby Massacre Island on the Murrumbidgee River.

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Among these more weighty numbers were songs about love and friendship, acknowledging the deep social connection of the Broken Hill community. The night was concluded with a sing-along of LeRoy Johnson's original song, No Barka, No Barkindji, a song about the deep connection of the Barkindji people to the Barka River and their struggle for water rights against the power and influence of the corporate irrigation industry.

The main room of the Trades Hall building is a space designed exactly for this: to project the voices of common people into a vast ceiling, multiplying sound so it reverberates above the audience and animates the voice of the performer as if it were thrown from a distant place, and from another time. A stand-out example of this was Aimee Volkovsky's original song 'Short Skirts' which she sang as a duet with Alex Rosenblum from the duo Dearest Dear. Their voices perfectly resonated with the frequency of the room so that some audience members found themselves looking around for the other vocalists that seemed to be behind them, above them and all around as if by magic or technological trick these two women had duplicated themselves among the crowd. The other voice was the space itself - the architecture the instrument.

Architecture has this power to bring into harmony a multitude of voices, creating frequencies between us that do not exist without the appropriate space in which we can connect. At a time when digital space dominates our relationship to political life, this performance causes us to remember the physicality of our collective struggle and to reflect on modern forms of political action, public space and collective storytelling by repurposing the historic architecture of democracy. As Aimee Volkovsky noted during her set, "Broken Hill is so alive at the moment, it feels like one of the best places to live in the world".

By reviving the political and social vitality of the past, Broken Hill seems to be reinventing itself once again as a place where powerful and important things are possible. ■



**Audience members were treated to the haunting sounds of Aimee Volkovsky's voice as it echoed beautifully throughout the 125-year-old Trades Hall.** PICTURES: Dan Schulz