

BEYOND THE BROCHURE

THE VISITOR ECONOMY AS CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE

Strategic Insights White Paper

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across Australia, a quiet transformation is underway.

Libraries are becoming gathering spaces. Museums are doubling as tourism anchors. Wineries are designing tasting rooms that feel like cultural encounters. And small-town community centres are finding new life as gateways to their region.

As visitor expectations evolve, these places — whether purpose-built visitor centres or not — are becoming the civic infrastructure of the visitor economy. They connect locals and visitors through story, culture and experience. They drive spending and social value. And they shape the way people understand and remember a place.

This paper explores how councils, cultural organisations, and tourism operators can reimagine civic and cultural assets as visitor economy catalysts. It identifies the principles that underpin commercially and socially successful centres: connection, adaptability, integration and authenticity.

Ultimately, it argues that the future visitor centre is not a building type — it's a mindset: a way of designing spaces that interpret, engage and sustain place identity while supporting community and economic vitality.

THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT

The definition of a “Visitor Centre” has expanded.

In many regions, traditional models — static displays, brochure racks, and retail counters — are struggling to justify their operational cost. Meanwhile, new forms of visitor experience are thriving: interpretive tasting rooms, event-oriented libraries, and co-located cultural hubs that blend storytelling, retail, and community programming.

These changes reflect a broader shift in the visitor economy:

Visitors now seek meaning and connection, not just information.

Communities expect civic spaces to deliver measurable local benefit.

Councils need to demonstrate return on investment, both economic and social.

In this context, a well-designed visitor experience centre is not simply a tourism facility — it is a local platform for participation, pride and prosperity.

When a museum evolves its interpretation to celebrate local stories; when a winery creates a space that brings regional identity to life; or when a library integrates creative programming that draws visitors downtown — each becomes a gateway to place.

This expanded understanding creates an opportunity: to treat the visitor centre function as a shared civic role, distributed across multiple touchpoints and sectors. Design, when strategically applied, can align these spaces to deliver both cultural depth and commercial return, building resilient, adaptable communities that invite engagement rather than just visitation.



INTEGRATED DESTINATION INFRASTRUCTURE

The most resilient regional economies treat their cultural, civic and tourism assets as a single system — an integrated destination infrastructure. Rather than thinking in silos — the museum, the gallery, the visitor centre, the tasting room — they design for connection and complementarity.

Each asset has a clear core purpose, but together they form a network that:

- Amplifies the region's identity and story,
- Increases dwell time and spend and
- Builds a year-round visitor economy.

In this model, visitor experience becomes the connective tissue between functions. A library event program might feed into a nearby gallery exhibition; a winery's tasting space might cross-promote regional produce and heritage trails; a community centre might host seasonal festivals that attract and retain visitors.

Design has a pivotal role in enabling this integration. Physical proximity helps, but alignment in story, visitor flow, and emotional tone is just as important. The most effective destinations are those that feel cohesive — not because every building looks the same, but because each speaks the same underlying story of place.

By re-framing visitor centres as part of a distributed civic ecosystem, councils and operators can leverage shared resources, diversify revenue streams, and elevate regional identity. This integrated approach unlocks greater resilience — both economically and culturally — than any single facility can achieve alone.

DESIGNING FOR CONNECTION

Visitors no longer come simply to see a place — they come to feel it.

Designing for connection means shaping spaces that translate a region's story into sensory, emotional and participatory experience.

Whether it's the cool hush of a museum, the warmth of a timber tasting room, or the openness of a civic forecourt, architecture and interior design communicate values long before words or labels do. Every material choice, light level, and spatial rhythm signals something about what — and who — the place is for.

At its best, design for connection:

- Translates identity into atmosphere. It takes the abstract qualities of place — authenticity, generosity, resilience — and renders them tangible.
- Creates layers of engagement. Visitors should be able to experience the space intuitively, but also discover deeper narratives the longer they stay.
- Invites participation. Spaces that encourage people to touch, taste, listen and share foster stronger emotional bonds and memory retention.
- Balances local and visitor perspectives. The most loved destinations make locals proud and visitors welcome.

The outcome is not a style, but a feeling — one that builds trust and curiosity.

For councils and operators, this is where commercial reality meets cultural meaning. People who feel connected stay longer, spend more, and return often.

Design becomes the bridge between emotional connection and measurable value.

ADAPTABILITY AS A MEASURE OF VALUE

In an unpredictable tourism landscape, adaptability is the new permanence.

Floods, fires, shifting travel patterns, digital disruption and funding cycles all test the long-term viability of civic and cultural assets. Buildings that cannot adapt — physically or programmatically — risk rapid obsolescence, no matter how beautiful their design or how well-intentioned their origin.

The most future-ready visitor centres, museums, and cultural hubs share three common traits:

1. Flexible spatial design. Movable walls, reconfigurable displays, and modular furnishings allow spaces to host events, exhibitions, workshops, and retail without major rework.
2. Digital integration. Screens, projection surfaces and interactive media layers enable quick updates and seasonal storytelling, keeping content fresh and relevant.
3. Operational agility. Staff models, partnerships, and programming are designed for evolution — drawing in local businesses, artists, educators, and volunteers to continually refresh the offer.

For councils, adaptability translates to risk mitigation and longevity. A space that can evolve without major capital reinvestment offers better return on public funds. For communities, it builds a sense of relevance: a centre that responds to their needs over time remains meaningful and well-loved.

Designing for adaptability requires architects and operators to think beyond the opening day. The question is not just “What will this space do?” but “What might it need to become?” — a mindset that turns buildings into living frameworks for connection and renewal.



MEASURING PUBLIC VALUE

The impact of a visitor centre — or any civic experience space — cannot be fully understood through visitor numbers alone. Footfall and retail sales remain important, but they represent only a fraction of the true value generated.

A comprehensive measurement framework should include economic, social and cultural indicators, such as:

- Economic: local spending uplift, event-driven visitation, job creation, repeat visitation rates.
- Social: volunteer participation, partnerships with schools or community groups, accessibility and inclusivity outcomes.
- Cultural: depth of engagement with local stories, visitor advocacy, inter-generational knowledge sharing, cultural pride.

Collectively, these measures define public value — the blend of financial return, community wellbeing, and cultural vitality that justifies ongoing investment.

Progressive councils are beginning to use these metrics to shape funding decisions and design briefs. This shift recognises that the success of civic and visitor spaces lies not only in what they earn, but in what they enable: pride, belonging, curiosity and connection.

By measuring value through this broader lens, we begin to see visitor centres not as cost centres, but as active instruments of regional prosperity.

EVIDENCE AND PRECEDENT

Across Australia, the most effective civic and visitor spaces share a consistent pattern: they combine storytelling with operational realism.

Whether the setting is a wine region, a national park, or a small coastal town, design-led interventions are proving that architecture can be a driver of economic and cultural renewal.

An immersive visitor experience built around the brand's story can strengthen both cellar door visitation and retail performance. In regional towns, libraries re-imagined as flexible cultural hubs have drawn new audiences and reduced vacancy in surrounding main streets. Museums that integrate food and event programs are achieving longer dwell times and increased community participation.

These examples show how well-designed visitor infrastructure multiplies impact - not only attracting visitors, but extending their stay, enriching their understanding, and reinforcing regional identity.

For local government, these outcomes create confidence to invest, to attract funding, and to build partnerships. For communities, they foster a sense of belonging and pride that can't be measured in dollars alone. For commercial operators, they provide tangible commercial advantage: increased visitation, higher engagement, extended dwell times, and diversified revenue opportunities — turning well-designed visitor experiences into both economic and brand growth.

Each precedent demonstrates the same principle:

When design thinking aligns story, function and commercial strategy, visitor spaces become catalysts for growth and meaning — not just buildings to be maintained.

CALL TO COLLABORATION

The opportunity is clear.

As Australia's regions adapt to new tourism realities, every community has within it the potential to create places that invite connection — places that tell their story and sustain their future.

Reimagining a civic building or cultural facility as part of the visitor economy is not simply an architectural exercise. It's an act of strategic alignment: between tourism, culture, economy and community.

At S2 Architects, we believe design is a tool for leadership.

Our work begins by uncovering what is unique about a place — its story, its rhythm, its people — and translating that into spaces that engage, perform and endure. We partner with councils, regional organisations and private operators to define the long-term role of their visitor infrastructure: commercially resilient, emotionally resonant, and authentically local.

If you're ready to explore how your civic or cultural asset could evolve into a new kind of visitor experience, we'd love to collaborate.

Together, we can design the places that connect visitors and communities — and shape the next chapter of Australia's visitor economy.

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