

a landmark construction to enrich the lives of the people of the Lachlan Valley and to attract new generations of settlers and cultural tourists to the region

THE LACHLAN VALLEY CULTURAL COMPLEX, FORBES, NSW

incorporating The French Heritage Centre, the Forbes Folklore Centre and many other facilities and amenities

A FIRST DRAFT PROPOSAL: preliminary ideas for discussion, 11 July 2004
For more information contact merrill.findlay@rmit.edu.au or phone 04040 57162

THE BIG VISION: A 'state of the art' multifunctional cultural facility in the centre of Forbes, NSW, serving the whole Lachlan Valley region and beyond: a fusion of heritage architecture and the most sophisticated contemporary 'green' design which evokes the Lachlan River, the rich cultural heritage of the region and its uniquely Australian native flora and fauna. A series of interlinked structures which together create a warm, open and hospitable environment, yet also stimulating and exciting: the kind of place both locals and visitors will want to return to again and again, and from where they always leave feeling refreshed, invigorated and inspired.

*Wenz memorabilia on display at the Forbes & District Historical Society Museum.
Photo by Merrill Findlay, June 2004*



This unique regional complex might incorporate the following amenities, facilities and installations.

- **Special interest 'pavilions'**, one of which would be the **French Heritage Centre** and permanent home of the **Paul & Hettie Wenz Collection** of books and memorabilia now in the Forbes Library and Forbes Museum, while another would provide a home for the **Forbes Folklife Centre**. Other 'pavilions' might be dedicated to the region's British, Chinese, Afghan, Greek and Italian heritages, for example, and to the contributions women of all backgrounds have made to the cultural life of the Lachlan Valley.
- Several **art galleries**, including one for traveling exhibitions, and another for the work of local/regional artists.
- An adaptable **theatre/auditorium** for professional touring productions, locally produced plays, multimedia screenings, large community

- meetings, conferences, dinners and musical performances by the Mitchell Conservatorium, regional choirs, rock bands and other groups.
- A range of **interactive spaces** in which the region's cultural and natural heritage would be displayed and interpreted.
 - Smaller meeting rooms, offices, rehearsal and research spaces.
 - A **neighbourhood house/drop-in centre/information centre** with health, educational and government services information.
 - A **coffee shop, arts and craft shop** and caterers kitchen.
 - A virtual presence through an educational **web site**, and banks of public access computers with online research capacities.
 - A **display interpreting the building's ecological features** (eg passive solar design, energy and water self-sufficiency, grey water recycling, materials with low embodied energy, use of local resources, eg wool, recycled Red Gum, rammed earth and/or stone.)

THE CULTURAL COMPLEX AS A LANDMARK BUILDING, TOURIST ASSET, VENUE FOR SPECIAL EVENTS AND 'GREAT ATTRACTOR'

The Lachlan Valley Cultural Complex is envisaged as a **landmark construction** to serve the cultural, social, even spiritual needs of the estimated 100,000 people who currently live in the river's catchment, and the hundreds of thousands of other country folk who do not technically live within the river valley yet are close enough to visit Forbes occasionally. It would also attract thousands of cultural tourists to the region, and clearly differentiate Forbes from other towns, including Parkes.

The Lachlan River at Nanima Station before the days of irrigation. Photo by Paul Wenz, c. 1898. From the Wenz Collection in the Mitchell Library, Sydney.



The Complex would be the focus for diverse events and celebrations, such as the proposed **Wenz International Rural Writers Festival**, a biannual event bringing together rural writers and scholars from Europe and the countries the Wenzes visited¹, to talk about issues rural people

¹ The Wenzes seem to have visited every continent except Antarctica. Their travel books reveal their interest in southeast and central Asia, Africa and the Americas in particular.

everywhere are concerned about, and to expose participants to new and often-provocative ideas. Local wineries and other regional venues would co-host readings, exhibitions, dinners and concerts during the festival.²

The proposed Wenz Rural Writers Festival would be co-sponsored by the Australian and French governments and, once established, attract many hundreds of people to the region, and serve to promote Forbes nationally and internationally.

RESPONDING TO DIVERSE CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The Lachlan Valley Cultural Complex is conceived as a response to many cultural development needs and opportunities, such as the following.

1. The unique collection of books, photographs and other memorabilia associated with Paul and Hettie Wenz now in need of a permanent new home where they can be made available to the public and to scholars. (See www.geocities.com/merrillfindlay/TheWenzCollection2004)
2. The increased appreciation of the social and economic flow-ons of heritage conservation and the recent willingness of Forbes Shire Council to be more proactive about conserving and promoting local heritage.
3. An emerging pride in the Lachlan Valley's rich cultural and biological diversity and a desire to celebrate and conserve these.
4. A growing sense of regional identity focusing on the Lachlan, and an acknowledgement that the region's future depends on the river's health.
5. People's frustration and sense of deprivation at the lack of modern amenities, such as galleries, theatres, and function facilities in which people can engage with local, national and international cultural productions.
6. A growing awareness of the economic advantages of good cultural amenities, and the quality-of-life benefits of active involvement with theatre, music, visual arts, crafts, dance and literature³.
7. A widespread and active interest in bush traditions and local folklore, including the works of bush poets.
8. A need to counter city people's perceptions of country people as 'red necks' and 'bumpkins' by demonstrating our cultural sophistication and talents.

² See www.geocities.com/merrillfindlay/TheWenzCollection2004

³ See Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* and other recent urban planning and regional development research.

9. New understandings about the linkages between cultural development and the sustainable management of natural resources (natural heritage), such as the much-degraded river, native habitats, and farming land.
10. An emerging pride in the Lachlan Valley's Wiradjuri heritage, and acknowledgement of the need for reconciliation between Wiradjuri descendants and the descendants of non-indigenous settlers.
11. A concern that many groups who have contributed to the region's development -- women, indigenous people, Afghan cameleers, Chinese 'sojourners' and many other migrants -- have been 'written out' of mainstream narratives and that our collective sense of who we are is reduced by this.
12. An on-going desire to commemorate the lives of already-acknowledged Lachlan notables like Ben Hall, Kate Kelly, Henry and Louisa Lawson, and the Wenzes through public installations.
13. An awareness that cultural tourism is 'the way of the future', as Rob Willis says in his Forbes Folklore Centre proposal on the following page.

ABOUT THE LACHLAN VALLEY

Writer Paul Wenz poses with one of the many giant eucalypts which once covered his Nanima Station on the Lachlan. Photo c. 1898, from the Wenz Collection at the Mitchell Library.

The Lachlan Valley is part of the Murray-Darling Basin, and extends over 84,700 square kilometers of central NSW from the edge the Great Divide to the seemingly-endless western plains.

This fertile catchment is home to over 100 000 people who produce an estimated 14% of the state's agricultural output. It includes the Lachlan River towns of Forbes, Cowra, Condobolin, Lake Cargelligo, Hilston, Booligal and Oxley; the Lachlan tributary towns of Blayney, Canowindra, Crookwell, Gunning and Boorowa; and non-river centres of West Wyalong, Parkes, Young, Grenfell, Mount Hope, Ivanhoe, Trunkey and Bigga. Major inland highways, such as the Newell, bisect the Valley, as does the transcontinental railway.



The River itself is the focus of many indigenous dreamings and dozens of bush ballads, folk songs and yarns, and yet its unique character is still generally unrecognized. Unlike other rivers in the Murray-Darling Basin, the Lachlan disappears into a mosaic of seasonal wetlands all of which are of national ecological significance. 'Our' river only ever reach the Murrumbidgee in very wet seasons. Ironically, it is only now when most people in the Valley are

enduring severe water restrictions, that the Lachlan's life-sustaining significance is fully appreciated.

But the Lachlan is a threatened river. The Murray-Darling Basin salinity audit identified its catchment as one of the most 'at risk' in terms of salinity problems, for example. The region is also degraded in many other ways.

This photo from the Wenz Collection, c. 1898, clearly shows the extent of nineteenth century ringbarking to clear the land, one of the primary causes of salinity.



According to the NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation other threats include 'declining surface water quality, declining health and abundance of native vegetation, gradual loss of native biodiversity from the ecosystems within the catchment, degradation of riparian and wetland ecosystems and the deterioration of the soil resource.'⁴

All these environmental problems have social, cultural and historical dimensions which could be addressed through interpretative exhibitions and creative interventions at the Lachlan Valley Cultural Complex - and toured to other centres.

FORBES & DISTRICT FOLKLORE CENTRE

A celebration of Australia's diverse cultures

(Proposed by Rob Willis, May 2004)

The proposed Folklore Centre would cover the following areas.

- Poetry - Literature (connections with Lawson, Morant, Ogilvie, Wenz - and other prominent poets and authors)
- Musical instruments of the bush
- Women's traditions and culture.
- Ethnic and Indigenous folklore - particularly the multicultural aspects of the goldfields.
- Folksong (Bushranging, shearing, farming - song centre of Aust)
- Dance
- Craft/Bush trades - spinning, weaving, blacksmithing
- Bushranging lore

⁴ Lachlan Catchment Blueprint published February 2003, p. 7.

- Droving
- Yarns
- Shearing
- Many I have missed

This would NOT be a museum but would feature interactive displays - audiovisuals from the extensive 'Forbes' collections in the National Library of Australia and Screensound Australia. Light shows, and some static displays of musical instruments, shearing and bushranger memorabilia complemented by interactive audiovisuals. South Australia has many of these quality 'interpretive centres' that draw large crowds, as does Perth. (Migration centre, shipwreck centre)

Forbes is ideally situated on the Newell and this complex would be the catalyst to make travellers continue that extra 100 kms and stay in Forbes rather than West Wyalong.

This is an ongoing attraction but could be complemented by 'events' such as festivals. Forbes needs an ongoing attraction; we have and need events but require an exciting permanent attraction.

Once completed this facility would require minimum maintenance and upkeep and would not be a burden on the ratepayer. It is not a 'Vintage Village' that requires permanent upkeep.

1. Feasibility study either by council or Government funding should be available (as per Slim Dusty complex)
2. Approach Government for support using the Slim Dusty Centre and Shear Outback as examples of successful complexes. The shear outback complex has created employment in the Hay area.
3. Corporate sponsorship? Toyota, Rural chemical companies, Telstra

There has been resurgence in interest in our background/history/folklife. With Australia's population aging many people have stopped reflecting where they are going and are reflecting on where they came from - our cultural heritage. These people travel and have a large disposable income.

Cultural tourism is the way of the future.

For more information contact merrill.findlay@rmit.edu.au or rwillis@westserv.net.au