**Deputation to Council – City of Perth Ordinary Council Meeting**

**Re: Item 19.5 – Administration’s Response to the Notice of Motion on Public Art**  
**Presented by: Helen Curtis, Save the Kebab**  
**Date: Tuesday 25 March 2025**

Good evening, Lord Mayor and Councillors.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. I’m here to speak in response to the Administration’s reply to Item 19.5 – the Notice of Motion regarding public art, conservation, and engagement.

My name is Helen Curtis, and I speak on behalf of the advocacy group, Save the Kebab.

By way of background, I am the Director of the arts consultancy Apparatus. Prior to this, I worked in the arts at the City of Perth for thirteen years. I’m a preferred provider for the State Government’s Percent for Art Scheme and a member of the Art Consulting Association of Australia (ACAA). I also serve on multiple advisory panels, including those for the Child and Adolescent Health Service, North Metropolitan TAFE, the Heritage Council, the City of Stirling, and the State Design Review Panel.

I want to begin by saying that I don’t enjoy making people uncomfortable. But I do love this city, and I want the best for it.

I want to acknowledge the Officers of the City of Perth and the significant effort involved in managing a collection of this scale.

To the Elected Members, I recognise you are presented with mountains of reports to consider and resolve—this is no small responsibility, and I thank you for your time and service.

Before I speak to specific recommendations, I’d like to share some context.

Working in the City of Perth arts team could often feel challenging, but in hindsight, we achieved a great deal. I was incredibly fortunate to work alongside a group of highly skilled and committed professionals, including at various times:

Jo Darbyshire, Isobel Wise, Mark Stewart, Kate McMillan, Belinda Cobby, Paola Anselmi, Helen Hewitt, Paul Caporn, Michelle McDonald, Lisa Schreiber, Katie Lenanton, Ashleigh Whyte, Duncan McKay, Maria Yakimov, Janice Lally, and Simon Geevers.

Together, this team developed and delivered a comprehensive suite of programs that made a genuine impact on the arts and cultural life of our capital city, including:

* A cultural sponsorship program designed to support sector development—not just audience numbers
* Ensuring democratic access to high-quality arts experiences like *Symphony in the City*;
* Australia’s first dedicated public art maintenance program;
* The commissioning of innovative, site-specific public artworks such as *The Arch* and *Eliza* at Crawley Baths;
* A robust series of art awards and commissions, alongside an active acquisition program that developed the City’s significant Art Collection;
* The Perth Public Art Foundation;
* An international artist exchange program with Taipei, Taiwan; and
* A cultural heritage program that helped the people of Perth connect with our shared history—through exhibitions and storytelling that shape our identity and bind us as a community.

These programs, developed over more than a decade, were built to support the professional lives of WA artists, foster civic pride, and reflect the aspirations of a growing and evolving city.

But slowly, that has all been unwound.

All of the professionals I mentioned have since watched, as the programs and policies they helped build have been incrementally dismantled. Today, the City can feel impenetrable—detached from the very community it once so actively supported.

Many of us have not engaged with the City of Perth at all, accepting this shift with a kind of weary resignation.

But then came the removal of *The Ore Obelisk*—which was perplexing.

Then *The Arch*—which was unfathomable.

And then the acceptance of *Boonji Spaceman*—a mass-produced artwork, placed in the heart of Stirling Gardens, on the very site where *The Obelisk* once stood.

That was the final straw.

And so, Save the Kebab was formed: a group of five committed citizens—Felicity Johnson, Pippa Hurst, Reece Harley, Damien Pericles, and myself. I want to thank them sincerely for their passion and perseverance. I also thank the many journalists who have taken up this story, the artists, designers, historians, and community members who’ve reached out with their support. We are doing this on behalf of all of them—and we know we’re on the right track because of the depth of that support.

So, what are we asking?

We are calling for the return of *The Obelisk*, a significant 1971 work by Paul Ritter—affectionately known as “the kebab.” It honoured WA’s mining heritage and held a meaningful place in the civic memory of Stirling Gardens. The public was assured it would be returned after its removal in 2021. Instead, it faces permanent replacement by *Boonji Spaceman*, an imported, mass-produced sculpture by American artist Brendan Murphy—purchased for $250,000 of ratepayer money.

This decision appears to contradict the City’s own Public Art Policy (CP 4.8), which explicitly excludes mass-produced works. The policy also calls for consideration of local artists, originality, heritage value, and endorsement by advisory groups. Yet there is no record of endorsement from the Culture and Arts Advisory Group or the Elders Advisory Group.

Similarly, *The Arch* by Lorenna Grant was removed in 2023 with no clear plan for restoration or reinterpretation.

Together, these actions paint a concerning picture:

* Policies bypassed,
* Artists excluded,
* Public trust eroded.

With great respect to the Lord Mayor and Councillors, we civilly request that Council:

1. **Restore or reinterpret Paul Ritter’s *The Obelisk* at its original site in Stirling Gardens.**
2. **Commission Lorenna Grant to restore or reconceptualise *The Arch* at its original site in Northbridge.**
3. **Return *Boonji Spaceman* to the US—or at least relocate it to a more suitable site—not Perth’s oldest colonial garden.**
4. **Ensure all future public art acquisitions comply fully with CP 4.8 and are endorsed by the relevant advisory groups.**

We are not simply asking you to *save a sculpture.*

We are asking you to:

* Uphold your own policies;
* Respect the legacy of Perth’s artists and cultural leaders;
* Restore works that matter deeply to our community;
* Spend public funds with care and accountability;
* And lead—with creativity, integrity, and pride in place.

Regarding the Administration’s response: while it offers useful detail in places, it also reveals several key concerns:

* The Public Art Strategy is nearly ten years old. A review was only initiated in late 2024.
* The Cultural Gifts Program is described as an “investment strategy”—but this does not replace meaningful engagement with philanthropy or the arts industry.
* Important works like *The Obelisk* and *The Arch* are left in storage, with outdated costings and no real plan for reinstatement.
* The estimated cost of reviving the Art Award Program appears significantly inflated.

We commend the Administration for programs such as the Council House Foyer Gallery and the mural initiatives, which represent meaningful contributions. However, what is presented is a list of activities—not a clear or visionary strategy.

Elected Members, before you now is an opportunity to make a lasting and positive change.

Let this be a moment to proudly recommit to nurturing local culture, honouring civic memory, and championing creative excellence.

Thank you.