

5. Waitakere Enterprise Film Overview

– Regan Soloman

Henderson Valley Studios is New Zealand's largest film studio complex. The studios are of local and national significance and have attracted both local and international film and television productions since 1994. The Waitakere City Council, central government, (particularly through New Zealand Trade and Enterprise) and the private sector have worked together to create and develop this important piece of film infrastructure. This article outlines some of the key interventions on the site since 1994 with a particular focus on the relationships between key agencies in the development of the site.

The Henderson Valley Studios is New Zealand's largest film studio complex. The complex currently consists of one world-class sound stage (building five in the figure below) and cool stores which have been converted for film use. The studios have been used as part of a number of local and international film and television productions. Some examples of films shot at the studios include *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Whale Rider* and *In My Father's Den*.

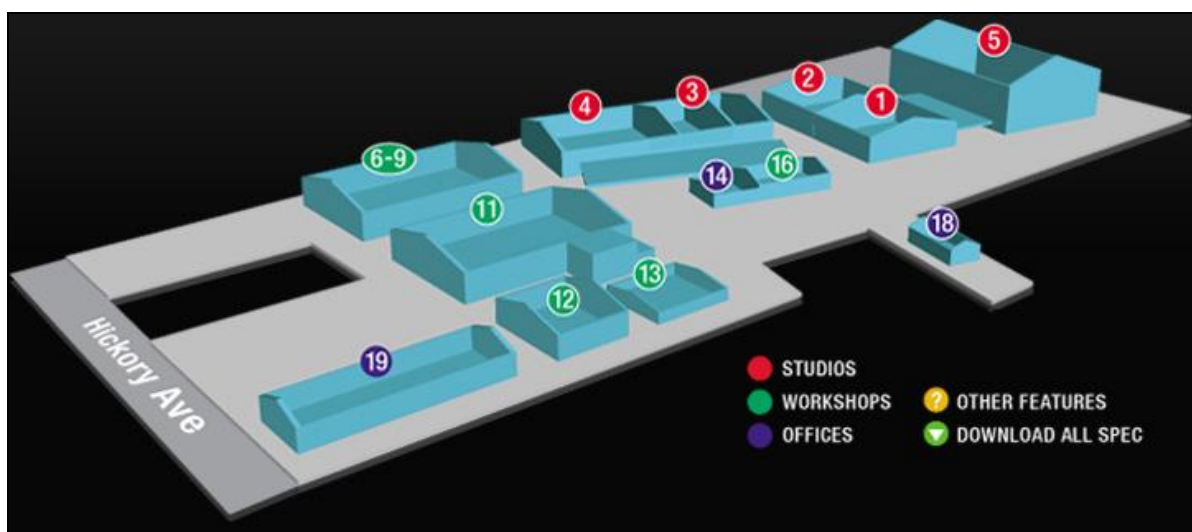


Figure 5: Henderson Valley Film Studios

The genesis of the film industry in Waitakere can, in part, be attributed to the success of the fictional show *Xena: Warrior Princess*. This show was largely filmed in Waitakere over its six seasons which ran from 1995 to 2001. Substantial proportions of the show were filmed in the Waitakere Ranges Regional Park which is managed by the Auckland Regional Council as well as the Henderson Valley Studios. *Xena* itself was a spin-off of another show *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* which was also partly filmed in Waitakere.

The Henderson Valley Studios is a four hectare site on Henderson Valley Road. The site was previously used for cool stores by the New Zealand Apple and Pear Board. The buildings were decommissioned in 1994. Between 1994 and 2002 the buildings were used for the filming of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, other television shows and television commercials.

Building on the film base that was emerging in Waitakere, the Waitakere City Council resolved to partner with Enterprise Waitakere (another Council Controlled Organisation) to facilitate and develop a film cluster within Waitakere. An opportunity arose for the purchase of the property which the Council completed in 2002 for \$3.85 million. This purchase represented a significant investment on the part of Waitakere City Council and clearly signalled an intention to ensure a successful film cluster.

Upon purchasing the property the Council transferred the property to Waitakere Properties Limited. Waitakere Properties Limited is a Council Controlled Organisation which is allowed for under part five of the Local Government Act (2002). This organisation is wholly owned by the Council and provides property development services and consultancy to the Council. The role of Waitakere Properties Limited (WPL) was to manage the site commercially and to advance its development to ensure a better fit for purpose. To this end WPL undertook a range of interventions on the site, which were funded from the rental income stream flowing from the studios, to improve the condition of the on-site buildings.

As the site and buildings were improved, it became apparent that new capital was required to further develop the studios. An information memorandum was issued and private investment sought. An Auckland based property developer and the Waitakere City Council resolved to enter into a joint venture. This joint venture resulted in the property being vested in Prime West Limited, subsequently renamed Auckland Film Studios Limited. For the Council this meant it became a simple shareholder/ investor in the studios as it took a 44.5 per cent shareholding in company in exchange for land and buildings.

A significant component of the joint venture has been the construction of a purpose-built sound stage. The sound stage was built between 2006 and 2007. It is some 2000m² in size and cost approximately \$7 million to build. It has a height of 14.7 meters to the lighting grid. Approximately \$1 million (GST inclusive) was provided by New Zealand Trade and Enterprises' Major Regional Initiative fund while the remainder was provided by Tony Tay Film Limited.



Figure 6: The purpose built sound stage at Henderson Valley Studios

The role of Prime West Limited (PML), subsequently renamed Auckland Film Studios Limited (AFSL), is managing the land and buildings of the studios. Waitakere City Council holds a 44% shareholding in the company while Tony Tay Film Limited has the remainder. Another company, Prime West Management Limited has focused on promoting and securing tenants and managing the operations of the studios. However recently the management functions of PWML were internalised to PML (now AFSL).

The studios have been a successful commercial venture. The rental income has meant the existing buildings have been improved while the sound stage has been a successful public-private partnership resulting in a studio of international quality that has attracted more people to look at filming in New Zealand. Walt Disney New Zealand Limited is a committed tenant of the studios to March 2010.

A number of initiatives are underway to further the development of the Henderson Valley Studios. The Waitakere City Council is exploring options for an easement to allow for broadband access to the site. This piece of infrastructure would enable other developments on the site, such as the development of a post-production facility. Work to amalgamate the nine underlying titles, including their historic legal descriptions and easements is underway. Reconfigured land ownership would facilitate additional development of the property. Investigations into the potential for another sound stage are likely which, if ultimately successful, would enable the studios to support two productions simultaneously and allow for greater flexibility.

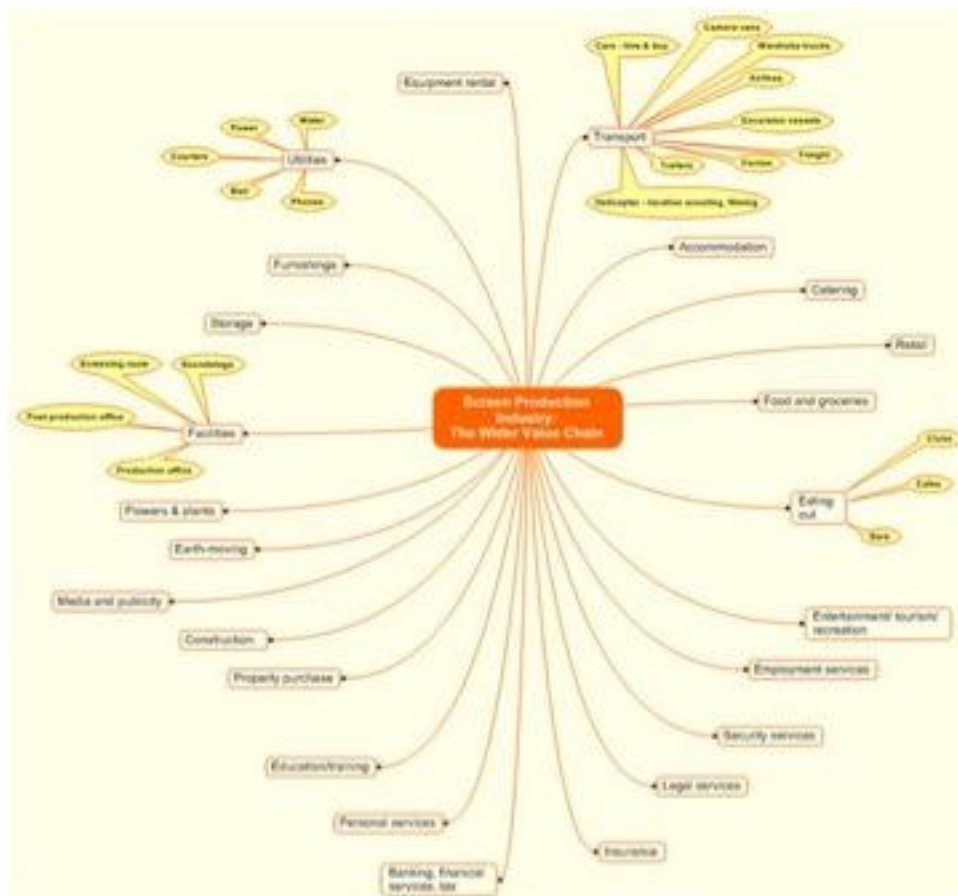


Figure 7: Screen production industry value chain

Source: Margaret Farrell Consulting, 2009

The investment in the film studio site, initially by Waitakere Properties Limited and later through the joint venture, has helped consolidate the film industry in Waitakere. Statistics

New Zealand 2008 figures show that some 170 business with some 110 Full-Time Equivalents were employed in Motion Picture and Video (Margaret Farrell Consulting, 2009). Further economic analysis of the film industry suggests a multiplier effect (in the motion picture, radio and TV services sector) to be approximately 2.79. This means that 1.79 jobs are created for every additional employee in this sector (*ibid*). This reflects the significant supporting relationships this sector has with others (including hospitality, communications and tourism for example).

From its relatively small origins, Waitakere has emerged as a significant film location in the Auckland region and indeed New Zealand. Henderson Valley Studios and the other screen production industries based in the city clearly show the development of a broad film cluster in Waitakere.

References:

Margaret Farrell Consulting, Prospects for the Creative Industries in Waitakere, prepared for Waitakere City Council, July 2009.

Wayne Thompsen, "Henderson 'Hollywood of South Pacific', New Zealand Herald, 20th June 2006.

Paul Voigt, "New High-Grid Soundstage for Auckland", see <http://www.investmentnz.govt.nz/section/14237/15927.aspx>