

Along the continuum, museums and possibilities

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land. That is the Australian traditional opening of all formal occasions and one that has come to symbolise the sensitivity of the Australian museum community to their work. For in some sense, the people of a nation are all the owners of the land, and we must acknowledge them if we intend to build trust between ‘them’ and ‘us’.

All museums (except virtual museums) have features in common. Each has a public location which is open some of the time, and all present some of their public offerings in exhibition form. The space in which the exhibition is housed is one of the spaces in any society where strangers can safely come.

There are city planners and sociologists who believe that in order to maintain civility, people need three kinds of spaces in their lives. Spaces for our family and friends (our most intimate relationships), places where we work, and places where it is safe to interact with strangers. The museum place is such a location. Others include railway stations, airports, churches, shops, libraries and athletic stadiums.

These spaces have an important meaning beyond the material they house. The places themselves and their availability to strangers reassure the public that there is civility and safety to be found in populated centres. Whenever any of these places is considered unsafe for any reason, they are abandoned, sometimes permanently, and society becomes more balkanised.

It seems easy, on the surface, to enter a museum, without revealing too much personal information. Actually, visitors reveal quite a lot. They demonstrate that they can

afford the cost by paying. They must have leisure time, and must dress and behave superficially ‘normal’ in order to both attend and remain in the building. Thus, there is a threshold that potential visitors must navigate in order to use a museum. When the threshold is lowered, by reduced or free admission, for example, the museum will be more heavily used than formerly. In today’s world, it is the attendance figures that, rightly or wrongly, demonstrate the success of a museum.

Research data presented at the symposium has responses from both staff and visitors. I would suggest that we must consider the data collected from the real or potential users more important than the responses from the staff. In addition, parenthetically, we must urge staff to study the visitor’s response to learn where the disparity is. Staff must begin to see that visitor satisfaction is a primary responsibility of all.

Now it used to be that staff were unconcerned if visitors came or had what they considered a valuable time doing so. The funding allocation remained the same regardless of who came and the jobs were secured either by civil service or by tenure. That is no longer the case in the Anglophone world, (though it remains the case in some others parts of the world). Visitor numbers and audience satisfaction not only matter but also determine the economic health of the institution. The staff, regardless of their preference, must pay attention to the users if they wish to remain employed. Therefore, this study, which looks at motivation and wishes of the audiences and contrasts it with motivation and wishes of the staff, is useful for all of us.

The research material collected is quite large and from varied sources. I suspect it will be quite useful for a number of things, though probably not for the purposes it was

intended. This may be because the terms used appear to be vague enough to allow many respondents to create an answer based on a fantasized notion of a museum.

It is not surprising that subjects, when asked about ‘museums’, will readily think of one stereotyped kind of museum, despite the fact that there are many different kinds. Except when interviewed while in specific museums, many respondents do not think of the zoo, the contemporary art gallery, the botanic garden, aquarium, children’s museum, science centre or the historic house as museums, even if they have visited in the recent past. When asked about museums, they think about vast, august, object-based collection-holding, curatorially-controlled musty unchanging ‘dead circuses’ of the movies and their childhood, and answer accordingly.

Their answers reveal a certain nostalgia and an appreciation for the reliability and trustworthiness of the old museums.

Now there are plenty of examples of goliaths that have changed over the recent past, the National Museum of Australia and Te Papa are two that come to mind. They have changed at great cost to the staff and in doing so, each have cost the directors their jobs. There are plenty of cautionary tales to suggest to staff that change is not only difficult but also dangerous.

Nevertheless, the dead circus is hard to find. There is no museum that can afford to remain as unresponsive as they were thirty-five years ago when I entered the profession. There are many museums that have experimented with new ideas, tried new ways of behaving, created new paradigms that have become models for all. In addition, these challenging museums have influenced other museums, beyond their size or prestige, and have introduced changes that now seem ordinary and therefore copied by

the more timid. Witness the fact that many art museums now have study carrels, access to more information, hands-on galleries, and varying label protocols, whereas thirty-five years ago they had none these facilities.

There have been many examples of risk and innovation. My favorites include the Exploratorium originated by Frank Oppenheim, ‘Harlem on My Mind’ created by Tom Hoving for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, ‘Mining the Museum’ created by Fred Wilson at the Maryland Historical Society, ‘Endings’ an exhibit on death for young children, developed by Janet Kamien at the Boston Children’s Museum, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum directed by Jeshajahu Weinberg, ‘Mathamatica’ created by Charles Eames, ‘Rats’, the premier exhibition of the Anacostia Museum, the Primitivism Show at the Museum of Modern Art, the New Museum (both in New York City), and now the reinstallation of the Natural History Museum in Paris.

That said, museums and their staffs, remain mostly timid. When confronted with public debate, we find that the most threatened have retreated. Fiona Cameron is right to point out that those who feel most public, and whose funding is most controlled by politicians, are most vulnerable to the pressure put upon them by the funders. That does not surprise me. However when these same institutions are led by courageous people, they create programs, policy, and exhibitions that have led the world to change. Witness your own Des Griffin and others and the example they brought to the world in sharing authority with indigenous people. Witness the creation of the Japanese Internment exhibition at NMAH as the bicentennial exhibition of 200 years of the American Constitution when Roger Kennedy was director, and witness the inclusion of all the victim groups (including gypsies, and homosexuals) at the United States Holocaust

Memorial Museum, which changed the definition of the holocaust. These are only a few examples of moral courage shown by certain leadership in certain museums at certain time. Dawn Casey, now leaving the National Museum of Australia is such an example. All is not lost. Do not despair.

What we know: what the public wants

So, what does the public want? In reading Lynda Kelly's paper, you can find evidence that the public wants the museum to be:

- Transparent: The public understands that objectivity is an old concept. If there is bias, they wish the museum to reveal the bias overtly, and not manipulate them. They understand all too cynically about 'spin' and do not want museums to use it.
- Trustworthy: The public does not want museums to take away their sense of safety by entering into a partisan debate on any one side. That is not to say that the public wish blandness, superficiality, or lack of facts, they most certainly do not.
- Creditable: They wish information to be accurate, verifiable, and researched. They want reassurance that research and review of the content has been serious and thorough. That does not mean boring or unvaried in presentation.
- Reliable over time: Each exhibition should have a standard of excellence, as should the whole museum. Staff often confuse excellence with formality. Lively can be excellent as well.
- Important: Subjects should be treated as important and not trivialised. The

visitor goes to museums for all kinds of information, but want the trip to be worthwhile.

- Judicious: The public want the museum to pick topics or interpretations that work best in a museum setting. Not every good topic makes a good exhibition.
- Tangible: For the visitor, three-dimensionality is unassailable. It is not surprising, when thinking of objects as evidence, that presentation might be a contested by opposing parties.
- Engaging, educational and relevant.
- Balanced, neutral, Impartial and even-handed: Visitors wish all sides to express themselves. This suggests that the museum must respect all sides and impart that notion. It also means that all points of view treated by the museum are seen to be represented by people of good will. This is especially difficult in those topics for which there is much emotion. This is often not done and seems undoable in many topics. Where is the sympathetic (or at least understandable) Nazi viewpoint in the Holocaust Museum?
- Contemplative and encouraging of discovery: We have often forgotten that learning in museums is individualised and based on previous experience, unknown to us. As we create exhibitions, we must remember that not all learning needs to be factual, dry, or verbalised. Exhibitions can have plenty of experiential learning.
- Sharing of authority: Users want to debate the subject with each other and leave some evidence of that debate behind. They wish us to recognise that the exhibition creators are not the only authority.

- Welcoming: Not patronising.
- Not gratuitously confrontational: They ask that museum do not intentionally confront for its own sake.
- Broadening: Museums should be catholic in their offerings to allow people to grow and expand, without forcing them to do so.
- Emotive: The public is becoming more comfortable with the expression of emotion but they wish to have it be their own not that of the creators of the exhibition.
- A full-service accessible resource: Interestingly, visitors trust us. They wish us to make our information accessible for their own use. The museum as library and archive remains important to our users.

What is most important is the emphasis the public has put on their own learning. The visitor wants the museum to take its responsibility seriously. For the visitor, museums are places for evidence, for exhibitions that present as much information as possible in interesting and engaging ways. The audience wishes that the dialogue that ensues be between the visitor and him or herself. I do not think we have understood how entirely personal is the integration of the information wanted and needed by the viewers.

Visitors want challenge, not polemic, want facts and opinion, but they will make up their own minds, thank you. This research will have been important if that point becomes widely understood by the whole industry.

The other point that has struck me from these research findings is the importance that visitors give to the physically of evidence. We have always discussed collections as

the ‘real thing’ but it seems clear to me that it is not the authenticity of objects alone that matters. What matters is the fact that the visitor is seeing it in person and learning in non-verbal but authentic ways. No other widely used institution of learning utilises three-dimensional and environmental evidence. We present a learning environment different from all others. Our closest cognates are the retail enterprises that display their merchandise. While we have concentrated on the particularity of our collections, we have not focused enough on the ways in which learning takes place in the presence of tangible material, and we should.

Good news and bad news exhibitions

Now let me take issue with the notion of Cameron’s paper. Not all creditable news is bad news. Good news, even celebratory news, is news too. In every large story, there is to be found heroic people, good outcomes, advances in science, and recognition of the underdog, in addition to bad news. Some victories happened. In my opinion, there has been too much conflation between bad news and the truth. For good and reasoned people on every issue, there has been justifiable and emotional debate, there has been compromise and many unanticipated consequences. We, museum staff, have been terrible in presenting complex issues in ways that the public find helpful and understandable, because it is difficult to make sense of complexity.

People vote with their feet. Bad news exhibitions fail if they are polemic. Most visitors will not organise to take a day out in order to feel bad. However, we have not researched how many people will want to take a day off to see mindless superficial tales of heroism. Exhibitions succeed, I would submit, if the museum creators allow the

individual to decide their own position within an internal dialogue when confronted with thoughtful facts of the dilemma at hand.

Cameron is correct in asserting that any government in power often works very hard to keep a problematic issue below the radar screen, especially if they are implicated in the injustice. Often, time needs to pass and the actual players in the drama need to be dead or made impotent. To be fair, the narrative longed for by the Howard government at the National Museum of Australia is also history. The stories they are pushing happened, as did the stories they dislike. It is a matter of balance. As a lifelong ‘knee-jerk’ liberal, I have become persuaded that the fight over our history made visible in the national museums, is a fight worth having but only if we, the staff in the museum, begin to understand that the opposition has some validity on their side. If we wish a national museum to remain inclusive, we must be willing to include our thoughtful antagonists as well as our formerly marginalised friends.

Acceptable topics are determined, I would submit, by national tolerance. Moreover, like it or not, tolerance is often determined by the relationship between the institution and its funders. If the major funders happen to be the government, then to remain acceptable the choice of exhibition cannot fly in the face of the policy of the government. Yet, I am grateful to those kamikaze directors, savvy of political maneuvering, who have successfully presented interesting and arresting material, by being willing to lose their jobs on the one hand and compromise intelligently on the other.

National museums generally take the longest to come to grips with issues below the radar screen and contemporary art museum and ethnically-specific or specialised

content-focused galleries take on the issues first. All other museums place their exhibitions somewhere in between these two poles. So, while generally not talked about, the choice of exhibition topics is intensely political and is often based on the policy of the government in power, the political leanings of the funders, the bravery of the director, and his or her willingness to lose their job.

Taking on contested subject matter might take courage, but the topic itself does not guarantee an indelible experience. Good exhibitions need to be created by those with subtle artistic talent. While exhibitions are blunt instruments, it is quite easy to make boring displays that satisfy the initiated and very difficult to create exhibitions that help the viewer toward new insights.

What is the purpose of bad news exhibitions? Often the unexpressed motivation is to preach to the uninitiated, to change private and public policy, and to make the audience feel guilty.

It is often the case that the creators do not want the visitors to think for themselves and come to their own conclusions, for that risks the possibility that visitors will come to the wrong conclusion. These bad news exhibitions are generally preachy, filled with difficult pictures, and heated text. Visitors become overwhelmed, depressed, angry, and/or turned-off. I submit that the basic good intentions of the creators are thwarted by the visitors, who are not prepared to take on so much personal guilt. The most comfortable visitor, then, is the initiated ‘right thinker’, who does not advance the agenda of change because they are already accounted for. Therefore, because the exhibition does not help the uninitiated understand, it fails to attract them. The role of the visitor in making up their own mind needs to be stressed repeatedly, when contemplating making

exhibitions about contested subjects.

The solution for failed bad news exhibitions should not be transforming bad news to good news exhibitions, though that is a technique that many people have tried. This is especially true when it is the first time for a cultural community to present itself. The community wishes to display the achievement and success of its members and the unwarranted abuse heaped on it by outsiders, but rarely does the community wish to discuss or display its own shortcomings and problems the first time around.

I would submit that for moral challenges, allowing the visitor to become introspective works best, in that it allows the uninitiated visitor to reflect on the matters at hand. In addition, personal stories of human challenges and human courage, not soft-soaped and simplified, seem to work too. Life, in reality, is complicated and acts of courage are never simple or simply foolhardy. Courage is often acted upon in a context where the alternative seems worse.

Exhibitions can be cumulative introspective experiences, with incremental learning, reinforcing the information continually over the entire length of the visit. It may be the ingredient of time (the length of the visit) that is one of the most important strategies needed to create understanding. Exhibition developers and designers have not reflected on ‘time’ as a design ingredient enough. Stay length in an exhibition and its relationship to learning bears further study.

Metaphor, the transformation of the information into situations not presented, and the vow to change ones life in small manageable ways, are the greatest achievement of the bad news exhibitions. The Holocaust can stand for contemporary inhumanity; likewise, one example of racism can be transformed in the visitor’s mind to racism to

others. Museum thinkers need to further explore the transformation in our exhibitions that go from history to metaphor.

It turns out that the research presented at the symposium predicts that preaching to the visitor and demanding that they feel what you tell them to feel, are among the worst elements of failed bad news exhibitions.

How can the museum sector use this research, even if it is a bit muddy: I would summarise by reiterating three points:

- 1) Staff needs to be more aligned with visitor aspirations. They need to study the audience wants and determine new ways to give it to them. What our audience wants is not bad, superficial, or to be thwarted. We, the staff, do not own the museums or their collections. We are public servants in the service of civic good.
- 2) We need to focus on the internal personal processing that our visitor does as their preferred learning style. Fairness demands that we present our audiences with the broadest range of conflicting facts and opinion within the exhibition, or alternatively, having taken a single viewpoint, reveal ourselves (the authors) as to name, bias, class, education an opinion, so that the visitor can make up their own mind.
- 3) We need to honour that museums remain not contested spaces but safe spaces for unsafe ideas. I said it in 1996 and the evidence presented here show that today's audiences wish the museum to remain one of these rare and valuable civic spaces to interact with strangers.