

CASE STUDY: THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

KEYNOTE ADDRESS FROM
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DAWN CASEY

Today's case study is provided by the new National Museum of Australia, a museum which is not only a showcase for Australian cultural and environmental history, but also a research base and centre of excellence. About 450,000 visitors have passed through the exhibitions since March, but while they may spend hours exploring the subject matter of Tangled Destinies or Nation or Horizons, they only see the surface. There is very much more going on behind the scenes, including collection care, professional consultancies, future planning and research, which the general public never see. And yet it is research in particular which underpins the content and the quality of the visitor experience as well as the broad range of the Museum's work.

Why do we have museums? The traditional definition describes a permanent institution in the service of society which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits material evidence of people and their environment.¹ However a more realistic question might be: why do we have a National Museum of Australia — most especially now, in an era of restricted Commonwealth expenditure on cultural institutions of all kinds?

The answers are quite interesting. The obvious one, of course, is to commemorate the Centenary of Federation with an appropriate and lasting expression of national history and identity. But in addition to the chance to exploit that very fortunate anniversary, there was the realisation that funding of national cultural institutions is a sound investment.

The outcome is not just job creation and tourist income — though they do provide a significant and measurable economic return on investment — but also a profound contribution to the evolving discussion of national history and identity, the place of Indigenous peoples in a pluralistic settler society and the aspirations of present day Australians for the future.

National museums are always, in part, a nation building exercise and national governments are mindful of their potential impact on public discourse. Today I also hope to show you that the government's investment in the National Museum of Australia has given us a number of other assets, many of them planned in advance but some arising incidentally from the development process, which we intend to exploit for our own and the national good.

But let me return to the Museum's official role as anticipated by the National Museum of Australia Act 1980.

The functions of the Museum are:

- * To develop and maintain a national collection of historical material;
- * To exhibit historical material from the national historical collection;
- * To exhibit material in written form or in any other form relating to Australia or to a foreign country;
- * To conduct, arrange for or assist in research into matters pertaining to Australian history; and
- * To disseminate information relating to Australian history and information relating to the Museum and its functions.



Dawn Casey walks through the Main Hall of the National Museum of Australia during its construction. Photo: Fairfax.

The Museum shall use every endeavour to make the most advantageous use of the national collection in the national interest.²

So — we must collect, care for and display heritage material, create exhibitions, research Australian history and disseminate the results. While based in Canberra, we must also remain mindful of our national obligations. And in the real world of 2001, we must do all of the above with a strictly finite set of resources: human, financial and technological.

Fortunately the Museum's brief but intense development phase left us in March 2001 with a number of valuable assets.

First and foremost is the building itself, which I suspect has added its own chapter of daring innovation to the history of Australian architecture. Our choice of the Alliancing method for its construction was also a world first for a building project of this size. I believe that Alliancing has now so successfully demonstrated the value of an integrated team in achieving cost, time and quality targets and a 'no dispute' culture, that it is likely to become a trend in Australia's construction and other industries.

Other assets or resources which we now enjoy and intend to use as we plan our future development are as follows: people, technology, and partnerships. Let me tell you something of our aspirations in the fields of research, innovation and outreach and how we intend to put those resources to good use in the future.

One of the very great pleasures of the Museum development process was the chance to work with a number of wonderful people, expert advisers prominent in many academic fields — and I am pleased to recognise some of them in the audience today. Their contribution to our great re-telling of the national story not only ensured that the Museum's approach was detailed, balanced, richly diverse and based on sound scholarship, but also left us with a group of good friends and respected colleagues whose advice we certainly hope to use in the future.

The diversity of specialist contributions was far greater than any of us expected at the start and encompassed a number from the sciences as well as the humanities. My head of Research and Development, Dr Mike Smith, has observed that to develop just one exhibition, *Tangled Destinies*, we commissioned at various stages the work of an economic historian, an archaeologist, a lexical cartographer, a bio-geographer, a geo-morphologist and cultural geographer, as well as specialists in the history of natural history, the history of science, and the history of ethnography. Truly an outstanding example of cross-cultural research.

Among the Museum's human resources I therefore include the many external advisers who helped create the Museum's content and who in many cases have a continuing relationship with us, and also of course the Museum's staff. It takes an enormous range of skills to run a museum, and I am pleased to say that we have acquired a correspondingly diverse and talented staff with expertise in everything from visitor service and children's programs to multimedia technology and commerce.

I mentioned technological resources as another major asset which we intend to build on in the future. Based on the infrastructure we already have and that which we intend to acquire, in this field the sky is definitely the limit.

The National Museum's recent Strategic Review of Communications Technologies and Information Management recognises that new information and communication technologies offer the Museum important opportunities as an educator, a research institution and a leisure venue for the general public. The use of new communications media on-site, and the off-site distribution of museum content through broadcasting, narrowcasting and the Internet, can strengthen our role not just as a repository of artefacts but as a source of knowledge and information for many audiences, including those who may never visit Acton Peninsula at all.



Image of the programmable Optiwave Screen in 'kSpace' at the National Museum of Australia. Photo: George Serras © National Museum of Australia 2001

Our challenge in the next years will therefore be to use information communication technologies effectively to create and maintain a position in the very competitive information market. We will use these technologies to extend our professional practice across the spectrum: research of all kinds, collections acquisition and management; the interpretation of objects and historic events for different audiences, the presentation of knowledge in interesting and user-friendly ways, and the capacity to support and illustrate debates about contemporary issues.

We are already well placed to meet these challenges. If you have seen the rest of the museum you will know that we have a rotating audio-visual theatre called 'Circa', a three-dimensional animation sequence downstairs in 'kSpace', a programmable Optiwave screen

in the Main Hall, and a number of interactive multimedia exhibits and databases throughout the public spaces. When it is not being used for conferences, this Visions Theatre also runs a digital video program based on historic film footage. The Museum's web site provides another medium through which virtual visitors can explore our collections, exhibitions and multimedia resources and more is being added as the web site evolves and expands.

In the next few years we intend to maintain a leading position in information and communication technology by continuing to invest in technology infrastructure on Acton Peninsula and dramatically increasing our outreach potential. These are some of the outcomes we hope to see:

- * Targeted technology — that is, services intended specifically for some of our priority audiences. These would include school students up to Year 12, who frequently have good classroom access to information technologies and are keen to exploit any interesting sources which can deliver curriculum needs. Then there are adult Internet users who like to browse for information or entertainment options and on-line shopping, and subject specialists who want access to our collections or databases.
- * Broadcasting — we aim to carry out web-casting immediately, and after further development explore other broadcast media to create innovative, specialist programming, perhaps in co-production with suitable partners.
- * Collections management — we intend to acquire an industry standard digital collections management system which can combine acquisition, treatment, storage and exhibition records, images and intellectual property information for all items in the National Historical Collection.
- * Digitisation — the continuing large scale creation of digital copies of collection items or exhibition support material, particularly those in which the museum has intellectual property.

- * Central media repository — an integrated central repository to include all digital images, audio and video sequences which will have many uses, including off-site delivery of Museum programs.
- * e-Business — the capacity to deliver online retail facilities in order to enjoy the benefits of efficiency, public profile and income generation.
- * Collection support strategies — the acquisition of digital images, audio and video to support or complement the interpretation and historical significance of key collection items. The historic video footage associated with the ABC broadcast van is an obvious example.

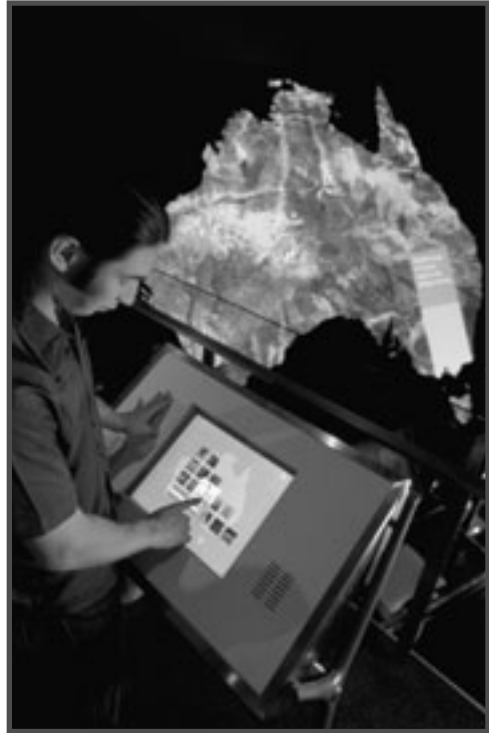
In addition to acquiring and managing its own technology applications, the Museum has already been involved in a number of creative business partnerships whose work can be seen throughout the exhibition areas.

The amazing welcome space leading into the Gallery of First Australians in which life-size dancers appear on the walls, and the program reacts to the footprints of visitors passing through the space, was created in collaboration with the CSIRO and of course the performers, Bangarra Dance Theatre.

'kSpace', an installation which encourages young people to design a city and transport system of the future in which their own faces appear, was devised in collaboration with ANU computer specialists.

The electronic 'big map' of Australia on which visitors can call up a variety of interactive programs was developed in collaboration with CDP Media and Massive Interactive of Sydney.

We call these 'muscle media' — powerful media — and their impact on visitors can be seen on any day of the week. They are immensely attractive, and crowds usually gather to see the programs run through their paces or to take their turn in 'driving' the interactive controls. And of course they have also become showpieces for our business partners, who are now able to point to them as



The 'big map' at the National Museum of Australia. Photo: George Serras © National Museum of Australia 2001

examples of what is possible in a museum context when you merge the power of technology with the power of the human imagination.

Another partnership about to be exploited for a variety of useful outcomes is a three-way relationship between the Museum, the Murray-Darling Basin Commission and Charles Sturt University.

Picture this: an innovative collaboration between a major natural resource management organisation, the Museum, and the Centre for Rural Social Research at Charles Sturt University, in which each of the partners maintains parallel goals, while involving rural communities in a number of associated programs and voluntary initiatives.

Among many other outcomes, this project intends to consider a number of essential questions:

- * How can community participation in natural and cultural resource initiatives be activated and maintained?
- * How can such participation be made meaningful to the participants themselves?
- * How can the diversity of the communities within the Murray-Darling Basin be recognised, valued and reflected in such participation?
- * How can participation be promoted amongst those sections of the community who have typically been excluded or alienated by conventional participation and communication processes?
- * How can the power imbalances and the limitations of articulation and social skills be overcome?

The National Museum and the Murray-Darling Basin Commission share an agenda for increasing public participation in their respective programs — natural resource management and the preservation and communication of Australian history. The research expertise of the Centre for Rural Social Research in social research, rural communities and participation will then be required to answer the key questions. Most importantly, this project recognises that the goal of activating communities and individuals to support natural resource management involves an engagement with local cultural heritage — it cannot be imposed from outside. That is where the notion of a partnership becomes so particularly appealing — the need for organisers to draw on expertise and experience across very different fields.

I find the potential of this project particularly exciting — and once again, I would like to point out that it is only possible now that a cultural institution with the very wide ranging interests of the National Museum exists to provide an essential link in such partnerships. Government investment in a museum has given rise to the potential for a variety of research and development projects of enduring value.

So — what now lies ahead for the Museum? What are our aspirations for the future?

In brief:

- *To continue to delight and inform our on-site visitors;
- *To build and exploit our influence as a major interpreter of Australian history;
- *To maximise the use of information technologies for the use of specialist off-site audiences;
- *To become an acknowledged lead player in the knowledge economy;
- *To better manage heritage collections; and
- *To continue developing our skills base both internally and through strategic alliances.

I have already mentioned our commitment to work with evolving new technologies, to develop the potential of assets such as our Broadcast Studio and our web site. The Museum development process included the installation and testing of a sophisticated technical infrastructure based on multimedia. That infrastructure now supports interactive multimedia programs throughout the Museum, but it is only a beginning.

Although we have developed highly successful schools programs here on Acton Peninsula, we now hope to reach out with our webcasts to all classrooms with Internet access, or children working at home with their parents. We want any Internet user to feel encouraged to explore our online resources and take away whatever they need in terms of information, research materials or perhaps just entertainment. Our ambition is to be known as a reliable and authoritative source for any enquirer, whether their need is images to accompany a school project or in-depth information contributing to a research paper or thesis.

We are also a member of the Consortium for Research and Information Outreach set up by the ANU. The Consortium involves the humanities, social science and environmental science sectors of the ANU and brings together in a formal relationship leading multimedia

researchers to enhance the use of digital communication technologies by cultural institutions. Our physical proximity to the ANU and its Centre for Cross-Cultural Research makes the proposed sharing of facilities, infrastructure and even staff particularly easy.

Our chief ambition for the future is to make the National Museum a familiar and valued part of Australia's cultural landscape. I believe that the Museum's influence will grow, in the sense that our innovative way of presenting history will be considered worthy of imitation. We have positioned ourselves a little differently from other museums and are already recognised for a popular and unusual approach to social and natural history, based on sound scholarship. This means challenges ahead as we try to stay competitive in a market already well supplied with leisure choices in general, and quality museums in particular. However we have started out with gratifyingly large visitor numbers and very

high visitor satisfaction levels, and I am confident that we can sustain this very positive trend.

As many of you know, it took successive Australian governments a very long time to proceed from the Pigott Report of 1975 to the establishing Act of 1980 and finally the built Museum of 2001. It will now be our duty as well as our pleasure to prove that such a major investment of public resources was well made, and will lead on to public benefits both foreseeable and not yet guessed at, well into the future.

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Endnotes

1 Paraphrased from the International Council of Museums definition (see <http://www.icom.org>)

2 Paraphrased from Section 6 (see http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/consol_act/nmoaa1980297/)