

FUTURE SHOTS

PROMINENT AUSTRALIANS SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS ON MUSEUMS OF THE FUTURE

BETTY CHURCHER, AO
FORMER DIRECTOR, ART GALLERY OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA. FORMER DIRECTOR,
NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA

“I’m not sure what the art museum of the future will become, but I do know that I hope it never ceases to be a place of private discovery and contemplation. I believe that the more transitory and electronic our world becomes, the greater will be our need for objects of lasting value. Palpable objects that are prepared to sit quietly on a wall or on a floor and speak to us with their own voice across time and space.”

ANDREW SAYERS,
DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY,
CHAIRMAN, ADVISORY BOARD FOR THE
HUMANITIES RESEARCH CENTRE

“The greatest challenge for museums in the medium to long term future is sustainability. Around the world, museums are undertaking larger and more complex building projects; virtually every major gallery and museum has recently seen major additions, or these are planned. Yet these buildings create their own demands. At the same time, running costs are dramatically increasing, yet money is not being spent on running costs at a rate commensurate with capital expansion. Museums are about collections and ideas — buildings are important, too, but it is essential that the right balance is maintained and the core values which sustain museums are not put under impossible pressures by over-investment in bricks and mortar.”

SIR ROBERT MAY
PRESIDENT, THE ROYAL SOCIETY
CHAIRMAN EMERITUS, NATURAL HISTORY
MUSEUM, LONDON

“Yesterday’s museums tended to be — marvellously but simply — treasurehouses or cabinets of curiosities. Whether art galleries, or museums of science or natural history, the interpretive material was usually minimal. Today’s museums (with a few exceptions) aim to educate, using the objects on display to tell a story about our past, or about how the natural world works. Unfortunately, these stories are too often presented as wisdom to be received, and sometimes even preached as sermons which force-fit today’s values onto the different realities of yesterday. I hope that tomorrow’s museums will go beyond the best of today, using the objects to provoke questions, with guidance that is open-ended rather than a closed answer. Increasingly, this will be helped by moving beyond the Gutenberg style — text on a panel — to add information and questions in the style of computer games, and in other imaginative ways, which will engage contemporary audiences of younger people.

I end on a paradoxical note, based on discussions and experience in the Natural History Museum in London. Despite what I have just said, I have great personal affection for the Victorian clutter of the cabinets of curiosities. So the real challenge for tomorrow’s museums may be to blend a demotic idiom suited to the realities of the TV/computer/internet age, with nooks and crannies which preserve some of the crowded displays that have so much appeal to a certain kind of scholarly mind. No easy trick.”

CAROL SCOTT, PRESIDENT OF MUSEUMS AUSTRALIA AND EVALUATIONS MANAGER, POWERHOUSE MUSEUM, SYDNEY

“Museums in the future will be facing significant challenges. Firstly, they will be examining the impacts of technology on interpretation and the place of the object. Will ‘bytes’ of information and networked paradigms become substitutes for linear narratives and stories? What will be the significance of the object in a world where less distinction is made between the simulated and the authentic? Secondly, the museum of the future has work ahead of it with regard to maintaining audiences. In a post modern world, the increasing pace of life is favouring fun and entertainment over leisure that requires intellectual commitment. And museums, accustomed to being patronised by the numerous and affluent generation of baby-boomers, will be encountering an emergent generation that is less numerous and less willing to accept the transcendent authority of the museum. Finally, the issue of the repatriation of cultural material to communities and individuals will be a compelling concern. All of this points to a re-negotiation of relationships with communities and stakeholders and a re-positioning of the place of the museum in society

MARGO NEALE, DIRECTOR, GALLERY OF FIRST AUSTRALIANS, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

“The museum is an eighteenth-century concept and this is the twenty-first century. This apparent dichotomy will have to be addressed by museums of the future. Do we still need museums? If so, why and what sort ?

Regardless of how futuristic, virtual and conceptual the museum of the future may look and feel, and how many bells and whistles it has, it would be a mistake to confuse these new modes of delivery with content and disregard the traditional visitors’ changing expectations and the basic human need for contemplation, reflection and enlightenment. Instead I see the tools of new technologies, not as ends

in themselves but tools to be exploited, to enhance and expand the museums’ pluralistic roles, the imaginative dimension and the multi-sensorial.

Museums will be compelled, by an increasingly sophisticated, insatiable and educated audience to expand their functions and deepen and broaden the knowledge base. Just as shops lining one street in linear progression have been replaced by shopping malls that offer a total, more immersive experience, from beauty and health to retail and entertainment, the museum of the future, I believe, will combine many of the functions of the traditional museum, art gallery and university with contemporary needs. That is, alongside a sense of worship by a congregation of people in cathedral-like spaces and the leisure of the park or garden as before, there will also be a sense of the cultural keeping place of ancient and living traditions, the engagement of penny arcades, theme parks and festivals. A kind of one-stop shop. I see the beginnings of all this at the NMA where joint scholarly projects with universities are underway and where museum spaces are being used for critical contemporary debates broadcast to the nation alongside ‘yowie’ picnics.

Accountability on all fronts, in particular content and delivery, will be high. And only those who can address the popular with the scholarly, the object with the experience, the fun and fantasy with the profound, the sacred with the secular and a sense of the spiritual, will survive in the highly competitive market ahead. The idea of ‘either - or’ and that things have to one way or the other is outmoded and bound for the dustbins of history.

From an Indigenous perspective and a minority position, I hope the museums of the future increasingly become sites of negotiation. Places where multiple histories are told by diverse voices and stories have no end. A place where contradictions are allowed to exist, hard questions are posed without qualification, answers are debated and conclusions are forever rubbery. And most of all where these practices are considered normal and

FUTURE SHOTS (CONT'D)

expected and not resisted by a reactionary mainstream as sacrilege. A time when one does not even have to talk about these ideas in the same sentence as the word 'future'.

'Encounters' and 'people' will hopefully remain the keystone of all future museums, value-added over time. The museum must always be a place of encounters. Encounters between cultures, between disciplines and between technologies. Encounters with and between objects. Encounters between people from all walks of life and as the new National Museum's logo states, encounters between yesterday and tomorrow."

GEORGE MACDONALD
CEO MELBOURNE MUSEUM
(AN EXTRACT OF AN INTERVIEW WITH
DR AMARESWAR GALLA)

"I think in many ways we are dealing with a new form of culture that has not been given full recognition, which I call the 'distributed metropolis'. It is just not the global village, that village model does not fit. We are in a metropolitan society that has a manifestation around the globe and that's the part of society that is growing most rapidly. These cities are made up of elements from every part of the globe, every population is represented. I think of Toronto and Melbourne as being the same

city only positioned in different parts of the globe but having the same overall population profile. Toronto has more Italians, Melbourne has more Greeks but they all have the whole world represented in their population and therefore their institutions tend to be going in the same direction.

People are always asking why museums are being built at the rate they are and why is the public investing hundreds of millions and sometimes billions of dollars in these new museums. In that sense I think they represent culturally neutral space in an environment where the renegotiation of identity is an ongoing process. We look at social models such as the American 'melting pot' and all those processes are still at play. The whole requirement is for every individual to identify who they are in the world and to what group they belong and what is the positioning of that group in the social, economic world and political world.

So museums of social history or historical museums even natural history museums, come into play and in this they are there as a forum, as a market place of ideas. But as a place of renegotiation of individual and group identities they form an appropriate kind of place for that to happen."