AUSTRALIAN MUSEUMS ON SHOW FOR ICOM'98

Kimberley Webber

ICOM'98 in Melbourne this coming October occurs at an interesting time for Australian museums and members are encouraged not just to visit museums in Melbourne but also to venture further afield, particularly to regional centres around Melbourne such as Ballarat and Geelong and to other capitals, including Sydney and Canberra. This will be particularly important for those wanting to understand the ‘Australian museum’ since Melbourne’s two major museums – the Museum of Victoria and the National Gallery of Victoria – are closed, with the former being rebuilt on the site of the 1880 Melbourne International Exhibition and the latter undergoing major remodelling.

In all, there are some 500 museums in Australia. Each state and territory has a state art gallery and a state museum or museums that deal (individually or collectively) with ethnology, natural history, science, technology and social history. Each capital also has a botanic garden and zoological park. Museums and their professional staff belong to Museums Australia which holds an annual conference and produces the journal Museums Australia. Training for museum professionals is available in a range of courses, from post graduate museology diplomas and masters degrees at the University of Sydney, in Melbourne at the University of Victoria and at the University of Adelaide; to courses in applied history with a museology component at Deakin University in Geelong and the University of Technology, Sydney; gallery management at the University of Melbourne and Sydney College of Art; and material culture studies at the University of Townsville in Queensland and at Canberra University in the ACT (Australian Capital Territory).

The most significant recent development in museums in the region is, however, not in Australia at all, but in Wellington, the capital of New Zealand. Opened in February 1998 and with final costs of construction close to $NZ300 million (1500 million SEK), the Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa, is one of the largest museum projects ever undertaken in the region. More significant is its determination to be bi-cultural – and bi-lingual – giving equal weight to Euro-
pean and Maori history and culture. Although it is too early yet for considered criticism of the new museum to emerge, the resultant exhibitions, public programmes and publications will be followed with great interest in Australia which has yet to open a national museum of its own culture and history and where a bi-cultural approach is rarely seen.

Indeed, discussions on the best approach to a national museum – its site, collections and exhibitions – have been taking place for at least seventy years and only in the last twelve months have they approached any degree of certainty. A national museum was first proposed in 1927, in the lead up to the opening of Australia’s national capital, Canberra. The then Minister for Home Affairs and Territories observed:

Suggestions have been made from time to time that a National Museum should be established at Canberra to serve as a repository not only for articles of ethnographic interest, but also for articles of historical interest and articles Australian in character and of considerable intrinsic value, such as collections of precious stones.¹

However it was not until the commissioning of the Piggott Report on Australian Museums in 1975 that the idea was taken up with any degree of seriousness:

Virtually every nation has its national museum but here the argument for a national museum is particularly powerful. For the nation covers a whole continent ... A new national museum will illuminate new fields of knowledge and also link traditional fields in revealing ways. Australia’s natural history and human history is unusual, and today the knowledge of many facets of that history is unfolding in exciting ways. A new national museum will naturally chart a course quite different to that followed by other national museums in Europe or the Americas or by those earlier Australian museums which were founded during a different educational and scientific climate ...²

In the twenty years since, the proposed National Museum of Australia has experienced considerable waxing and waning of government support. Sites have been chosen and abandoned, themes established and later changed, directors have come and gone. However, with the most recent change of federal government (to a conservative coalition between the Liberal and National Parties) has come a new enthusiasm for the museum. A site has been chosen where the Museum will be developed together with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Cultural Centre. $A133 million (665 million SEK) has been set aside from the National Federation Fund and an international competition held for a ‘non monumental and distinctively Australian’ design, leading to the appointment of Ashton Raggatt McDougall and Robert Peck von Hartel Trethowan as architects. Late last year the new director, Dr W. Jonas, announced that this will be an integrated museum telling the story of Australia through the themes of Indigenous cultures and history, the social history of the last 200 years and people’s relationship with the environment. How this is to be achieved is yet to be explained. However, visitors to Canberra can gain some idea of the Museum’s approach through its temporary exhibition programme at Old Parliament House.
In contrast, the Australian National Gallery (also in Canberra) has had a much less controversial development and has just opened an extension to house the Asian collections. Its newly appointed director, Dr Brian Kennedy (formerly of the National Gallery of Ireland), is ensuring that the Gallery takes a leading role in the public, and professional, debate about the role of museums in society. As he said in his first speech at the Gallery:

The role of the gallery today is taking on the aspect of a cultural battleground. In many parts of the world, the iron curtain of ideology is being replaced by a cultural curtain which demands equal attention be given to the Spice Girls and Mother Teresa, Kuwait and Rwanda, Serrano and Rembrandt.

Kennedy has called a (temporary) halt to acquisitions whilst the collection policy is reviewed, has restructured the curatorial area, instituted a 'spill' of curatorial positions and encouraged wide ranging debate on the museum. In October, his impact should be evident in the re-hanging of the permanent collection and temporary exhibitions such as Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Photography and The Ballet Russes.

In Melbourne, although the new Museum of Victoria (renamed the Museum of Melbourne) is still two years away from opening, the construction site will provide some idea of the scale of this $A700 million (3.5 billion SEK) project. Designated by its director as ‘A museum for the 21st century’ and designed by the Australian architects Denton, Corker, Marshall, the new museum will include an Aboriginal Centre, Children’s Museum and Gallery of Life. Meanwhile, delegates will be able to inspect two of the Museum’s other sites, Scienceworks in Spotswoode, formerly a sewage pumping station and now a highly interactive centre for science and technology and the Immigration Museum and Hellenic Archaeological Museum which opens in the Old Customs House in October.

Excellent roads and comparatively short distances make regional Victoria very accessible from Melbourne. Ballarat is only an hour and a half’s drive from the city centre and, in the absence of the National Gallery of Victoria, provides an opportunity to see the work of nineteenth century Australian painters such as Eugene von Guerard in its very fine Art Gallery. The Gallery also displays the Eureka Flag, which was flown at the only major rebellion against British rule on the Ballarat goldfields in 1854 and today stands as the symbol of the republican movement. In addition, Ballarat has the most successful outdoor museum in Australia (inspired by Skansen) at Sovereign Hill. Attracting half a million visitors a year this commemorates, and celebrates, the discovery of gold in Ballarat in the 1850s and provides an insight into living and working conditions, mining techniques and use of steam technology. The adjacent Gold Museum has exhibitions on the social and cultural history of the region. A trip to Ballarat also provides an opportunity to explore some of the gold field towns in its environs. Castlemaine, Chewton, Maldon and the spa town of Daylesford are all remarkably intact with excellent examples of nineteenth century domestic and commercial architecture.

The largest city in Australia – and the
place with one of the highest levels per capita of museums in the world – is Sydney, an hour by plane from Melbourne. The Powerhouse Museum (formerly the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences) was founded after the resounding success of the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition. Reworked in the 1980s and re-housed in a former electricity generating works, the Powerhouse has 22 permanent exhibitions on science, technology, social history and decorative arts displayed in galleries totalling 20,000 square feet. In 1996 it had 652,267 visitors (about one seventh of the population of Sydney) with a further 113,682 visiting the museum's temporary exhibitions at venues around the country. A major temporary exhibition which should be open in October is Beyond Architecture: Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin in America, Australia and India. For the first time material will be brought together from museums and archives in Australia and the United States concerning the work of the architects who not only laid the planning framework for the national capital, Canberra, but also had a grand vision for a community to live in harmony with nature in the (partially realised) Sydney suburb of Castlecrag.

The other major museum in Sydney – and the oldest museum in Australia – is the Australian Museum which has an active program of exhibitions on the natural environment, human societies and human interaction with the environment. The Museum has been a leading proponent of working co-operatively with Indigenous people on the management of their material culture, recognising their rights to that material culture and returning objects when requested to do so. The Museum's permanent exhibition on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and society provides a fine example of the benefits of museums working directly with Indigenous peoples.

Historic houses and sites in New South Wales come under the management of the Historic Houses Trust. The Museum of Sydney, on the site of the first government house erected in 1788, has a permanent display on the archaeology of the site together with a range of temporary exhibitions on Sydney, architecture, design and the experience of colonialism. Its underlying philosophy that history should be experienced – and thus emphasis on visual imagery, contemporary quotes and rich layering of objects rather than explanatory text – has been controversial and first-time visitors to Sydney may find the name something of a misrepresentation. However, its stark design and fine detailing provide an opportunity to see the work of the architects of the future Museum of Melbourne. The Hyde Park Barracks Museum, in a former convict barrack built by Governor Macquarie in 1815, provides better insight into the colonial history of New South Wales and to the experiences of the men and women who lived there, first as convicts and later as immigrants, the destitute and the insane.

Other museums worth visiting in Sydney are the National Maritime Museum which focuses on Australia's maritime heritage, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Sydney Jewish Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art. The latter pursues an active program of making available the latest ideas in visual culture and has what is unarguably the
best cafe in an Australian museum.

Eighteen million people visited Australia’s museums last year, the equivalent of the total population. Collectively, museums are more popular than ever, and more people visit a museum than participate in organised sporting events. Yet within the museum community, competition is intense and only increasing as attendance at individual museums decline. Seventeen new museums and art galleries opened in Australia in the 1960s, 59 in the 1970s and 108 in the 1980s. The 1990s have seen a number close including (in Sydney) the Museum of Childhood, the Earth Exchange (a mining museum) and the Sydney Mint Museum (a museum of Australian decorative arts). The opening of the Museum of Melbourne in the year 2000 will set new standards – not least in the amount of money spent – and much will depend on its ability to refigure the museum for a 21st century audience. All museums have to face the challenge of demonstrable relevance to the community, of harnessing new means of providing...
access to the collections through the internet and other information technologies and of serving new audiences in new ways whilst continuing to expand traditional ones. ICOM’s meeting in Melbourne in October 1998 will provide an opportunity for delegates to assess the likelihood of these challenges being met.

NOTES


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