

‘Better well done than well said’

Applying Benjamin Franklin’s dictum to the preservation and interpretation of cultural heritage within the regions

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Preserving the cultural heritage of Australia outside the capital cities has traditionally been the sole domain of community-based organisations such as the National Trust of Australia on a national basis and historical societies on a local level.

The emergence of the heritage movement during the 1960s and 1970s is well documented, with the Whitlam Government’s Piggott Inquiry into Museums and the Hope Inquiry into National Estate¹. These inquiries captured the spirit of the times and crystallised the emergence of a “new” concept – the heritage of Australia.

Over the last two decades, the Australian community has come to broadly accept the importance of preserving, protecting and valuing the physical and spiritual evidence of our past. This change in attitude is manifested in government endeavours such as legislation, funding programs and educational projects. Similarly, within the context of the building and real estate industry, a premium is increasingly being paid for the preservation and rehabilitation of historic structures.

Less progress, it is argued, has been made in the preservation of cultural heritage, both in an urban and regional context. Compared with many other countries, Australia lacks a decentralised network of well-funded and well-operated museums. Despite the obvious fact that a community without a museum is rather like a man without a memory, the majority of regional cities lack access to a scholarly, multi-dimensional and stimulating presentation of their past, present and future.

The focus of this paper is to discuss the development of a select number of successful regionally based museums and projects and to identify those strategies which have proved successful in mobilising both government and community support. In so doing, it is hoped to formulate a multi-purpose plan of attack for those individuals seeking to awaken that sleeping giant that exists within every community – its own past.

Planning Overview

In undertaking museum planning exercises, project proponents normally seek to achieve one or more of the following objectives:

- Enhanced community involvement
- Partnering with community organisations
- Maximising available resources
- Creation of excellent exhibits and public programs
- Alignment of internal structures and processes
- Improvement of facilities and access
- Expansion of educational services
- Collection development

¹ Report into the Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate 1974 (Justice Hope, Chair), AGPS, Canberra.
Report of the Committee into Museums 1975 (PH Piggott, Chair), AGPS, Canberra.

Invariably, museum managers believe that the solution to their problems is a 'built' solution. Building projects are easier to manage than a workforce, whether waged or not. Conversely, funds are often more readily available to construct an asset than to maintain one. In this sense, the prudent manager is more likely to be professionally successful through pursuing a construction scheme rather than carrying out routine management tasks.²

Having established this truism, what are the necessary development strategies required to generate the resources needed for successful museum construction projects? The experience of the author suggests the prudent manager should consider the following:

Technique 1 Knowing what you want & ensuring the policy setting is right

The development of new museums and the redevelopment of existing infrastructure are largely dependent on government funding, whether on a local, federal or commonwealth level. Surprisingly, many of the funding guidelines that project proponents face are confusing, obtuse, dispirited or contradictory. Moreover, the "vision" of project proponents often does not fit within any one particular funding program.

In recent years, the NSW Ministry for the Arts conducted an interesting initiative within their funding guidelines, they took the time and trouble to actually define what they saw as a key concept: "the regional museum." In their terms it meant a facility capable of serving a population of 50,000 and above, was sufficiently resourced to run an education program for interested schools and employed a key group of professionals, including a curator and education officer. Such facilities were eligible for staff funding and larger capital grants. Funding in this sense was not being made available for remote area museums run by volunteers. These were being supported in a different manner.³

Whether one agrees with this approach or not, at least the Ministry's objectives are clear and the policies aligned with broader government programs and strategies. These objectives are also associated with regional delivery and consolidation of services in areas such as health and education. If your project is in effective alignment with government policy and makes strategic sense, your chances of garnering support at a government officer level is that much higher. In this sense it is important that professional groups such as Museums Australia press for clarity and focus in funding guidelines. The alternative is to obtain funding for what "they" want rather than what you want.

Technique 2 The Power of Design

The Lightning Ridge Fossil and Opal Centre Planning Committee has been sporadically struggling with an ambition to create a facility that will showcase the unique cultural and natural resources of the Lightning Ridge opal fields in North West NSW. To date, success has eluded them, however, this dream may become a reality over the next five years, due largely to the recruitment of a star player to their planning team, architects Glenn Murcutt and Wendy Lewin.

² Morris, M *Expansionism... Successes and Failures*, Museum News, July / August 2004, P30.

³ www.arts.nsw.gov.au

In combination with strong community lobbying, the Planning Committee has, since mid-2003, been in a position to select a site for the proposed Centre, commence recruitment of an exhibition / interior design firm and commission a number of key studies, including an updated development plan and a geo technical study. This initial work will enable the preparation of a comprehensive design concept that will form the basis of a funding submission. Preliminary discussions suggest the building will be underground and largely self-sustaining in terms of power consumption.

While a successful outcome for this work is not guaranteed, those selected to respond to this genuine community project will be faced with a project which will be truly ground breaking, innovative and provoking within a world context.⁴

Technique 3 Plan, Wait, Strike

Since the early 1990s, the Planning Committee for the Qantas Founders Outback Museum in Longreach had been filled with a dream to celebrate the origins of the Queensland and North Territory Aerial Service. After acquiring control of the first Qantas Hangar at Longreach Airport and converting it into a museum, it soon became clear to the Committee that a Stage 2 project had to be initiated.

Despite the fact that a new facility adjacent to the hangar would cost at least five million dollars, the Museum Committee signalled their intention to grow the museum by commissioning well-known architect Noel Robinson to prepare a design concept. Equally as important, the Planning Committee sought to establish the likely commercial viability of stage 2 by commissioning an economic feasibility study and inviting Brisbane-based management consultants the Gibson's Group to be involved with the museum on a long-term basis.⁵

By the mid to late 1990s the Qantas Founders Outback Museum was in an extremely strong position to press their case for funding under the Heritage Trails Network Program and indeed received the second largest amount of funding under this scheme.

Technique 4 Maximise the Public Good

Grant funds must be able to clearly demonstrate they are achieving a public good, whether it is in the field of tourism, education or provision of much needed general services. Too often museum groups pursue an argument based on despair or despair for the condition of their collection or the building for which they are responsible. In so doing, they forget the well-known Russian analysis of their own history: "Revolutions are based on hope not despair."

Museum groups must be able to clearly demonstrate and quantify the broad community benefits that would flow from investment in their scheme. When competing against other capital projects such as a school extension, a new neighbourhood centre, a nursing home or a library, arguments put forward by museum planning committees can appear fairly thin.

⁴ The work of leading architects who have worked on significant museum projects is documented in such publications as Newhouse, Victoria. *Towards a new museum*. New York: Monacelli Press, 1998.

⁵ www.gibsons.com.au

In the case of Tenterfield, NSW, a town of 3,000 people “famous” as the birthplace of Peter Allen and the scene of the famous Federation oration by Sir Henry Parkes, a strategy of “twinning” was adopted. The National Trust of Australia (NSW) and the Tenterfield Shire Council prepared a combined submission to the NSW Federation Trust for 2.5 million dollars to restore and refurbish the Tenterfield School of Arts Building as a combined Library, Sir Henry Parkes Museum and community theatre. The grant was successful and the project has received national acclaim.⁶

Technique 5 Working in partnership with the private sector

Throughout Australia there are major building projects being undertaken which involve the refurbishment of historic structures or the disturbance of archaeological remains. Such projects can represent exciting opportunities to present historic information outside the context of a museum environment. Such an opportunity was presented with the recent 100 million dollar refurbishment of Jones Bay Wharf at Pyrmont in Sydney.

As part of a Development Application approval, the developer Multiplex was required to invest approximately \$200,000 in site interpretation. The outcome of this requirement was the creation of a heritage centre within the complex that explored the eighty-year history of the wharf, the restoration process and the famous arrival of Jewish refugees to Jones Bay in 1940. Extensive external signage has also been funded along the apron of the wharf that is now publicly accessible.

The availability of these funds enabled a fruitful partnership to be created between the developer, conservation architect, museum consultant, an interested community group and an end user.⁷

Conclusion

In conclusion, the successful preservation of regional cultural heritage requires the deployment of a variety of strategies to garner the necessary resources to achieve the required outcome. Museum organisations need to operate strategically and possess the necessary skill base if they are to successfully pursue their objective. By adopting this approach they are at least on an equal footing with other non-profit organisations struggling for a voice and access to resources.

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⁶ Architects for the project were Sydney architects Tonkin Zulika Greer with exhibition work undertaken by 3D Design.

⁷ The conservation architect working on this project was Otto Cserhalmi and Partners who initiated the conservation strategy.