

THE MUSEUM COMMUNITY

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photo: George Serras



The word 'community' has become such a loaded term for museums. Few other words are so often used, and sometimes misused, in discussions about contemporary museum practice.

Almost every meeting of museum professionals seems to involve at least some mention of community, or more often its plural, communities. It has rhetorical power – you are told that museums should be working more closely with communities, that they should be community-focused, community-driven, building bridges with communities, reaching out to communities, creating new communities of interest. The inference seems to be that museums have only just discovered a 'community' orientation, and recently developed their sense of service and public engagement.

Yet museums have always reached out to the public in some way or another. The regular lectures held by natural science museums early in the twentieth century were really outreach programs. While museum exhibitions of the past might seem dated today, they were conscious attempts to involve ordinary people in emerging ideas. Nineteenth-century museums created displays that were informed by the life of the street, and by popular scientific or artistic understanding, as much as any remote curatorial authority.

Instead of imagining a disjunction between past and present practices, it may be more useful to see the museum's relationship to communities as a continuum. Museums always have been predicated on a sense of public or audience interests; from the researchers who used their collections to the people who passed through the front door. Given this, the changes in contemporary museums have often built on long histories of community orientation. Such changes tend to have been evolutionary, rather than revolutionary.

In recent years, however, there has been greater recognition of the highly differentiated nature of the communities that museums serve. There is also growing sensitivity to the ways in which museums can involve all people in the creative life of ideas, without adopting a hectoring or declamatory tone. Museums now have – arguably – a more complex, nuanced view of the communities in which they sit.

Some of the impulse for this has rightly sprung from a desire to welcome people who were formerly distant and disaffected from museums. New galleries of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories in several Australian museums have been underpinned by extensive, enduring collaborations that have helped recover the reputation of these institutions among Indigenous Australians. Interestingly, the experience of collaborating with Indigenous communities has inspired museum workers to reconsider approaches to involving other groups, whether defined by ethnicity, class, age or gender.

There are also prosaic reasons for museums accenting a community focus. In Australia and overseas, museums have moved to assert roles in promoting social inclusion and enhancing the practice of civics. In the United Kingdom, the *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, PAT 10: Arts and Sport* (2001) identified social inclusion as a priority for museums and other cultural institutions. The American Association of Museum's report, *Mastering Civic Engagement* (2002), established an approach for museums to actively involve communities in their core business.

As funding regimes tighten, so cash-strapped cultural institutions have recognised the rhetorical power of arguing their case on the basis of their promotion of social inclusion. This is more than a nineteenth century vision of the museum as an educative institution promoting social and moral improvement. Rather the argument for museums as machines for social cohesion, as architects of a socially inclusive, sustainable society, is a case for public funds.

This may be understandable, but it poses dangers for museums' long-term viability. An argument of the museum's value in instrumental terms – as agents of social change – is based on sociological assumptions about their transformative power and the constitution of an idealised inclusive community. Both assumptions have their problems.

The contemporary discourse of social inclusion has been broadly criticised by the left and right. The left challenges the idea on the grounds that it glibly attempts to paper over differences that naturally exist in communities; the right is sceptical about the prospects of engineering a socially inclusive society. Both arguments reveal the difficulty in idealising community and civic values.

Museums encourage us to discover and learn through artefacts and other media. They may also serve, as is frequently argued, as forums for ideas. At their best, they are affecting places of discovery that take us from what we know, to consider what we don't. They also have clear responsibilities to engage and serve the diversity of interests that comprise twenty-first-century societies. But agents of social change? I'm not so sure.

The transformative power of museums is determined by the particular perspective of the visitor, which is subtly different in each case. Even museums with wide-ranging links to diverse communities of interest find it difficult to generalise those experiences. Any capacity they have to engineer a new social mood across groups and promote an inclusive society is therefore limited. Claiming otherwise – especially to policy-makers – may be both dishonest and dangerous, setting museums up for a fall. 🐼