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*Understanding
our natural
environment
and cultural
heritage*

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NMA Review Secretariat
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Information Technology and the Arts
GPO Box 2154
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**Submission to the National Museum of Australia
Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs**

Although the National Museum of Australia is still very young it is destined to become one of the great museums of the world. This is because of its emphasis on state-of-the-art technology, sound scholarship and innovative exhibition design. In its current form, the National Museum of Australia has only been open to the public for a few years but already it has generated much debate about Australia's people, land, environment and history. At the Australian Museum (Sydney) we see this as particularly healthy and believe that museums everywhere should generate and, at times, lead debate. Museums must be safe places for controversial and sometimes dangerous ideas about significant issues. This is especially true about the past, for coming to terms with all of the past, the regrettable aspects as well as those we are proud of, empowers us to make more ethical decisions in the present that will build an even sounder foundation for the future, one in which all of Australia's grandchildren, black, white or brown, will take justifiable pride.

Under no circumstances should the National Museum of Australia's research or display activities be dictated to or constrained by political, cultural or religious factional interests. It is the National Museum of and for all of Australia, not one or another particular group. Researchers and program developers should be able to honestly reflect the past, present and future of all aspects of Australia's cultures and natural environments providing they fall within the framework of the Museum's charter of establishment. If presenting controversial issues honestly and fairly causes discomfort to some individuals in the community, that is a necessary price that must be paid to preserve objectivity and fairness to all sectors of the community, past, present and future. Contextual interpretation of any event or object will always disturb some individuals. Given the diversity of human preconceptions, this is unavoidable. Deliberate effort to pander to or reinforce preconceptions will result in dishonesty, lack of objectivity and mission failure.

We applaud the National Museum of Australia for focusing on significant controversy and for resisting bland, sanitised history and science. We also applaud the multi-vocal nature of the National Museum, its multi-level presentation of the past and its diverse coverage and recognition of Australian achievement.

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A U S T R A L I A N M U S E U M

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The National Museum recognises all members of society, past and present, by allowing them to participate in the presentation of Australian life to the public at the individual level and by not focusing on central views about how history and contemporary society should be portrayed. Indeed, it is refreshing to see so much space devoted to everyday people, indigenous Australians, immigrants and women, rather than the usual cast of primarily white male politicians, explorers, sporting heroes, money-makers, pop stars and similar folk who come and go in the tabloids. The National Museum of Australia is not a museum for or about the Australian elite, it is a place where all Australians can reflect on a collective past. It also is a venue where individuals can place themselves within the larger Australian natural and cultural environments, based on their personal experience and identification with some of the people and places portrayed in exhibits. It is a place for everyone, including tourists who can learn about who we are and what it is like to be Australian. It would be a tragedy if this representative and egalitarian approach were to change.

One of the areas that has generated much controversy is the space devoted to Indigenous Australians. Some people have said there is too much space, others question the content or the accuracy of scholarship. Given that Australia has at least 50,000 – 60,000 years of Aboriginal versus little more than 200 years of European history, we do not see the balance as unreasonable. Furthermore, from the outset, it was agreed that Indigenous Australia would be one of the first to be profiled in a major way so as to better inform visitors about past and present Indigenous issues so often debated in the press and Parliament. The National Museum has achieved a great deal in this regard and should be applauded for its bold, refreshing, highly educational, scholarly and collaborative approach. Indeed, the policy of using Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curators shows through in the Indigenous galleries in terms of focus and themes. It also is important to note that the National Museum of Australia has the only permanent space devoted to Torres Strait Islander culture and that this gallery is distinctly different from the Aboriginal gallery.

The Australian Museum was one of the first to pioneer a social perspective approach to presenting Australia's Indigenous peoples and we are heartened that the National Museum took up and built upon this lead. We have sections on social justice, spirituality, family life, dispossession, discrimination, massacres, alcohol and drugs, missionary influence, deaths in custody and land rights, as well as aspects of Aboriginal history, society and creativity more usually expected of a museum. The National Museum has taken a similar but actually less confronting approach.

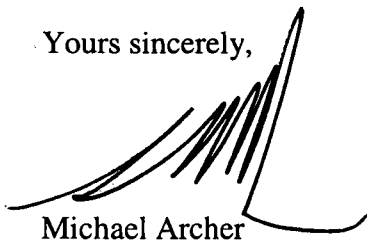
Of course, all museums, and especially national museums, should also be willing and able to respond to both constructive criticism and the need for change. Indeed, museums are all about change, documenting changing pasts and presents everywhere. They should never be static because no aspect of the world is static; the unfolding events of today will forever become tomorrow's history. The National Museum of Australia has been particularly strategic in recognizing and planning for this reality by collecting from the present because it is transforming into the past. No other major museum in Australia is doing this which means its collections are becoming a unique investment in the future. It also means that generally speaking the operations of the National Museum of Australia importantly compliment rather than compete with those of the other major State museums.

Museums worldwide have also recognised the importance of changing technologies, changing exhibition techniques and new forms of relationship with the peoples whose collections they hold. The National Museum clearly does not and should not avoid such change and should constantly reevaluate and accordingly adjust its broader focus. For instance, after developing a highly engaging focus on Indigenous Australians, it may now be opportune for the Museum to beef up its exhibits and education programs to also focus on Australia's environments, as well as other aspects of history and contemporary society. This is definitely not to say that the Indigenous section should in any way be downgraded because its focus again compliments in very important ways the more conventional Indigenous exhibitions in other Australian museums. Rather it may be the right time to plan equally effective exhibitions about other issues in a similarly substantive way.

For instance, new collaborative research and exhibition projects could be developed that interweave aspects of the past, present and future of Indigenous land management strategies and the future of the Australian environment. This is an increasingly critical and sometimes controversial research arena that directly effects Australia's future. Furthermore, curatorial/research support from external scientists and members of other identifiable communities (e.g. the Chinese, Greek and Muslim communities for new exhibits on migration and settlement) would add new perspectives, allow the Museum to expand its reach and better achieve its overall goals. If space is a problem, more resources could be devoted to temporary exhibitions. The upcoming 'Desert' exhibition and recent conference (23° South: Archaeology and Environmental History of Southern Deserts) provide good integrated models to emulate.

In conclusion, the National Museum of Australia should be congratulated for achieving so much in so short a time. The quality of the exhibitions and public programs is of the highest standard, including scholarship, exhibition design and use of multi-media technology. In regard to the latter, 'Circa', is particularly fantastic, as are many of the sections with state-of-the-art technology accessible by children. The National Museum of Australia can and should shift balance and focus as times change on a scale appropriate to the rate of change, but it should never abandon the important research and display focus it has already. If anything, the exhibition program should be broadened so that the Museum can better inform the world about the past, present and future of Australia's cultures and natural environments.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping, sweeping strokes that form a stylized, somewhat abstract shape. The signature is positioned to the right of the text 'Yours sincerely,' and above the name 'Michael Archer'.

Michael Archer