

The National Museum of Australia has been long awaited by everyone in the teaching field.

I see museums always as part of the educational opportunities of a country and Australia long has needed its national museum.

As I was away on research in 2001 and most of 2002, it was only late in 2002 that I was able to visit the Acton site, which I found thoroughly enjoyable. As I drove there, my thoughts were tinged by the fact that it was on that site - in Canberra Hospital - that my second son was born, when I was a PhD student at the ANU.

I was struck immediately by the dramatic architecture which challenged me and made me question what I was about to experience, even before actually entering the structure.

I was not disappointed.

I regret very much that when my children were small - the youngest now is 23 and living in Korea - there was not such an interesting and absorbing place I could take them to give them a sense of our country, in all its diversity.

Today's young people are lucky to have it and I shall recommend to all my university students that they visit the NMA as both an intellectual and emotional experience.

In my lectures in social anthropology at various levels, I often take up the topic of national museums, a number of which I have visited around the world.

The oldest national museums, say the Smithsonian in the USA, British and the one in Copenhagen, just to name a few, are essentially storehouses of conquest. France does not have a national museum, the Louvre being a part of a network of such institutions throughout the country. The story in the older museums is implicit, of a great nation having a great show place. Often springing from a private wealthy person's behest, such national museums are exhibitions of civilisation, trophy rooms, the story being that all that went before was leading to the grand country housing all those tangible proofs of importance. The older national museum is an institution showing a single triumphalist past leading to a homogeneous present and a glorious future of power and unity. One people; one country; one museum!

The Australian Museum was of that kind and its founding is not that far in time from the larger American and European examples.

The Museum that best represents the transition from the old style to the new I will discuss in a moment is the National Museum of Mexico, although the word "anthropology" appears in the title. It is Mexico's most popular museum for its own citizens for it seeks to explain Mexicans to themselves. As Mexico was not a conquering country, there are no foreign prizes to exhibit; only the monumental greatness of the country's past and the diversity of the present population, shown in exhibitions, both live and on display in full-sized models.

Between the unitary museum of the past and the Mexican leading to the present is the National Museum of Japan. True, there is the diversity of the past, but it leads to one people, the Japanese, Ainu, Burakumin and, heavens forbid!, Korean residents being shown as curiosities. The symbol of that museum, incidentally, is a thumb print, to demonstrate essential unity.

More modern national museums that I have studied are those in Canada, Aotearoa/New Zealand and, Kanaky (New Caledonia).

The national museum of Canada is called "the Museum of Civilisation" and preserves some of the triumphalist line of the empirical institutions, but with some hints - especially in the French/English divide - that diversity not only exists, but that it may be even legitimate!

Just preceding our Australian effort, is "Te Papa" which in architecture (same is true with Canada, and Kanaky) conveys its message as well as through its displays. Diversity is well displayed and performed with every aspect of the place proclaiming the bi-culturality of Aotearoa/New Zealand. I know Kiwis who love the place as well as those who loathe it, often for the same reasons! Better than a television series; more powerful than a book; Te Papa proudly questions its New Zealandness and is not afraid to proclaim doubt. I was interested to see what Te Papa apparently had borrowed: the thumb logo from Japan and the talking poles concept from another favourite of mine, but not national, the Museum of Sydney.

Sometimes a museum portrays its place unintentionally as well as through planning. The Tjibaou Museum in Kanaky/New Caledonia is such a place. It is a museum that does pay homage to the country's indigenous peoples, but it does so in a way that shows their predicament as well. The site is entirely artificial, the grounds landscaped to look native, the architect, Piano, a foreigner and most of the material used in the building comes from elsewhere. Most of the institution is hidden from view, underground in three stories, in fact, and only through donations from France can the place operate in its air conditioned, electronically sophisticated way. It is a perfect metaphor for New Caledonia and a demonstration of the predicament of the almost minority indigenous population of Kanaky.

The NMA has elements of all those institutions I have mentioned above and it combines them well and in a way (for me) that is uniquely Australian, with our sense of humour, our doubts and, also, our tellingly smug sense that we live in the best place on the planet!

I hope that the NMA will continue to establish its links not only in the culture field, but the educational one as well, particularly with universities, such as my own. I hope that the commonwealth government and perhaps some state ones as well will support this adventurous initiative both morally and financially.

And, I hope that the NMA continues for many years to both profoundly irritate and to bring great pleasure to we Australians for whom it was conceived and constructed.

Should the review require any further details from me, please do not

hesitate to ask and I look forward to seeing the other submissions, as is customary, and to being delighted with the supportive outcome of this review.

Sincerely yours,

Grant McCall

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