

Submission for the Review of the National Museum of Australia's Exhibitions and Public Programs

from Carol Serventy OAM BA
36 Diamond Road Pearl Beach 2256

2000-2003 President of Honour World Federation of Friends of Museums;
Vice-President Africa-Asia-Pacific WFFM
2002-2003 Membership Secretary ICOM Australia National Committee Member
Museums Australia
1997-2000 President of the World Federation of Friends of Museums
1982 to 1990 Councillor of the National Museum of Australia
1976 to 1986 Trustee of the Australian Museum
Past President The Australian Museum Society; The Australian Federation of Friends of Museums.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

1. (ii) I believe the Museum has made a brilliant beginning in the very long term process of realising the Government's vision in approving funding for its development.

2. Recommendations on future priorities.

Since its 2001 opening the Museum, with considerably less funding than many other comparable State and Federal institutions in Australia, has achieved a standard of every aspect of the modern museum that I have been proud to discuss at many overseas museum related meetings and workshops.

Future priorities that take account of the changing expectations of varied museums of the western, developed countries seem well understood.

Present and future expectations

In the 1980s we could define museums as collectors, guardians and interpreters. In the 1990s we included educators, accessibility and multi-perspectives. In this twenty-first century museums are realising their responsibility towards social capital and community. Many communities and their governments now expect them to contribute to the civic landscape and to political debate; even to be vehicles to aid the physical and economic rejuvenation of towns and cities.

A growth in confidence from minority groups, and a movement of people actively seeking a better way of life¹ results in people of different colours, races, religions and cultures expecting museums to be places where they will be comfortable and feel welcomed, and will find some of the exhibits of interest and relevance to them.

Minority groups and indigenous communities are expressing their views. Museums realise the value of lively debate among the people they serve, as well as in the media and in the board room and they are becoming more aware of fresh opportunities to develop ways to reach out to their communities

The American Association of Museums¹ National Museums and Community Initiative, from 1998 to 2002 explored the potential for dynamic engagement between American museums and their communities.

A briefing stated: Museums are becoming places of dialogue, advocates of inclusion, places of values, and incubators of communities ... places where consensus can be formed around the fundamental questions faced by people in every place and time ... arriving at the answers will be different for every community and every museum.

Genuine partnerships preserve each organisation's identity and strengths, and multiply the assets the participating organisations can offer to place a museum at the heart of its community.¹

Natural history museums should now address environmental concerns and science museums address contemporary ethical issues. History museums will focus on inter-cultural relations. They will all try to meet the anticipated needs of tomorrow's audiences, using the collections to help people better understand the human condition and the environment. They will not offer visitors a passive experience.

I believe that the National Museum of Australia well understands that modern museums need to continue to monitor contemporary society and be responsive to its changes. I hope that it will continue to address controversial issues and stimulate debate.