

## The place of ethnic heritage collections in the National Museum of Australia Submission to the National Museum of Australia Review

---

1. I present this submission in a dual capacity. Firstly, as a member of the Museum's Foundation Council (Interim council, 1980-82) and co-author of the Council's report *The Plan for the Development of the Museum of Australia*, December 1982 ("*The Report*"). Secondly, as a consultant in the development of the Museum's ethnic heritage collections and author/co-author of three reports published between 1988 and 1995 (see below). The consultancy followed my retirement from the Foundation Chair of Sociology at the Australian National University in 1986.
2. Participating in the drafting of *The Report*, my particular responsibility focussed on the specific objectives articulated in the section titled *The Gallery of Australia since 1788*: "The Museum will emphasize that Australian society comprises people of many different origins ... pay special attention to events in the peopling of Australia ... highlight the effects of cultural diversity ... how the concept of assimilation of new immigrants is being re-examined and re-shaped by pluralistic philosophies and practices ... concern itself with those cultural and historical traditions which immigrants left behind in the countries of origin ..." (p.40, paragraphs 31-35).
3. To equip myself for the task of examining the feasibility of implementing the above principles, I surveyed the museological literature on the subject of cultural heritage and, taking advantage of one sabbatical year and lecturing invitations in Europe and North America, I proceeded to familiarize myself with the museological philosophy and practice of selected institutions. These included The Smithsonian (Washington, DC), the Balch Institute (Philadelphia), and the Canadian Museum of Civilization (Ottawa) in North America. In Europe I visited the Centre Pompidou and Musée de l'Homme (Paris), the Nordiska Museet (Stockholm) and the Institute for Migration (Vaxjo), both in Sweden, and the Finnish Institute for Migration in Turku.
4. The experience gained during the visits has proved of great value during my subsequent consultancy work which involved a systematic survey of existing heritage items in the custody of individuals and institutions throughout Australia. The fruit of this work is the card index of institutions/individuals classified by ethnic origin, together with a substantial collection of files documenting specific items/collections which merited close examination. In addition the interview material collected from individual donors represent the first step in the process of research that will place several of the more important collections in their historical and cultural context (see Glen Cook and Jerzy Zubrzycki *Migrant Heritage. A Guide to the Collections*, 1992, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 80pp), a companion volume to Jerzy Zubrzycki *Ethnic Heritage. An Essay in Museology*, 1992, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 46pp). Some of the items from the migrant heritage collection were subsequently included in the Museum's exhibition on the subject of race relations in Australia (see Jerzy Zubrzycki *White Australians: Tolerance and Intolerance in Race Relations*, 1995, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 20pp).

5. The collections described above do not pretend to be more than embryonic in their size and coverage of the social and cultural history of Australia to the end of the century that marked a dramatic shift in the ethnic composition of the population. The fulfilment of the relevant interpretive and educational functions of the Museum in this area (see para 1 above) will need more investment of time and effort spent in collection building. For the present we have a miniscule display consisting of a handful of migrant heritage material (within the larger area dedicated to post 1788 people) dwarfed by the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia.

6. Given my long association with the Museum and bearing in mind the prominence given to the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia in an institutional sense in the Museum of Australia Act 1980, the planners of the present Museum had no choice but to give special prominence to the Gallery in the space which resulted from the ill-advised decision to shift the site to Acton Peninsula.

The so-called "land swap" resulted in the abandonment of the preferred location of the Museum as recommended in *The Report* after a thorough examination of no fewer than twelve potential locations. The Yarramundi Reach site of 88 hectares would have allowed construction of a number of low-level relatively inexpensive pavilions, open space displays, conservation laboratories, curatorial offices, administrative offices and a comprehensive professional and technical library. (No space could be found for some of these essential facilities on the present site.)

The restricted space offered by the Acton Peninsula – less than 20 hectares – forced the planners to provide a substantial, multi-layered building on a budget that in the end restricted exhibition space to perhaps one quarter of what would have been available on the original site.

We now have a building that has to accommodate the Aboriginal Gallery as a matter of priority. Given the tripartite centrepiece of the Museum (the portrayal of indigenous cultures, post 1788 people and the environment) the planners had no choice and give only token space to the second and third elements of the original concept.

Reluctantly I have endorsed this outcome for the sake of what has become a successful infant institution under an exceptionally gifted and wise Director.



Jerzy Zubrzycki

Canberra, 10 March 2003