

NSW Migration Heritage Centre, formerly at the Powerhouse Museum

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Background

The Migration Heritage Centre (MHC) was established in 1998, initially as a strategic initiative based in Premier's and then located at the Powerhouse Museum (PHM) from 2003. The initiative to create the MHC was prompted by the recognition that collecting, research and programming in the major cultural institutions was not reflecting the cultural diversity of NSW, and that action was needed to record the memories and experiences of aging post war migrants. The MHC's brief was to work across NSW with state and local government, cultural, ethnic and heritage organisations, to identify, record, preserve, share and interpret the experience of migrants arriving and settling in NSW. Using community engagement models of working in collaboration with many partners, the MHC commissioned new research, oral histories, collection surveys, exhibitions, books, catalogues, education resources, websites and heritage studies.

Over 10 years the MHC worked as a virtual museum, and as a three dimensional museum, archive and research centre. It commissioned exhibitions in partnership with regional museums, galleries, and libraries; with government museums and agencies; and for the PHM's now abolished Australian Communities gallery. The MHC led the way in designing online exhibitions, and with community support developed a unique archive of photos, object stories, oral histories, research reports, education resources, books and heritage trails. All of this work was original research from primary sources and first-hand accounts of migrants, with a particular focus on vulnerable post war migration stories. A number of the migrants who contributed to MHC programs and research have since died, so the Centre was just in time to record their stories for their families, and for current and future generations.

The MHC was funded with a dedicated recurrent budget of \$370,000, with a further \$100,000 contributed by the Community Relations Commission (CRC). It had three staff and a web manager. Using its funds to develop collaborative projects, the MHC's output includes 350 migrant community stories, 600 family objects and 70 online exhibitions, publications and displays. These are documented at www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au.

Most of the MHC's work was undertaken through highly effective \$ for \$ partnerships. The multiplier effect of the MHC's funding was significant. In Orange for example, the MHC's \$ for \$ funding of \$15,000 for community oral histories with post war migrants was leveraged with new council funding to create an exhibition, a website, a book, a driving tour and interpretive signs for migration heritage places.

<http://www.halfaworldaway.com.au/>

The MHC worked with communities across rural, regional and metropolitan NSW. It developed partnerships with more than 60 ethnic groups and 50 grassroots organisations such as local historical societies, community associations, heritage places, museums and schools. In Western Sydney the MHC developed exhibitions and community partnerships in Parramatta, Fairfield, Bankstown, Blacktown, Liverpool, Hawkesbury, Baulkham Hills, Thirlmere, and Scheyville. In regional NSW the MHC brokered exhibitions, oral histories and movable heritage studies in Albury, Wagga Wagga, the Riverina, Griffith, Broken Hill, Berrima, Bathurst, Orange, Molong, Young, Maitland, Armidale, Tingha, the Tweed, Newcastle, Port Macquarie, Trial Bay, Lake Macquarie, Lightning Ridge, the Snowy Mountains, Wollongong and the Illawarra. Elsewhere in Sydney the MHC collaborated with councils and communities in Rockdale, Redfern, Hurstville, Marrickville, Leichhardt, the Northern Beaches, La Perouse, and Canterbury.

The model of regional thematic studies commissioned by the MHC was a highly inclusive process that captured the experience of diverse migrant groups building new lives together in the suburbs, cities, towns and regions of NSW.

In addition to its community partners, the MHC was highly successful in forging partnerships with other cultural institutions, schools, universities and government agencies. These included State Library of NSW, the Museum of Sydney (*The Enemy at Home* – book and exhibition on First World War internment), the Art Gallery of NSW, the Australian National Maritime Museum – exhibition on child migrants, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Hyde Park Barracks on Irish female migrants, and the NSW Heritage Office - which was a long term funding partner, and where the MHC supported work on numerous migration heritage sites and themes.

With a cross agency and semi-autonomous role, the PHM committed to a governance model for the MHC that included an independent panel of advisers, chaired by a PHM trustee, with a representative from the Community Relations Commission and community members. The MHC reported to both the PHM trust and the CRC board.

The impact and quality of the MHC's work was recognised in numerous awards including the 2012 Building Inclusive Communities Award, presented by the then NSW Premier, The Hon. Barry O'Farrell MP. A list of awards is available at www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/awards.

Current Status

Following the appointment of new directors at the Powerhouse Museum, (Dawn Casey 2008-13 and Rose Hiscock 2013-15), the Migration Heritage Centre has been mothballed and effectively abolished. This decision coincides with cuts to social history programs and exhibitions at the PHM, and the abolition of the Australian Communities gallery that presented migration heritage exhibitions. The museum accepted voluntary redundancy applications by the Centre's manager and website expert in 2012. The two remaining staff left in 2013. One research position was backfilled until 2014. Multicultural NSW has been unable to provide the MHC with annual project funds (\$100,000) since the retirement of its long-standing Chair, Dr Stepan Kerkyasharian AO, in 2013. The independent panel of advisers was abolished under Dawn Casey, which meant there was no reporting mechanism to the museum's trust or to the CRC.

The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS) 2013-14 annual report noted that *the Migration Heritage Centre as a specific public program was replaced, with ongoing migration heritage, regional programming, and cultural diversity engagement programs embedded within a new Cultural Diversity Strategy developed and delivered as part of the Program team's remit*, p.15.

The 2015 annual report did not mention the cultural diversity strategy or any specific 'cultural diversity engagement programs'. It appears the new managers at the rebranded MAAS misunderstood the brief and responsibilities of the MHC. It was never a 'public program' but was a state wide research, education, collecting and interpretation centre, undertaking its work through community partnerships. For the MHC, regional and migrant communities were **partners and content creators**, rather than a visitor demographic to boost numbers. Based on recent annual reports it would seem that the museum's leadership and board has no interest in migration heritage or migrant communities in NSW.

No new MHC projects have been commissioned since 2012. Legacy projects are still being completed but without active engagement with communities. The home page of the MHC website has a message at the top: *this website has been archived and is no longer updated. The content featured is no longer current....* Glitches and problems are emerging with navigation through the website.

Key Issues and Opportunities

While the MHC website is on ice, there has been no communication with the centre's extensive community partners, email list or project partners. Families and individuals who entrusted their stories, photos and memories to the MHC have not been advised that the centre has been abolished. Contributors are unclear about the MHC's status and if its substantial online research collection is protected. Relationships with hundreds of families, ethnic groups and grassroots organisations across NSW are now at risk.

Stakeholders have expressed their concern and disquiet about the future of the NSW Migration Heritage Centre and the conservation of its valuable digital archives. Project partners are concerned the stories their communities entrusted to a state government museum are not receiving the long-term promotion, protection and care they had understood would be provided in the process of entrusting their stories and memories to the MHC.

The valuable original research developed by the Migration Heritage Centre through its community partnerships is at risk without a small investment in the maintenance of its online exhibitions, resources and research. Maintenance of its collection would only require limited resourcing. As a minimum, the MHC requires an archivist and the support of a web manager.

The closure of the MHC and the appropriation of its dedicated recurrent funding for other priorities, points to a policy vacuum for NSW state government museums and the migration heritage of this state.

Migration heritage is not among the disciplines the rebranded MAAS has declared as priorities in its strategic plan. Migration heritage objects are not specifically collected by MAAS, and the migration heritage of NSW is not among the list of the museum's research priorities. This is remarkable given that the MHC was the standout research and publishing centre at the PHM for nearly a decade.

While other states such as Victoria and South Australia have dedicated migration museums, and Queensland has copied the MHC community partnership model, NSW is the only state in Australia without a commitment from its state museums to research, document, collect and interpret migration heritage.

Indeed, NSW is the only state or territory in Australia without a museum responsible for the history of this state.

The issues, needs and opportunities that drove the establishment of the MHC remain. These include:

- The risk of a proliferation of small, unsustainable ethno specific museums in the absence of a coherent museum plan for migration heritage from the NSW

government. While ethno specific museums have an important place in the history and cultural life of their communities, they do not explore some of the larger migration themes and stories about the way diverse communities work and live together in towns, suburbs, factories, migrant hostels, workplaces, schools and heritage places.

- The aging of post war migrants in NSW and the loss of their memories, significant objects and the stories associated with those objects
- The need for cultural organisations to document and interpret the stories of migrants while it's in living memory
- Opportunities to record the stories of refugees, their often difficult journeys to Australia, and their resilience in building new lives in NSW. Interpreting these personal stories inspires other refugees, and builds community understanding and harmony.
- With nearly 50% of the people in Parramatta born overseas, and more than half speaking a language other than English, there is an opportunity for an imaginative new museum of migration and settlement in Parramatta, instead of moving the planes, trains and automobiles from the Powerhouse Museum
- Moving the museum will not of itself reinvent the PHM or provide tangible benefits for Western Sydney communities without critical thinking about who the museum is for, what its role is, and how it will connect with and benefit the diverse audiences of Parramatta and Western Sydney
- There are economic and tourism opportunities for NSW in strengthening links with countries such as India and China. One opportunity is interpreting the long history of these communities in NSW. It would make a powerful statement for visitors from China and India if NSW had a destination museum that explores the stories of Chinese and Indian migrants, among many others, who've settled in Western Sydney and NSW and contributed to the development of Australia.
- More importantly, NSW needs to build inclusive, tolerant communities. One way to do this is by recognising and interpreting the stories of migrants, their journey to Australia and experience of settlement in a new land.
- A museum that tells this story of migration and settlement would be a destination for schools from across Sydney.
- From the dozens of MHC exhibitions presented across NSW we know that public recognition of migration stories and cultures is a powerful way to build understanding and community harmony. These exhibitions help to break down barriers and build respect and understanding.
- Museums give people's migration stories dignity and recognition in a prestigious public place. It is humbling to see the impact this recognition can have on three generations of a migrant family who may have never been in a museum before.
- A migration museum is one of the missing links in the cultural infrastructure of Sydney and NSW. Migration and settlement, along with Aboriginal history, should be the priority for a new museum in Parramatta. The MHC's archive and network is a huge untapped resource for a new museum on this theme. Most importantly such a museum would be relevant and resonant for the history, cultures and diverse communities of Western Sydney.

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