

**Submission
No 150**

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

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New South Wales Museums And Art Galleries Inquiry

Submissions to the inquiry

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SUBMISSION #1



SUBMISSION #1

FUNDING MUSEUMS ART GALLERIES, HERITAGE BUILDINGS AND THEIR COLLECTIONS

<http://nswmuseumsinquiry.blogspot.com.au/p/funding-museums-art-galleries-and.html>

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- DATE: August 14 2016

SUMMARY

FOREWORD

- Submission made against my background and the experiences as designer-maker, academic and independent researcher.
- I believe that the inquiry is timely long needed and that it is of national significance.
- I'm aware of the fact that musingplace collections are an important component of 'national estate'.

POLICY AND FUNDING

- Public institutions' are generally assumed (rightly & wrongly) to receive their prime source of funding, for recurrent funding at least, is from government and that they "cannot make a profit" ... thus imagined as Govt. 'cost centres'.
- A 'cultural landscape' without musingplaces would be as impoverished as it might be without the 'pragmatic institutions'.
- If cultural development has any kind priority in the determination of government budgets -Local State & Federal - it is increasingly clear that modes of funding and the paradigms 'musingplaces' operate within need to change away from current 'status quo' models and modelling.

HOW MIGHT FUNDING CHANGE LOOK

- The foundations of contemporary museums and art galleries were laid down in Medieval Europe's *wunderkammers and kunstkammers*
- Currently governments maintain bureaucracies of various sizes and complexity to oversight expenditure in the cultural arena ... government needs to ensure accountability.

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FOREWORD

Public '*musingplaces*' – museums and art galleries – hold in their collections the cultural knowledge; cultural and intellectual property, '*public assets*', relative to diverse communities of ownership and interest.

Most of the people who make up these communities, individuals and groups, have many layers of individual and shared interests and ownerships.

Sometimes these people are called stakeholders, and even audiences, but their '*ownerships*' are much more deeply held than any of these descriptors might suggest.

Indeed, it would not be unusual for some of their ownerships and interests to be in conflict with each other. Consequently, it is important to identify not only '*the people*' but also their ownerships and interests without conceding to an impulse to '*rank*' them or some imperative to privilege one group over another.

Typically, these '*ownerships*' will be deeply felt and they should be vigorously defended.

In the end all this is a matter of '*lore*' rather than '*law*' and for each and every individual it's a matter of **identity** ... and undeniably that '*matters*'."

About Me

Ray Norman

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- In the short term change is more likely to be achieved '*at arm's length*' from governments bureaucracies rather than from within them.

A CULTURAL TRUST FOR NSW

- It needs to be acknowledged that it is possible that exemplars exist and move on ... the research needed here is for another time once the context for it is clear - *or at least clearer*.
- An in depth examination of the State Government's and NSW's Councils' **financial and in-kind** commitments to their cultural collections and musingplaces in order to establish just what the current financial investment is.
- This aspect of '*cultural development*' is needed Irrespective of impending council amalgamations ... it is an exercise worth the effort to provide a snapshot of the State's '*cultural estate*'.
- There is a credible case for a '*purposeful*' State-wide trust cum devolved arms-length 'funding agency' to set up ... a 'compounded cultural collection' that is managed **rhizomatically** rather than hierarchically and located throughout the State albeit strategically placed.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

- The status quo relative to musingplace funding and management is both unsustainable and undesirable, revitalisation becomes a more viable proposition.
- A changed paradigm, is likely to initiate change purposefully or otherwise.
- Looking ahead, it will be important, for individual public collections and musingplaces to establish a corporate identity, and a distinct entity, out from under the direct administrations of Local Govt. in particular.



FOREWORD: I make this submission against my background and the experiences I have gained as designmaker, academic and independent researcher. While I currently live and work in Tasmania I trained and worked in NSW. Moreover, I continue to have family and professional connections in the state plus ongoing interests in cultural institution located in NSW.



I'm responding to this inquiry because I believe that it is timely long needed and that it is of national significance. More to the point, such an inquiry being held in regard to museums, art galleries and **musingsplaces** of all kinds needs to acknowledge that these '*places*' need to be reimagined in a 21st Century context.

Over time I have become increasingly aware of the fact that musingplace collections are an important component of '*national estate*'. In their collections, and under the stewardship of '*the institutions*', are held the cultural treasures of the nation. Arguably, there are serious issues that need to be dealt with and '*the inquiry*' offers some solace here.

In this submission I'm addressing that aspect of the inquiry that is looking at:

- NSW government policy, funding and support for museums and galleries, museum and gallery buildings and heritage collections, including volunteer managed museums and museums managed by councils;
- potential funding impacts on museums and galleries affected by council amalgamations; and
- opportunities to revitalise the structure, reach, and impact of museums and galleries, and their research and collecting priorities.



POLICY AND FUNDING: In regard to '*public institutions*' it is generally assumed (*rightly & wrongly*) that their prime source of funding, for recurrent funding at least, is from government. Moreover, it is equally assumed that these institution's "cannot make a profit" and thus they are, and must be, funded as '*cost centres*'.



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So far as it goes, this may well have been a reasonable business assumption that has served these institutions well enough. However, it has set up a default '*operational paradigm*' that is focused on controlling expenditure rather than one of possessing the willingness and energy to do something new and/or innovative even if it might takes a lot of effort - *and involve risk*. Therefore, their perceptions of, and understandings of, sustainability is based upon risk adversity rather than risk awareness.

It follows that this paradigm, let's call it the '*Micawber Paradigm*' defines success (*happiness?*) as managing to stay within budgetary constraints while, as Wilkins Micawber did while waiting for "something to come up". To quote him and Dickens, "*Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pound ought and six, result misery.*"

All is well enough when something comes up, say when sponsors and partners arrive on the scene, but in the end cost centres are designed to **survive rather than succeed**. It need not be like that. Public museums, art galleries, heritage buildings and their '*collections*' are ever likely to require government funding as after all they are '*public assets*'. Leaving their fate to '*the public*' would more than likely expose these '*public treasure houses*' to far too much risk - *risks beyond contemplation*.

That said, it dose not automatically follow that **musingsplaces** cannot be, or should not be, entrepreneurial and within constraints of risk taking operations. Likewise, it aught not be an imperative that they do not, or should not, albeit within constraints, hold and manage reserves. Such an approach might present auditing issues but in the 21st Century digital technologies are well and truly able to meet the '*data demands*' required.

Based on the histories of '*institutional funding*' by government at all levels it is clear that a case for alternative funding models can and should be mounted. Arguably, the '*Cost Centre*' model does not fit the circumstances of the 21st C as well as it did in the 19th C & 20th C. What has changed most of all is society's capacity to store and retrieve ever increasing amounts of data and translate it into useful information. By extension, this enables information to lead to new wisdoms, new understands, new knowledge, expanded opportunities, etc.

Whatever view is taken relative to all this it is clear that the '*status quo*' is an ever decreasingly viable option and 21st C circumstances seem to demand paradigm shifts along with the new/emerging opportunities and imperatives to embrace fundamental change.

Institutional government funding models, essentially 20th C models, and the operational modelling pertaining to museums, art galleries, heritage collections, etc. - *musingsplaces* [\[LINK\]](#) - are currently contentious - *or at the very least contestable*. The funding of cultural institutions and their activities is ever likely to be politically contentious when and if it is compared with the pragmatic funding of hospitals, schools, roads etc. - *and it has ever been so*. However, a '*cultural landscape*' without these institutions would be as impoverished as it might be without the '*pragmatic institutions*' - *the very institutions that so easily win political precedence and boisterousness via their inbuilt ability to win attention*.

If cultural development has any kind priority in the determination of government budgets - *Local State & Federal* - it is increasingly clear that modes of funding and the paradigms '*musingsplaces*' operate within need to change away from current '*status quo*' models and modelling.



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HOW MIGHT FUNDING CHANGE LOOK: The foundations of contemporary museums and art galleries were laid down in Medieval Europe's *wunderkammers and kunstkammers*, its '*great hoses*', its monasteries and its '*universities*'. In the 19th C and 20th this changed somewhat with the upsurge in colonisations, the Industrial Revolution and international industrialisation.

Against this background the resistance to change and/or the acceptance the status quo is problematic. Clearly the "the way things are" serves some well - *museologist et al*. However, does it serve the wider community well - *that is those who fund musingsplaces, and very often by conscription through their taxes, rates, etc.?*

Given that 'cost centre thinking' does not automatically deliver the best possible outcomes for musers, or put another way, musingplaces's **Communities of Ownership and Interest - [LINK]**.

Currently governments maintain bureaucracies of various sizes and complexity to oversight expenditure in the cultural arena. Very often these administrations are populated with people with various levels of professional experience and understanding of the cultural operations they are administering funding support to. In practice this is ever likely to be so given the kind of accountability a government instrumentality needs to deliver.

Consequently, in the short term change is more likely to be achieved '*at arm's length*' from governments bureaucracies rather than from within them.

Local government amalgamations in NSW are likely to be a factor in bringing about the kinds of change that will be more than likely unprecedented. In parallel, these changes might well impact in some way upon the ways in which cultural funding, musingplace funding in particular, is imagined at a State level.

Given the immensity of what is at stake, plus the collective value - *cultural, social and fiscal* - of NSW '*public collections*' just how these collections, institutions and organisations are imagined and understood is a non trivial matter.



A CULTURAL TRUST FOR NSW: At the outset it needs to be said that over time much of what is being canvassed here has seen some kind of precedence. However, it is not within the scope of this submission to catalogue these things. Rather, it needs to be acknowledged that it is possible that exemplars exist and move on. The research needed here is for another time once the context for it is clear - *or at least clearer*.

An in depth examination of the State Government's and NSW's Councils' financial and in-kind commitments to their cultural collections and

musingsplaces would establish just what the current financial investment in this aspect of '*cultural development*' is in fact. Irrespective of there being impending council amalgamations this is an exercise worth the effort given that it would provide a snapshot of the State's '*cultural estate*'.

Alongside this there is an equally good case to be put in regard to initiating a wide ranging audit of the size and scope of NSW's '*cultural estate*'. Such an exercise is not something that can be achieved with a high level of accuracy nor quickly. Nonetheless, if we truly value our cultural '*holdings*'; then winning this data and the information attached could well lead to more sustainability in musingsplaces.

While credible research does not project its outcome, speculatively at least, it is worth considering the possibilities of: There being a credible case for a 'purposeful' State-wide trust cum devolved arms-length '*funding agency*' being set up;

- There being a '*compounded cultural collection*' that is managed **rhizomatically** rather than hierarchically and located throughout the State albeit strategically placed;
- There being the possibility of initiating collaborative cultural research projects facilitated by the '*compound collection*' and/or the State-wide trust;
- Developing network linkages with other institutional and registered private collections, sponsors and donors; and
- New understandings and imaginings of what is possible and feasible being able to emerge.



NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT: If it is acknowledged that the status quo relative to musingplace funding and management is both unsustainable and undesirable, revitalisation becomes a more viable proposition.

Altogether the kinds of funding and administrative change flagged here, simply due it being a changed paradigm, is ever likely to initiate change purposefully or otherwise.

Looking ahead, change is likely to be important, possibly an imperative, for individual public collections and musingsplaces to establish a corporate identity, and a distinct entity, out



from under the direct administrations of Local Govt. in particular.

However, a survey of public collections indicates that:

- Many lack a standalone charter/constitution;
- Many lack an independent strategic plan than applies specifically to the musingplace's operation and policy determinations;
- It's not unusual for strategic planning to be aspirational and mission focused rather than purposeful and functionally accountable given the elasticity this paradigm offers in measuring

performance outcomes; and

- The roles of governance and management becomes increasingly blurred to the point that the credibility of the institution may diminish as the operation grows.

When the above become evident the 'value' of the musingplace and its collections become compromised.

It is also evident that 'public collections and musingplaces' operate in ways that set them apart from their **Communities of Ownership and Interest** (COI). Plus, over time the musingplaces governance and management can become insulated from the institution's COI. The result is all too often that they can become closed shops peopled with gatekeepers predisposed to delivering programs to passive audiences - *the receivers of information rather than the generation of new understandings*. Falling or stagnant attendances are typical signposts of all the above being so.

On the pretext of preserving 'professional standards' old paradigm musingplaces resist, interactive programming, initiatives like citizen curatorships, proactive entrepreneurship, etc. and quite often they serially resist change. In the end such resistance is unprofessional in that it's a sign that accountability to a COI is discretionary, and something that can be deemed to be rather than it being a requirement. orobligation

The revitalisation of public musingplaces is ever likely to require more than cosmetic change. While it is not within the scope of this submission to speculate upon, what the kind of change flagged here might look like, it is clear that a course needs to be set for change if its acknowledged that that status quo is delivering less than it might.

Nonetheless, proactively exploring the legal, regulatory and cultural paradigms that will stimulate change should be a priority. Albert Einstein said that "*there are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.*" Likewise, someone, somewhere has said that miracles can happen if you create the circumstances for them and you're prepared to stand back.

Putting a 'Cultural Trust' in place as a standalone facilitator for 21st C musingplaces may well put the circumstances in place for positive and productive change - *plus the facilitation of meaningful change*.



[LINK](#)

Ray Norman - Artist, Metalsmith, Networker, Independent Researcher, Currently a Launcestonian, Cultural Theorist, Cultural Geographer and a hunter of Deep Histories ... Ray is Co-Director of zingHOUSEunlimited, a lifestyle design enterprise and network offering a range of services linked to contemporary cultural production and cultural research. Ray is also engaged with the nudgelbah institute as a cultural geographer. That institute's purpose is to be network of research networks and to be a diverse vehicle through which place oriented scholarship and cultural endeavours can be acknowledged, honoured and promoted.... [LINK](#)