

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

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New South Wales Museums And Art Galleries Inquiry

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SUBMISSION #2

REIMAGINING THE POWERHOUSE COLLECTION AND ITS GOVERNANCE

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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. It has been amply demonstrated the proposed sale of the Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo and its proposed move to Parramatta is at the very least contentious.
- The transparency of advice to the government in regard to cultural and social issues should be a primary concern for musingplace governing bodies.

PUBLIC COLLECTION ACCESS

- The collection material held in Australia's musingplaces - museums, art galleries, heritage builds, botanical gardens, libraries, etc. - make up an important component of the nation's wealth - a public treasury.
- Access to the data and information held in, and added to, these collections over time is an issue that should not be trivialised.
- While ever a musingplace's primary 'audience focus' is upon who those walk through their front doors their modus operandi can largely be regarded as something out of the 19th C - albeit an attitude that persisted through the 20th C and into the 21st C.
- More and more, audiences no longer either expect to be, or want to be, understood as passive receivers.
- Musingplaces work hard to maintain that for which they are traditionally known and they also become the victims of the expectations of their own 'historic treadmill'
- It is no longer tenable for musingplaces to be the governed for those seeing themselves as

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FOREWORD

Public '*musingsplaces*' – 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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passive receivers nor justifiable to allow collections to fall into the hands of gatekeepers and 'the experts' as they're no longer essential.

THE POWERHOUSE DILEMA

- There were always alternatives strategies to the proposed sale of the Powerhouse Museum's Ultimo site. Likewise, the proposal to move the institution to Parramatta, or anywhere else, is arguably foolishness of the highest order.
- There is a need to do an operational audit of the Powerhouse in order to assist in the navigation a course through the contention and overcome the lack of either a 'road map' or a survey of the cultural landscape.
- Ideally some kind of *'middle way'* needs to be navigated and a path of moderation, between the extremes of indulgence and indignity found
- What is clearly and undeniably of the most value is **"The Powerhouse Collection"**.
- On the available evidence, that building a multidimensional *'Community Cultural Enterprise'* built on the foundations of the Powerhouse Collection might be a starting point for a reimagining and revitalizing what the foundations have previously supported.
- There is a need to avoid predetermining rankings in a hierarchy ... hierarchical relationship are bound to fall over in relation to the hierarchical weaknesses in the pyramid ... And organic alternatives allow for elements - *branches?* - to be removed if they fail and without destroying the whole

ADVISORY MECHANISMS FOR MUSINGPLACES AND GOVERNMENT

- The acknowledgement of the need to develop mechanisms for providing transparent and fearless advice to the government on priorities for NSW musingplace, museums and galleries specifically, is an important development.
- Given all that communities have invested in these institutions the advice base from which they operate is non-trivial.
- *'Citizens Juries/ Assemblies'* offer a way forward ... the *newDEMOCRACY* Foundation has played a facilitating Citizen's Juries in Australia for some time
- History has shown that *'peer groups'* and *'expert committees'* have much to offer but they have the inherent capacity to become controlling mechanisms - *or at worst decorative bodies that make autocratic managements appear 'democratic'*.
- Citizens Juries/Assemblies offer opportunities for expertise to drawn upon via expert witnesses etc. ... every jury is 'fresh' thus the advice they offer the ultimate decision makers is likely to be useful and relevant.



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FOREWORD.

I make this submission against my background and the experiences I have gained as designermaker, academic and independent researcher. I currently live and work in Tasmania but I trained and worked in NSW and I have family and professional connections in the state. I also have ongoing interests in cultural institution located in NSW.

In particular I'm responding to this inquiry because I believe that it is timely and long needed. In addition, I believe that the inquiry is of national significance.

More to the point, such an inquiry being held in regard to museums, art galleries and musingplaces of all kinds needs to acknowledge that these *'places'* need to be reimagined in a 21st Century context.

Providing access to the collections of NSW public museums and art galleries is both a fundamental necessity and an obligation that falls to the governing bodies of the institutions and the managers of the collections.

As has been amply demonstrated the proposed sale of the Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo and its proposed move to Parramatta is at the very least contentious. If sought there are indeed alternative strategies and enhanced methodologies to support 21st C museum development and to facilitate improved access to the collection material.

The transparency of advice to the government in regard to cultural and social issues should be a primary concern for musingplace governing bodies. NSW museums and galleries, indeed its musingplaces, should and could be pursued somewhat more proactively than is currently evidenced.





PUBLIC COLLECTION ACCESS

The collection material held in Australia's musingplaces - *museums, art galleries, heritage builds, botanical gardens, libraries, etc.* - make up an important component of the nation's wealth - a public treasury. Access to the data and information held in, and added to, these collections over time is an issue that should not be trivialised.

In the greater part of the 19th & 20th Centuries it largely fell to '*the keepers*' to interpret the material in collections and provide it to audiences largely understood as passive receivers of knowledge - *wisdom even*. In a 21st C context by-and-large this kind of thinking is no longer appropriate. The keepers cum curators - *collection stewards* - who were once the '*most knowledgeable*' can no longer make such claims.

Indeed, while these 'stewards' are indeed very knowledgeable in regard to material they have in their care invariably there is considerable community of academics, researchers, practitioners, et al beyond the institution who collectively possess a great deal of knowledge. This '*knowledge bank*' is largely under valued and arguably they are under utilised. These external musers constitute the a significant portion of a musingplace's **Communities of Ownership and Interest** - its **COI**.



While ever a musingplace's primary '*audience focus*' is upon who those walk through their front doors their modus operandi can largely be regarded as something out of the 19th C - *albeit an attitude that persisted through the 20th C and into the 21st C*. Even if this generalisation possibly discounts far too much, overall musingplaces work relatively hard to maintain that for which they are traditionally known. They also become the victims of the expectations of their own '*historic treadmill*'.

More and more, audiences no longer either expect to be, or want to be, understood as passive receivers. Likewise, they are becoming less and less enamoured with being presented with regurgitated wisdom, or presented with the way something should be seen and understood. The convenience and value of shorthand labelling shrinks in relevance as passive audiences evolve into proactive COIs. The traditional paradigm musingplaces operate within can in part be explained by the imperative to '*protect the collections*' but the strategies along with rhetoric becomes less sustainable with the fast-moving evolution of digital and other emerging technologies.

While there is little that can replace the haptic experiences of '*real things*' can provide, nonetheless evolving technologies allow for deeper explorations. Moreover, the data and information extractable from musingplace collections not only grows dynamically, it is transmissible to ever increasing numbers of active musers.

As a consequence of all this going on in the background, in a 21st C context musingplaces arguably need to be totally reimagined - *that is a root and branch reimagination*. Given the '*values*' invested in musingplace collections it is an imperative that it happen in order that COIs can realise their investments in them.

It is no longer tenable that they be the governed for those seeing themselves as passive receivers. Neither is it justifiable to allow collections to fall into the hands of gatekeepers and 'the experts' as former are no longer needed and the latter are no longer essential.



THE POWERHOUSE DILEMA

There were always alternatives strategies to he proposed sale of the Powerhouse Museum's Ultimo site. Likewise, the proposal to move the institution to Parramatta, or anywhere else, is arguably foolishness of the highest order.

Taken together the assertions that are being bureaucratically presumed to have veracity simply demonstrate a paucity of understanding relative to the values invested in, and held in, musingplaces.



That said, it's not automatically the case that the status quo should, or even could, be maintained. The American President, Ronald Regan apparently once said "*the status quo is simply Latin for the mess we are in*" and at least on this occasion he was insightful. It's more than likely that the proposition is based upon a set of beliefs and shallow reasoning.

However, on its current site, like many musingplaces that operate in a mindset largely framed by a 20th C paradigm, it is likely that:

1. Visitor numbers are either plateauing or flagging;
2. The cultural landscape is evolving into something other than the one that originally lent substance and relevance to the institution and its collections at the turn of the 20th C;
3. It may be argued that the real estate value invested in the institution currently arguably exceeds the value of the presumed 'social license' to occupy it.

There may well be other factors in play too but reconciling competing layering of claims of '*ownership and interest*' is non-trivial. Indeed, by-and-large the purpose of this inquiry is to assist in the navigation a course through the contention. Interestingly, it seems that this is being done without either '*road map*' or a survey of the cultural landscape.

Even with these things there will inevitably be contention as various groups play their hands and in circumstances where rank is likely to be pulled.

While rationales 1, 2, & 3 all might have veracity they might as well have been framed in a vacuum unless the full spectrum institution's **COI** has been included in the conversation. If that is to be done it seems that it is either a work-in-progress or possibly on some future unarticulated agenda.

Ideally some kind of '*middle way*' might be navigated where the path of moderation, between the extremes of indulgence and indignity. This just might provide the wisdom required to achieve a win-win worth having.

There would appear to be no really compelling rationale for the maintenance of the status quo. And the notion that "*its not broken and therefore is in no need of being fixed*" likewise seems to lack the evidence of its rhetoric.

What is clearly and undeniably of the most value is "**The Powerhouse Collection**". However, it needs to be said that this collection, in its entirety, can be governed other than the way it is currently. Moreover changes in governance would/could also mean a paradigm shift in regard to the collection's management. That is changes in regard to the institution's articulated purpose, objectives, the rationales for them and ways outcomes will be achieved and measured.



COLLECTION LINK

Rather than a smooth transition from one circumstance to another it is ever likely that there will be unforeseen consequences. It would seem that there are reasons to change almost every aspect of '*The Powerhouse Operation*' but if meaningful change is to be undertaken there needs to be careful and considered navigation.

It would seem, on the available evidence, that building a multidimensional '*Community Cultural Enterprise*' built on the foundations of the **Powerhouse Collection** might be a starting point for a reimagining and revitalizing what the foundations have previously supported.

What might a multidimensional '*Community Cultural Enterprise*' look like? The answer to that could be almost anything but its important to identify what it would not be like. Firstly, it wouldn't/shouldn't be imagined as a '*cost centre*'. After that it wouldn't need a corporate

structure that inhibited income generation, audacious initiatives nor risk taking within bounds.

The chart here simply identifies the components of such an operation and avoids predetermining rankings in a hierarchy. Each operation would need to determine its own relationships. However, hierarchical relationships are bound to fall over in relation to the hierarchical weaknesses in the pyramid that requires nothing less everyone in place fulfilling a purpose.

The organic alternative allow for elements - *branches?* - to be removed if they fail and without destroying the whole structure/organism. As it is with trees, new branches can grow to replace those that needed to be removed for whatever purpose.



ADVISORY MECHANISMS FOR MUSINGPLACES AND GOVERNMENT

The acknowledgement of the need to develop mechanisms for providing transparent and fearless advice to the government on priorities for NSW musingplace, museums and galleries specifically, is an important development. Given all that communities have invested in these institutions the advice base from which they operate is non-trivial.

It would be possible to look at the precedence provided by other jurisdictions in Australia and internationally and then search for a common

denominator that appears to fit the circumstances of the future. The flaw here is that the future was never predictable given the complexity of the factors in play. Thus any common denominator will fail the *'future test'* simply because it offers no real possibility of succeeding.

On the other hand *'Citizens Juries/ Assemblies'* are being employed around Australia and the United Kingdom and particularly in the area of Local Govt. The **newDEMOCRACY Foundation** has been facilitating Citizen's Juries in Australia for some time in response to a range of issuers. In fact this inquiry is a Citizen's Jury of a kind.

The alternatives to this kind *'judgement and advice'* paradigm is likely to be a self-serving and liable to grow into somewhat monolithic structures designed to provide predictable or trustable outcomes relative to situations that have not yet arisen. The flaws here should be obvious but nonetheless some management functionaries often feel more comfortable within such structures.

Citizens Juries /Assemblies offer the advantage of the potential of being purposeful and circumstance focused. Moreover once their task is complete they simply dissolve back into the communities from which they were assembled. The next time a 'jury' is required it can be assembled and resourced as required. .

History has shown that *'peer groups'* and *'expert committees'* have much to offer but they have the inherent capacity to become controlling mechanisms - or at worst decorative bodies that make autocratic managements appear *'democratic'*.




Also, they have the capacity to selectively and subjectively privilege some information over

and above alternative evidence and in ways that is not always criteria based - *arguably it's also seen as their job to do so.*

Citizens Juries/Assemblies also offer opportunities for expertise to drawn upon via expert witnesses etc. Given that they can be empanelled on a needs basis and that every jury is *'fresh'* the advise they are liable to offer the ultimate decision makers is likely to be useful and relevant.



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](#)

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