

BIG IMPACT FROM SMALL BUDGETS

Paper presented by Maisy Stapleton, CEO, Museums and Galleries NSW

I am presenting this paper on the small to medium museum and gallery sector in NSW and while it is not presented as a 'how to' – I hope that it will inspire you and demonstrate how these organisations can have a large impact despite their size.

Over the last 7 years, as CEO of Museums and Galleries NSW¹, I have observed many museums and galleries throughout Australia and internationally. I feel that sometimes we overlook the achievements of museums and galleries outside the 'mainstream', particularly beyond those institutions that are heavily resourced by either state or federal governments. So I am delighted to talk to you today about the big impact that many a small organisation makes on a relatively small budget.

Many smaller museums and galleries 'punch well above their weight'. A number are playing a leadership role, undertaking innovative programming, exhibiting flexible management practices, exemplifying collaborative and cooperative relationships with their peers and colleagues, developing responsive relationships to the community, developing magnificent specialist collections and are able to embrace diverse and often difficult issues in a way that often surpasses the initiatives of larger institutions.

The small to medium museum² sector in Australia

There are around 1500 of these institutions in Australia³ located across the nation, from the outer metropolitan areas to remote and regional locations to the inner city – some towns can boast as many as five to eight museums. Lest you have a fixed view of the typical museum, the following figures indicate their diversity:

Social history museums	53%
Historic places	19%
Art museums (galleries)	13%
Transport and maritime museums	8%
Natural history and science museums	6%
Keeping Places	1%

They are staffed by volunteers or paid workers and usually a combination of both, with numbers that range from a single volunteer or full-time worker to around 20 or so full-time staff or large numbers of volunteers.

¹ Museums and Galleries NSW (MGnsw) is the key agency supporting the development of museums and galleries in New South Wales. We work with museums, public galleries, Keeping Places, artist-run-initiatives and contemporary art and craft spaces throughout regional and metropolitan NSW.

² This refers to both 'art galleries' as well as museums.

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics survey of small museums with no paid employees or part of an organisation mainly undertaking other activities such as local government, universities or corporate entities, 1997-1998

The Lady Denman Museum at Huskisson on the NSW south coast has reported it has 150 volunteers, while Gosford Regional Gallery has 130 and Grafton Regional Gallery 85.

Visitation levels are strong. In the regional gallery sector alone over 1.2 million visitors were recorded in 2004. We estimate that total visitation to museums and galleries in the state is around 2 million per annum. Patterns of visitation vary significantly. While a majority of small museums attract up to 5,000 visitors each, nearly 20% recorded over 20,000 visitors in 2003 and 5% recorded over 40,000 visitors each in the gallery sector alone. 16 internal exhibitions and collections valued at over 144 million.

Small organisations also demonstrate significant leadership. As one director of such an organisation has stated “While large museums have more considerable resources at their disposal in terms of space, staff size, general size and scope of collections, and funding, it can also be these very things which prevent larger institutions from responding to, or enacting, change. Small museums ... may be more adept at turning such drawbacks into strengths and using them as catalysts for innovation.”⁴ The strengths referred to include administrative flexibility; the ability to deliver more innovative programs – including taking more risks, and have the ability to involve communities and build audiences through direct relationships with the community.

Responsive relationships to communities

“A community museum is a process as well as a structure ... they are nodes in a network of attractions that form the recreational, cultural and historical geography of a community in a region ... They actively involve people in the processes of both representation and interpretation”⁵

Relationships with the community occur on many levels, from undertaking civic responsibilities on behalf of the community to embracing the diversity within the community in a supportive way. Many seek support from Friends groups who prove valuable and powerful allies in smaller communities. In one town recently, it was the intervention of the Friends that saved the gallery from having to charge admission prices.

Eden Killer Whale Museum is an excellent example of community spirit – Australia day ceremonies are held at the museum, they loan equipment to other community groups, make donations to the upkeep of the cemetery, have a publicly accessible library, maintain archives for community groups, actively collect local, oral histories; hold welcome parties for individuals new to the area and run familiarity tours for local tourist groups, the chambers of commerce, etc.

Moree Gallery with a budget of less than \$200,000 per annum is committed to the support of the indigenous population in Moree, has an indigenous curatorial trainee, presents indigenous art exhibitions, has a close relationship with TAFE and training in indigenous art-making.

⁴ Doll, Nancy M. Director of Weatherspoon Art Gallery “Unique Exhibitions: Small Museums as Advocates and Innovators” conference session at *A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE Exploring the Big Impact of Small Museums* conference

⁵ *Visualising Hidden Heritage*, Imali Community Museum Feasibility Study, 2003 – Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) Rhodes University, South Africa.
<http://www.ru.ac.za/institutes/iser/research/heritages/Reports/Museum/museum.htm>

Wollongong Gallery supports the development of local indigenous expression through exhibitions of local indigenous artists (Pallinjang exhibitions) and ongoing enhancement of its strong indigenous collection.

Some smaller museums and galleries are also directly involving the community in the actual processes of their organisation. A number have used community curatoriums to share in and contribute to program development.

Time and Love: The Handcrafted Bedroom was an exhibition of fabrics and textiles associated with the bedroom held at the Penrith Regional Gallery and The Lewers Bequest⁶ (presented in December 2003 to January 2004). It illustrates a remarkable partnership between members of the community and the museum.

The exhibition was undertaken using the expertise of a community curatorium of eight individuals (all were Friends of the Gallery except one), coordinated and guided by Cheryle Yin Lo, Project Co-ordinator. Their brief was to develop the conceptual framework and select the works to illustrate the breadth and diversity of this fibre textile art in Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains. There was an underlying emphasis on ensuring cultural inclusiveness in the selection of artists.

The gallery shared the process of exhibition development with the curatorium and training was provided in gallery practice. Professional standards for instance in documentation were explained and rigorously followed. The curatorium was responsible for the research, community outreach and development of the exhibition concept. They met the artists and selected the final works. Amongst the learnings for the curatorium were how to respect the works of artists with practices and lifestyles very different from their own and how to say 'no', avoiding the selection of every work proffered. Even so, 200 items were chosen for the exhibition and over 90 artists were involved.

The work shown was diverse, from quilts to 'cutting edge'. It was enhanced by a superb professional presentation by exhibition stylist John Murray. Above all the work was respected and the artists felt acknowledged.

Many of the exhibitors, requested their exhibition labels as treasured mementos and wrote appreciatively to say "I have never seen my work displayed like that".

There are many lessons we can learn from the *Time and Love* experience, including the rewards derived from close community engagement. In conjunction with the opening of the exhibition the Gallery organised a market day. The exhibition brought in four and a half thousand visitors over 6 weeks, it resulted in close connections with some of the guilds and other membership groups associated with the exhibition. It has further diversified the audience for the gallery, reached visitors from a wide range of suburbs previously not associated with the gallery and created loyal followers and ongoing repeat visitation, and left a legacy in the community.

Every member of the curatorium experienced the rigour involved in the selection, documentation and presentation of an exhibition. Every exhibitor now realises the skills involved in presenting and documenting artworks. Sharing the mystique of the museum with the community has resulted in a better understanding and valuing of its work. There are a host of new advocates within the community who appreciate and support the importance of a professionally-managed museum.

⁶ Information kindly provided by Cheryle Yin Lo

“What I like about small museums is that the public actually can reach the curator and the director, and a dialogue can go on”⁷

Innovative programming – through social and cultural inclusion

Liverpool Regional Museum and Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre also exemplify the smaller museum and gallery striving to connect with and reflect its own community through innovative programming which reinforces cultural inclusiveness.

In recent years, this family of museum and art centre, demonstrates the hope ‘that it can play a role in reflecting and creating an awareness of the social and cultural changes that are present in Western Sydney, [which] while supporting the values and culture of the disparate communities of the region... .. encourages people to look outwards rather than inwards and encourages them to explore aspects of other cultures while reflecting on their own’.⁸

The two museums demonstrate remarkable consistency to these objectives as a random scan through catalogues of recent exhibitions demonstrates⁹ both wide diversity and an exciting program are achieved by developing their own community-centred exhibitions rather than relying on touring product.

These include:

Flannelette: An Australian Story – Liverpool Regional Museum, 2003 was developed to ‘engage the community and explore the relationship between this symbolic piece of clothing, popular notions of the ‘westie’ and the changing cultural status of Western Sydney’ and included artworks, fashion and a fashion parade featuring this iconic fabric.

Aunty Nance – Liverpool Regional Museum – a tribute to the life and work of a prominent member of the Koori community in Liverpool, Liverpool Regional Museum, 2002

Edges: Lesbian, gay and queer lives in Western Sydney, Liverpool Regional Museum, 2001.

Viet Pop – contemporary Vietnamese–Australian Culture, Liverpool Regional Museum, 2002

While a museum cannot engage with every cultural group within a community, the work in Liverpool reflects an exemplary attempt to provide exhibitions and programs that resonate with the local community.

Being location-centred or community-centred or aiming for social inclusion does not necessarily mean that a museum or gallery is limited in its vision or programming. Nor does it mean that such projects are not nationally or even internationally significant. The Liverpool examples reflect programming of the highest order that also deals with community issues.

⁷ Wilson, Fred. Paper presented at “Unique Exhibitions: Small Museums as Advocates and Innovators” conference session at *A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE Exploring the Big Impact of Small Museums* conference

⁸ Allan, Fiona. Curator *Flannelette: An Australian Story*, unpublished paper on exhibition, 2003.

⁹ I am grateful to Kon Gouriotis, Director of the Casula Powerhouse Art Centre and the Liverpool Regional Museum for assistance in providing this material

Negotiating controversy and hard issues

Many smaller museums and galleries engage with their communities not only on a popular level, but bravely address unappealing issues. Closeness to a community creates a sense of trust between the museum and its stakeholders, that enables the museum to negotiate difficult or highly controversial programs.

The exhibition *Anita and Beyond* exemplified this, dealing with the rape and brutal murder of Anita Cobby in 1986 in Western Sydney¹⁰. It was developed as a partnership between the Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre and the Penrith Regional Gallery.

A curatorium which included Anita Cobby's parents, social workers, police and legal representatives and an artist, was closely involved at all stages of the development of the exhibition and at every step in the decision-making process.

The exhibition addressed violence and crime in the community; the negative reputation of a region, and the aftermath of the crime, the trial and the grief of the family.

Crime and violence are difficult subjects to negotiate and it was a complex process to develop such an exhibition. It relied on establishing trust between the galleries, the curatorium and hence the community. Strangely most of the resistance to the idea of the exhibition came from arts industry colleagues and the exhibition suffered some lack of support as a result. The major stakeholder in the gallery, Penrith Council, gave its endorsement¹¹ and the outcome was exceptional – high visitation (17,450 visitors over seven weeks) and many stories in the media which focussed on the issues underlying the exhibition.

The result too, was an exhibition that was exceptionally moving, a commemoration of the life of Anita Cobby but one that also addressed violence – not with a sugar-coated pill, but with directness yet sensitivity for those personally affected.

The exhibition comprised documents and mementos of Anita Cobby, her family, as well as the trial of the perpetrators of her murder. In addition, twelve contemporary artists were commissioned to create work in response to primary research, the artwork “acknowledging that our visual landscape can communicate to us in ways that our conscious minds do not register.”¹²

And such projects are continuing. A group of galleries in Western Sydney in collaboration with the Ivan Dougherty Gallery recently collaborated on *For Matthew and Others* a series of exhibitions, workshops and performances opening the other night at Campbelltown Regional Gallery, which focussed on schizophrenia – another taboo subject for many.

Collaboration and partnership with peers

¹⁰ Presented at Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers' Bequest, NSW, 1 March – 27 April 2003. Information from discussion with John Kirkman, Director; *Case Study Anita and Beyond* by Cheryle Yin Ho, www.fuel4arts.com May 2003 and *Anita and Beyond*, catalogue of the exhibition, Penrith Regional Gallery and The Lewers' Bequest, January 2003. The exhibition was curated by Lisa Havilah and the curatorium chaired by Kon Gouriotis.

¹¹ Support was also received from the NSW Ministry for the arts and there was extensive media coverage of the exhibition.

¹² Havilah, Lisa. Curator. *Anita and Beyond* catalogue, p.12.

Many of these exhibitions rely on Cooperation and partnerships. And this is another area where there is leadership from smaller institutions. In NSW, numerous regional networks exist to foster self support and collaboration.¹³

Hunter Art.1 for instance, was developed to bring together regional and university galleries in the Lower Hunter, an area historically seen as “an industrial area with little culture.”¹⁴

There were five partners –Lake Macquarie City Art gallery, Newcastle Region Art Gallery, Maitland City Art Gallery, Watt Space and the University of Newcastle School of Fine Art Gallery. A curator from outside the region, Merryn Gates, ‘with national experience’ to ‘ensure a national focus’ was selected to curate the project.

Through a series of exhibitions, events and projects staged under a single umbrella, *Hunter Art.1* was devised to promote the Lower Hunter as a local and national visual arts resource, as well as growing local and national audiences and showcasing local and national talent.

An integrated marketing strategy was key to the project’s success and included a collective brochure; separate catalogues for each of the exhibitions and strong branding to demonstrate that the whole project was greater than the sum of its parts.

Flexible management, new paradigms of museum and gallery development,

The ability of the small to medium sector to build responsive relationships with the community, to nimbly respond to community issues, to negotiate the controversial or even the unpalatable, to incubate the innovative and to embark on intensive collaborative projects stems from their very size. These organisations, while leanly staffed, are highly flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances.

Staff and volunteers develop new skills. Cross-training and multi skilling are the norms as are overlapping roles and the potential for cross-sectoral development. “We are experts at multi-tasking ... we have to move around ideas and situations quickly and with as few incumbrances as possible. There is little separation between brainstorming and action. We don’t have the luxury to be able to add steps to that.”¹⁵

While a lack of resources and time is often cited as problematic by those working in the small to medium sector, this is balanced by greater freedom to make decisions and take responsibility at any level of the organisation. There is a lack too of the structural gap between different museum disciplines for instance curators and educators or between management and ‘workers’ that often hampers innovation and slows down decision-making. I have also observed an inbuilt ‘esprit de corps’ that surmounts difficulties because each person in the small team is so reliant on the other.

¹³ These include the Museum Australia Chapters, the mid-north coast gallery directors’ network, the Riverina professional network.

¹⁴ Information received from Debbie Abraham, Director Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery and the proposal for funding Hunter Visual Arts Project, 2002

¹⁵ Barnes, Lucinda. Director Boise Art Museum conference paper presented at “Unique Exhibitions: Small Museums as Advocates and Innovators” conference session at *A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE Exploring the Big Impact of Small Museums* conference

Small museums often too, lead the way in the development of specialist collections. Wagga Wagga has the National Glass Collection. Albury a specialist photographic collection. Bathurst has Ben Chifley's house and a fantastic fossil museum. Many regional galleries and museums are housed in iconic buildings that form land marks in their region.

The renowned artist and curator Fred Wilson has stated that "It's been my experience that small museums have a bigger opportunity to be responsive to the needs of artists, ideas, and new trends. And I do believe that in my experience, small museums can absorb, learn from, put into action, and critique in ways that large museums cannot."¹⁶

At the very least these smaller museums and galleries offer diversity and choice in museum going – they can appeal to niche and specialised markets. They can reach local audiences and can develop, train and enthuse audiences and future visitors to other museums. They can be incubators to test the experimental and the edgy idea, they can skill up workers who bring a holistic approach to working within a museum with a better understanding of the whole role of the museum and they can have a big impact on a very small budget!

The more I see happening in the smaller organisations, the more I'd like to celebrate the big impact on a very small budget that these organisations make!

Maisy Stapleton
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¹⁶ Wilson, Fred. Conference paper presented at "Unique Exhibitions: Small Museums as Advocates and Innovators" conference session at *A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE Exploring the Big Impact of Small Museums* conference