

Museums & Galleries NSW

SUSTAIN OR PERISH:

IS THERE A FUTURE FOR VOLUNTEER MUSEUMS? AND IF SO, WHAT WILL MAKE THEM SUSTAINABLE?

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Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you so much for inviting me to join you for this conference and particularly for inviting me to speak to you just after breakfast on Sunday. It convinces me, if I need convincing, what a hard-working bunch you are and I hope that I can provide you with food for thought that lasts well beyond the breakfast cereal!

It's always a privilege and a little bit of a challenge to think through issues such as is there a future for volunteer museums? I'm sure some of what I have to say may be familiar, but in these days of climate change and a much greater environmental awareness than in the past, sustainability has become a more urgent matter.

I'm calling my talk today *Sustain or Perish?*

When Charles Darwin made his discoveries about birds of the Galapagos Islands, he found they had developed new characteristics over many millennia in response to changing climate conditions and predators. This led to his introduction of the scientific concept of evolution – or survival of the fittest. Darwin demonstrated how nature needed to adapt to changing circumstances and environmental conditions or face extinction.

While I'm not suggesting that regional volunteer museums may be looking at the same fate as the Dodo or Tyrannosaurus, we need to be mindful and to take responsibility for the long-term sustainability of our sector.

Sustainability is a notion that is readily linked to climate change, but is far more complex. Today a sustainable future is based on the notion of how we are going to manage resources and consumption to ensure that basic commodities, let alone quality of life, can be sustained for future generations.

Sustainability can be regarded as a concept that embraces “how to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”¹

Sustainability encompasses far more than environmental issues. It also includes social, economic and cultural considerations - the four pillars on which society stands.

Sustainability requires long-term thinking, looking into the future, developing a vision and embracing innovation, as well as considering current needs and circumstances and how we can reconcile often opposing forces.

As a sector able to analyse and define the world through objects and storytelling, museums should be able to embrace this notion and indeed, contribute to its development. Just as Darwin showed how flora and fauna that adapt to change may survive, so the museum sector must look to the future and consider how to adapt to changing world circumstances.

We need indeed, to do more than consider, we must *manage* our own future, to ensure that our sector is the fittest to survive and thrive. We cannot rely on others to make these choices for us, we need to start the conversations and do our best to influence, if not drive, a changing agenda.

In my address I'd like to touch on a range of issues that relate to long-term sustainability of the volunteer sector, and while this is not a talk about environmental sustainability per se, it's hard to ignore the physical aspect of sustainability – the changing environment, which will impinge the most on the fate of the world.

At the moment, we focus on the needs of our collections and these seem to require extremely high levels of environmental control, in fact some of our museums and galleries are real energy guzzlers as a result.

There is no doubt that collections lie at the core of what museums are about. Personally, I like stuff as much as anybody and think it's a basic human condition to collect, amass or even hoard material.

But do we care too much about the stuff and not about the responsibility to our community? My belief is that we possibly care too little about both.

Collections should be held for no other reason than that they provide knowledge, inspiration, information – they help to tell a story, they provide access to ideas, feelings, scientific information or insight into humanity. A museum's prime purpose is not to collect more and more.

In fact, I believe, a sustainable museum will have sound collection policies that allows it to rationally choose which collections to preserve into the future, to say

¹ Report on the World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, quoted in Museums Association Sustainability and Museums – Your chance to make a difference. Discussion paper 2008.

See www.museumsassociation.org/sustainability. This excellent initiative of the UK Museums Association has given food for thought and inspiration for this presentation.

'no' to extraneous items, to be more discriminating, to effectively research and understand its holdings and to get rid of 'stuff' if necessary! (I hope this is not too much heresy so soon after breakfast?).

I believe that we need to ask serious questions about why objects are so important, that their preservation in optimum conditions will impact on the world's environment.

Last week, I attended a talk given by Carmen Lawrence, the former Premier of Western Australia and Federal politician. She made the point that while we, ourselves, may not feel the impact of climate change, as the water rises to cover Pacific Islands, as food becomes even scarcer in Africa and as crops turn to dust in India, others will be impacted on by the decisions we make. Can we afford, as a responsible sector, to neglect the common good? Particularly, as it has been shown that it is nations such as Australia and the highly developed countries that have the greatest impact on climate change.

I'm not advocating here that we de-accession all our items and rip out our air conditioning, but I am suggesting that a more aware attitude to the environmental impact of caring for collections is needed. In the future we must rethink our approach to storing collections, reconsider the environmental criteria we apply to all items, whether they merit it or not and reassess the need to store more and more material and build more and more sheds.

Objects by themselves are not necessarily the heart and soul of a Museum. Indeed stories are as important as many items and we may not always need long-held collections to tell stories. We can look to other means, like digital storytelling, temporary exhibitions, yarning, performance events and other means of conveying information and history.

Economic sustainability is also vital to the future

And here I commend you! The volunteer sector as a whole is possibly the most economically sustainable sector in the museum world. You are excellent fund-raisers, careful managers and do so much with so little. You take action rather than wait for handouts.

On the other hand, extra funding assistance can be vital to filling in the gaps, fixing problems, lifting your game just a little higher and to providing support and assistance in specialist areas.

It has been suggested² that there may be less funding in the future and too many museums to claim or gain support – an over saturated market. Do we currently have too much fragmentation and duplication of effort in our sector and the cultural sector at large, for sustainability?

Or are there new sources of income, or models of operation that might answer future needs?

² Sustainability and Museums p8

Remember however, it's a true saying that funding always comes at a cost.

These days, corporate giving and sponsorship are strongly linked to a company's marketing goals and profile, often difficult to achieve if you are a small organisation, with minimal staff and located in a regional area with little access to corporate support, except for local business.

While greater government support is often called for as the solution, increased government funding, particularly at the state or federal level, often means support for capital projects, rather than sustainable operational needs. You only need to think of the Bicentenary, the Centenary of Federation and other such commemorative buckets of largesse, which provided a number of new museums and buildings.

These funds were no doubt welcome at the time, however, they were often used to create more, or bigger, physical infrastructure, but provided no ongoing support to manage these new facilities. They also increased the competition for existing available funding for operations, rather than growing the resource pie.

It's also been said that too much government funding sets up a dependency model, where you are so busy responding to government policy objectives, that the organisation loses its own initiative.

I do believe that governments should support museums and the volunteer sector, but it is important to think of this support as leverage for other resources, rather than to rely on it entirely.

I suggest there are several economically sustainable directions we should be taking in the future. As well as considering external support this means considering new ways of generating or increasing income – working to develop long-term revenue streams that will sustain the museum.

For instance I've always thought that a car park in a metropolitan area attached to a museum would be one fail-safe income generator – but that was before petrol costs escalated. Museums must look at other potential income streams. A more realisable example is providing function areas for hire, for weddings and community events (the museum at Uralla is an exemplar in this area). This may require skills and expertise and time and divert us from our love of the museum and its collection – but there may be others in the community to take on this role, or fees that can pay for assistance.

The shops and cafes, more traditionally associated with large cultural facilities can also be made to work effectively for smaller organisations.

Museum & Galleries NSW's recent audience research³ confirmed that shops and cafes are regarded by visitors as a key experience in visiting museums and galleries.

³ Guess Who's going to the Gallery. Findings from year 1 of the audience development study in NSW regional galleries http://mgnsw.org.au/resources/audience_research/

The goods sold in the shops must be distinctive (For example I refer to the imaginative production and sale of Hokonui Moonshine through the museum in Gore in Southern New Zealand). The cafes be well-run and representative of the museum's position, image and attitude to visitor care – even a small facility can provide coffee to make visitors feel welcome..

Community philanthropy or giving may also be a way to go, establishing long-term support for the museum Our communities need to be made aware that access to culture is an investment for the community, and it's important that the community contributes to this in some way.

Another key direction is to look beyond individual museums, to a more integrated approach for sustainability.

In NSW at present, the concept of 'convergence' is an issue that not all are comfortable with. Convergence can be seen as the combining of several cultural functions or different art and cultural forms. Convergence can range from a unified management structure that combines the management of for instance, a library and museum, as in Puke Ariki in New Zealand or Albury Library/Museum or the incorporation of a new function within an existing cultural organisation such as the heritage centre that has been developed within North Sydney's Stanton Library.

There are also many different forms and physical manifestations of convergence, including co-location – sharing a building or site –joint programming and collaborative activities.

In the future, local government may certainly look at convergence in one form or the other for its cultural activities.

But how could convergence impact on the volunteer sector?

The notion may inspire new means of support or collaboration with other organisations - for instance, working with a library on digitising collections and making them more accessible. It might mean using a gallery space for a major regional exhibition comprising items from across the regional Museum sector or having access to local government storage.

Greater levels of convergence might mean that the volunteer Museum is incorporated into a larger entity – to become part of a library museum entity such as the Albury model. Or it might mean that a number of different collections are incorporated into a regional Museum.

A convergence model could provide one way of surviving or perhaps morphing into the future, (I will discuss alternative models later on in my talk). However, it will be important for volunteers who have hitherto managed a museum to think through all the issues that might be entailed in taking such a step. Also they should consider the role that they want themselves and future volunteers to take in such an arrangement. Memoranda of understanding, written agreements, setting out the terms on which convergence might take place, are essential.

You will need to consider whether you want to be part of the management committee, or at the other end of the scale, take no role in the running of the museum, but enable the new organisation to use the services of volunteer individuals to support operations as needed.

A different form of convergence takes the idea of networking to a higher level.

I have seen great changes in the volunteer sector in the last 10 years and one of the most obvious, is the way that it has taken its existence into its own hands, not necessarily on an individual basis, but through networks.

The *Working Spaces* conference is an excellent example of the value of the network. As are the various museum chapters that have developed across New South Wales. In some cases, these networks are supported by local government. It was not too long ago that Port Macquarie had eight separate museums, with little interaction. Now all work collaboratively together and are supported by a Hastings Council museum officer.

I think you can take ideas of networking even further in considering a sustainable future. This might mean sharing exhibitions, developing joint applications for specialised funding for regional activities or expert positions – such as sharing an education officer, or perhaps even sharing a museum officer. A truly integrated networked model might even include a shared collection, or collection storage, it may also lead to a shared museum.

Or perhaps this might create a regionalised approach to running museums, for instance conservation working bees; joint projects such as digitisation; regional significance workshops at one museum after the other – even shared ‘openings’ at the weekend – the idea of the weekend chemist, or the weekend petrol station that used to operate in so many country areas is a great idea – and a roster of open museums, or even a roster of volunteers who are willing to work at different museums, might be something to consider.

There is a great opportunity here for the volunteer sector to lead the way and self empower!

However, inevitably the most crucial challenge for sustainability, will lie in retaining the support of the community – this requires, I believe, being responsive to community needs and understanding what visitors are seeking.

A dynamic and sustainable Museum is a responsive and inclusive museum that meets the evolving needs of its diverse communities, contributes to the welfare of the community, strengthens relationships, aids understanding, education and learning and builds social capital. It actively engages new audiences and reflects the diversity of the community. It is not a collections storehouse or an *Olde Curiosity Shoppe* or a place where specialists dictate what the community must think or see.

It's important that we provide choices for the visitor, not see visitors as a single type or unit or indeed limit our museum offerings to the typical museum visitor – who is – do we really know??

Museums & Galleries New South Wales has undertaken recent research that shows just how effective galleries and museums can be in attracting and satisfying the needs of the community at large.

Our research shows⁴ that museums and galleries have great potential to become a focal point for cultural activity. However, in the case of museums, it is important that the history and the identity they portray does not exclude anyone.

A visit to a museum is a personal experience. It helps to define identity, to enhance self-respect and respect for others. If some key identities are excluded from the Museum, then how can the community learn to appreciate and respect these individuals or groups? Or how could the Museum represent the whole community it serves?

Engaging with audiences is key. Seeking feedback, understanding the audience – its composition and needs – is also vital to retaining or developing a place at the heart of the community.

I believe it is important to understand the value of our cultural facilities and be proud of them. We also need to articulate their value - which is my segue to the final issue that I'd like to address - that of our role in advocacy, promotion and leadership.

It is important that we speak out about the value and the importance of museums in the community.

We can share with a community that we are a vital part of that community and are there to support it, rather than run our own race. The sustainability of our sector relies on strengthening our relationship to the community and it's vital that we are aware of the value of museums to the community.

We can, for instance, demonstrate that museums provide recreational facilities for a whole community, as well as the presentation of ideas on society, on the community, and the world today, through the material we provide.

We can provide community facilities and a place for families to be together and for people to meet and to engage with each other through relating to the works on exhibition.

It's important to have a number of ideas to spruik about the importance and value of museums – particularly volunteer museums.

For instance: Volunteer museums help us to build community organisational capacity; they encourage local self-reliance and project management skills. They help people extend control over their own lives and be a means of gaining insight into political and social ideas. They can facilitate effective public consultation and participation.

⁴ http://mgnsww.org.au/resources/audience_research/

Museums can involve local people in regeneration and sustainability issues. They can facilitate the development of partnerships. They build support for community projects and strengthen community co-operation and networking⁵.

Museums can also develop and contribute to local image and identity and create pride in local traditions and cultures

They can help people feel a sense of belonging and involvement; create and substantiate community traditions; provide reasons for people to develop community activities; improve perceptions about marginalised groups and make people feel better about where they live.

We can also help a sustainable future by articulating and shaping it. We can tell the story of environmental sustainability and its needs.

We can do our best to promote the value of museums in these terms – they are terms which have meaning to others outside the collecting sector.

I would like to stress that to become sustainable and to ensure that we have a future we seriously need to consider change and evolution and what it might mean to our organisations. Unlike the Dodo, we will need to be able to adapt to changing circumstances, and be realistic and assertive about the value of the experience, the learning and the inspiration which museums provide, while at the same time, understand change and embrace its potential. We need to think of our museums, not as fixed entities, but flexible organisations that can adapt to change.

Its important for us to think as leaders.

So will there be volunteer regional museums in the future? I believe there certainly can be, in one form or the other. The choice is up to you!

Firstly I think you should be both visionary and thoughtful. Visionary in that we should be looking at ideas and possibilities. We should get excited about what could happen.

Then we need to be realistic.

It's a common lament that volunteer numbers are shrinking, "everyone is getting older" and "there is no one to hand things on to".

There are indeed places in Australia where the population is diminishing, where we have an ageing demographic and many are moving out of the villages and into towns. These are probably not the best place to establish a new museum or to grow an existing museum and you may need to consider alternative options, as I have previously discussed, to manage into the future.

However I would never let the generalist view about the volunteer sector be the only view. They are equally regions in our State where the population is growing and a volunteer museum can flourish.

⁵ See Matarasso, F. (1997) *Use or Ornament? The social impact of participation in the arts*. Comedia

I think there are a number of models for the future but they need to be models that have a fit within the context in which they exist.

So in the few minutes that I have left I would like to share my ideas of models for the future.

The first is a self-sustaining model and I see two ends of the spectrum here. One end is a *small but beautiful* model – where a small band of volunteers can develop a strong direction and purpose and a clear idea of what a museum can represent for its community. The Pioneer Women's Hut at Tumberumba is a fine example, with great clarity of vision and purpose. It survives on visitation, its shop offers relevant product and it serves a mean cup of tea.

The other end of the self-sustaining spectrum are the large museums with a strong volunteer management. The Lady Denman at Huskisson comes to mind, as does the Eden Killer Whale Museum.

These museums have a focused collection, a strong theme and purpose, the ability to create changing stories and different experiences, they have large supportive volunteer management groups and can afford a manager or a curator who reports to the board. Both have shops with a wide range of product that helps finance the operations.

These organisations are run like a business. Their membership is rather like a shareholder base and supports the work of the museum but does not try to do everything. Such large scale operations have indeed been built up over time and it is true to say that their location in high-growth tourism and development areas with a growing population has ensured their sustainability in the long run.

However at the heart of both these models lies incredible dedication and work of the volunteers who have developed and managed these museums.

It's also notable that these models have also thrived and attracted external partnership support – for instance, the Powerhouse Museum and staff have given enormous help to the Pioneer Women's Hut and there have been significant government contributions to the Lady Denman. But throughout this process, the volunteers have kept control and not relied on external support to prop the organisations up.

Beyond the self-sustaining model, as I've discussed already this morning, I believe sustainability will inevitably lie in organisations that can look outwards, can collaborate and network and even jointly operate or ultimately can converge into an alternative entity.

I believe in fact that the volunteer sector is a model for future sustainability. You have much to teach the rest of the sector about self reliance; community spirit and the ability to *just do it*. I hope you will proudly shout your achievements from the rooftops and be confident in your ability to provide enlightening and inspirational museums for the community

Thank you and I hope you enjoy the rest of the conference.