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Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.’ (Karl Marx)

Street sign sculpture at the District Six Museum, Cape Town, South Africa.
Photo: Paul Grendon, © District Six Museum.

Karl Marx was sitting at an austere desk in the British Library in the Bloomsbury district of London when he penned these well-known words, but England was not the object of his attention on that day early in 1852. Marx was actually writing for an American audience about the coup d’état of Louis Bonaparte — ‘Napoleon the Little’ — that had taken place in France on 1 December of the previous year, but his words are surely apposite for many places and times. In this, the second volume of Humanities Research devoted to a consideration of the ‘Museums of the Future’, the contributors
address critical issues of indigeneity, post-colonialism, cultural difference, human rights, and heritage and sustainable development, across a very broad front. In so doing they confront many of the nightmares of dead generations that perplexed Marx.

To some extent an agenda for the volume is set in the opening essay by Dipesh Chakrabarty, currently a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at The Australian National University. In his thoughtful piece Chakrabarty ponders the effect of mass democracy on museums in post-colonial societies. In part he accomplishes this by examining the District Six Museum in Cape Town. Formerly a ‘mixed’ neighbourhood, District Six was, as Chakrabarty recounts, systematically cleared at the height of the Apartheid regime to make way for a Whites-only housing development. Since 1994 the Museum has developed as a site of communal memory for former residents and their families that not only recaptures their past but also informs their present struggles. Museums such as District Six, he writes, “more than archives and history departments, have travelled the distance needed to keep up with the changes that mark late democracies”.

These broad issues are also canvassed in contributions by Murphy, Galla, Turner, and West. Reproduced here for the first time, Richard West’s address to a conference at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra in February this year outlines the inclusive consultative process that went into the establishment of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian, currently under construction in Washington. In making the case for extensive community involvement, “shared authority” and a “multiplicity of diverse and authoritative voices”, West argues forcefully against the notion of a museum as a “precious place” where “representational or interpretative truth” is the “sanctuary of a narrowly defined and largely self-appointed museological priesthood”. Engagement with minority and indigenous culture and the interface between East and West is also the agenda of Caroline Turner’s contribution to the journal. Her exposition of leading Chinese and Japanese museums produces both striking points of connection and dramatic contrasts: from the lingering spectre of the rampant Red Guards smashing artefacts during the Cultural Revolution, to the lingering stench of rotting meat that literally pervaded the atmosphere at the 2000 alternative Biennale in Shanghai (appropriately entitled F*** Off); from the explicit internationalism of the Japanese National Museum of Ethnology, which even found a place for the culture of the indigenous people of Hokkaido — the Ainu — long before the government revised its claim that Japan was a monocultural country, to the determined policy of engagement with Asia pursued by the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum and the Fukuoka Triennale. Clearly there is much to be learned from what Turner describes as the evolving “non-western museological discourse that is grounded in Asia, inclusive in both professional orientation and cross-cultural dialogue”.

Turner’s focus on the Asia-Pacific is shared by Murphy and Galla. Amareswar Galla presents an account of the development of the Ecomuseum at Ha Long Bay in the Quang Ninh province of Vietnam. Despite the backdrop of poverty, inadequate physical infrastructure and what he calls the “centripetal and centrifugal forces of globalisation and localisation/indigenisation”, Galla’s preliminary report card is overwhelmingly positive, and with good reason. Even at the development stage the Ecomuseum Hub has been internationally recognised as the world’s best practice as an innovative model for promoting heritage economics without compromising conservation values. Economic development and poverty alleviation, according to Galla, are not incompatible with cultural and environmental self-determination and heritage conservation. Bernice Murphy’s essay explores what she calls the “subtleties
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and cross-cultural dialogue and imagination” in the design and development of the Tjibaou Centre in Nouméa in New Caledonia. Murphy demonstrates how the architect, Renzo Piano, drew upon Kanak traditions and history whilst avoiding the dangers of cultural projection and the cliché. Named in honour of the assassinated Kanak leader, Jean-Marie Tjibaou, the resultant complex is, she claims, “exceptional in the world of contemporary architecture” in that it both reflects Tjibaou’s own rejection of an ‘archaeological’ conception of culture, and the aspirations of a colonised indigenous population to “regain a sense of agency in shaping their destiny”.

Australia’s sense of its own past — and the practices involved in presenting it — is also challenged in two important contributions in this issue by Karskens and Read. Karskens provides an overview of what she calls “a new collaborative and integrated approach to urban archaeology” that has recently been employed in the Cumberland/Gloucester Street project in Sydney. Artefacts, she insists, “still hang in the uneasy, as yet unresolved space triangulated between the idea of museums as repositories for scientific research, their aesthetically-inclined collection and presentation, curation and exhibition regimes, and the more recent, potentially radical inroads of social history”. In seeking a way forward Karskens argues that we can no longer “simply dig up the past”, and she supports this claim by demonstrating how collaborative urban archaeology can be used to challenge much received wisdom about early Sydney.

Peter Read’s searing account of a workshop on Top End history that he presented to the annual conference of Adult Learning Australia in 2001, is a reminder — if one was needed — that many of the issues raised by other contributions to this edition of Humanities Research also directly confront Australia. “Australians cannot achieve true reconciliation”, he writes, “until they acknowledge the past, nor acknowledge the past until they know actually what happened”. Knowing what happened, he suggests, is less difficult than is sometimes portrayed, but no less painful. There are many ‘nightmares’ for Australians to come to terms with. In his influential book, How Societies Remember, written, in part, during a visiting fellowship at the Humanities Research Centre, Paul Connerton has argued that “our images of the past commonly serve to legitimate a present social order”. If Connerton is correct museums will, inevitably, continue to present consensual images of the past, but, as the contributions to this volume make clear, the museum of the future must also challenge unitary views of history. The museum of the future must speak with more than one voice.

Endnotes


TWO MODELS OF DEMOCRACY

Before I get on to the matter of museums and their evolving relationship to democracies — my real subject in this short and sketchy essay — let me begin by explaining briefly what I see as the two models of democracy that coexist and sometimes clash in contemporary democratic polities. In the interest of brevity and exposition, I will keep my models separate and simple. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ideas of democracy assumed a pedagogical understanding of politics. One was never born political even if it were thought that every human being had the capacity or the potential to take part in political life. But the condition of being human was not equated to the condition of being political. It was assumed that becoming a citizen, possessing and exercising rights, called for appropriate forms of education. Societies were understood to have both high and low forms of culture. Education provided the capacity for discernment — access to high culture — that the citizen needed. This could be self-education. It could be education through the right kind of experience. More commonly, however, it was thought that it fell to the educational institutions of modern societies to provide citizenly competence. Universities, museums, libraries, exhibitions and other comparable bodies assumed this task. A crucial aspect of this education was the capacity for abstract conceptualisation and reasoning. The book became the key object embodying this assumption. The importance given to the written language as the medium of instruction signified the high place accorded in this mode of thought to the trained, human capacity for abstraction. Abstract reasoning made it possible for the citizen to conceptualise such imaginary entities as ‘class’, ‘public’, or ‘national’ interest and adjudicate between competing claims. Rationality was not merely a procedural aspect of disputations in life; it was itself thought to be an instrument of unity in public discussions. Rationality could help us appreciate our interests and arrange them mentally in the right order of priority. The public sphere was not only imagined as potentially united and unifiable; such unity was itself a value. For Marxists, ‘class’ could be the rational key explaining and promoting a unity between diverse underprivileged groups. For nationalists, something like ‘national interest’ could be a factor that overrode all divisions born of sectional interests. For liberals, rationality could lead to appreciation of that which was in the interest of all. Expanding the area of agreement through education and rational argumentation was seen as way of strengthening the fabric of national life.

This pedagogical understanding of citizenship is not history. It is not something we have left behind. Many of our institutional and personal actions are based on this understanding. Yet twentieth-century practices of mass-democracy — both in the West and in countries such as India — are also predicated on a very different understanding.

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of the political. Following Homi Bhabha's usage of the terms 'pedagogic' and 'performative,' we may call the second model of democratic politics a 'performative' one.\(^2\) The political, in this model, is not fundamentally a matter of pedagogy. The citizen is not someone who comes or is produced at the end of an educational process in which the school, the university, the library, and the museum intervene. In this conception that has increasingly dominated debates in and about public life in democracies since the 1960s, to be human is to be already political. Statements such as 'everything is political,' or 'the personal is political' are reflections of this point of view.

An Australian example will illustrate my point about the difference between the two models of democracy. A. P. Elkin, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sydney from 1934 to 1956, advocated citizenship for Aboriginals but supported only "a gradual granting" of such rights. Only "civilised" Aboriginals, according to him, were fit for citizenship.\(^1\) Elkin, in my terms, stood for the first model. Yet when Aboriginals finally obtained (partial) citizenship in 1967, the decision obviously did not reflect Elkin's position.\(^4\) Any Aboriginal, formally educated or not, was now seen as entitled to the rights of the citizen. The same point could be made with respect to the Indian decision, on the attainment of independence, to adopt universal adult franchise as a citizenly right in a society that was predominantly non-literate. This was part of a global trend the beginnings of which can be traced back at least as far as the 1920s when the fear of Bolshevism, for example, induced Western governments to extend to working classes in many countries the rights of organisation and protest. The acquisition of these rights was no longer made conditional on any preparatory work on behalf of the people. In short, the pedagogical or tutelage model of politics simply could not keep pace with the speed with which the world got politicised last century. The Soviet revolution, anti-colonial mass nationalisms in the non-West, and emergence of mass politics in the West were important contributors to the process until the 1950s. And then came the 'new' social movements and counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, first-wave feminism with its slogan 'the personal is political,' and the politics of multiculturalism and indigenous rights in the Western democracies. The spread of consumerism and the mass media has been an inextricable part of this search for forms of mass democracy. For the rise of the mass-consumer and the question of his or her rights — a growing concern of capitalist democracies — entailed both understandings of the political. The consumer is a subject of pedagogy. She or he is routinely taught many of his or her rights. There are associations and journals that aim to do just that. But the right of a consumer to choose or refuse a product (for whatever reasons) is a basic right, independent of education in these rights.

Understandably, educational institutions such as the university or the museum have not been immune to the growing tension between the pedagogic and performative kinds of democracy. The so-called 'culture wars' of the 1980s that saw the canons of the Western academy being both vigorously challenged and defended, the rise of varieties of cultural relativism, the accent on diversity and the politics of identity, the coming of postmodern and postcolonial criticism, have all left their mark on these institutions. These debates around pedagogic versus performative kinds of democracy are inconclusive but it can be safely said that very few, if any, museums or universities will now want to go back to the purity of nineteenth- or early twentieth-century propositions and ignore the discussions of postcolonial, indigenous and multicultural critics. Nor would they want to deny the reality of consumerist practices within which public institutions are situated. But that said, interesting and rigorous debates still take place in particular institutions about the specific mix of the two models of politics with which particular
situations should be handled. The ensuing decisions, needless to say, are principled as well as political and pragmatic. They do not offer any universal solutions to our dilemmas but I look on these debates as a reminder of tension between the pedagogic and the performative models of democracy. This tension is what we have to negotiate as we contemplate the futures, in late democracies, of the class of institutions we call ‘museums’.

Like the university, the museum also has had to accept that education and entertainment are not opposed to each other. But museums, for reasons I go into below, have been more affected by the process than universities. They have had to embrace the proposition that their clientele have choice and their preferences need to be addressed; that education will largely have to pay for itself and that state-funding will have to be supplemented by endowments and revenue. Along with this have come debates that have challenged the authority of the museum in deciding what could be collected and exhibited. Museums have been drawn into debates about the past, its representation and ownership, debates often driven by the so-called politics of identity. The last point has been a particularly sensitive one for peoples struggling for forms of cultural sovereignty. Indigenous peoples in various parts of world (including Australia) have successfully challenged the idea that everything could be exhibited to anybody or that scientific curiosity represented a greater human interest than a particular group’s cultural use and possession of objects. As a result, museums have also emerged as a key site for cultural politics arising over questions of the past in late democracies.

MUSEUMS, DEMOCRACY AND THE POLITICS OF EXPERIENCE

I want to suggest that if the pedagogic model of democracy privileges the capacity for abstract reasoning and imagination in the citizen, the performative one brings into view the domain of the embodied and the sensual. And that is what makes the roles of visual and other sensual practices different in the two models. Think of the education that once aimed to give the citizen the capacity to conceive of and visualise abstract things, such as the idea of the nation. There were visual aids, of course: maps, statues and other images of national unity. But the way school and university disciplines such as history, geography, political science and anthropology enabled one to think the nation or community was through developing skills for visualising abstractions. I still vividly remember a question a non-literate peasant-girl who hailed from a village in the district of the 24 Parganas near Calcutta once asked me as she accompanied my cousin, her family and myself making our way to Calcutta from Delhi by car in 1973. A domestic maid in my cousin’s home, she had lived in Delhi for quite a few years now and been exposed to television and cinema. And yet, a few miles away from Delhi and her curiosity stoked by unfamiliar surroundings, she asked, “Tell me, Dipeshda [my older brother, Dipesh], is Kashmir a part the 24 Parganas?” We all laughed at her ‘ignorance’ of Indian geography, but the incident also told me how much one’s geographical imagination was a matter of education and training in visualising — through instruments such as the map — completely imperceptible entities like the nation.

In pedagogic models of democracy, citizenship is based on the capacity for reasoning. This capacity is assumed to stand supreme as the machine through which all information needs to be processed. It is as if the pedagogic model privileges the brain over the senses. The museum of the past would collect and put in juxtaposition objects and artefacts that never belonged together in their natural/cultural distribution in the world. The zoological garden would do the same with animals, and libraries with books. All these arrangements would privilege the conceptual or the analytic over the lived. The zoo would make a catalogue come alive, as it
were. Museums and archives — both modern institutions for preserving relics of the past — were close to each other in principle at their moments of origin. Just as the museum curator ignored the sensory aspects of the exhibits, historians trained in the traditions of their science would seldom include in their narratives the tactile or sensory part of their research. The experience of old brittle documents going to pieces in their hands, the smell of old newspapers, the strain on the eye caused by past styles of handwriting, the allergy attacks they might suffer from the dust in the archives — in short, everything that made the so-called relic of the past a part of the lived present as well — would be put to one side in order for the past to emerge in clear distance from the present. Why would the senses be so relegated to the background in the work of the analytic? Because, it was assumed in this way of thinking, that it was only through analytic reasoning that one reached the deeper, general and invisible ‘truths’ about society, whatever they were — class, economic forces, natural laws. That which was merely perceptual, not subordinated to reason — and, in that sense, part of the lived experience — gave us access to only the local and particular.

The analytic, one might say, always wanted to subordinate ‘experience’ or the ‘lived’ to itself. Yet the realm of experience has asserted itself more and more in academic history or anthropology whenever these disciplines have tried to respond to the pressures of democracy. But not always with happy results. Historians in the 1960s and seventies explored ‘oral history’ assuming that the experiences reported by people would nicely fill out stories available in the archives, and thus democratise the discipline of history without challenging its basic precepts. Instead they found themselves in the land of memories which always blurred the distinction between the past and the present that was crucial for historical analysis and objectivity. A disciplinary unease exists between the field of memory and academic history. Anthropologists have similarly wrestled with strategies to release the lived and the experienced from their traditional subjection to analysis but with mixed results. The reasons are not far to seek. The vision of the political that academic disciplines are wedded to belongs to my first model of democracy: citizenship as the capacity for abstract reasoning. Indeed, without such reasoning, the critical-political edge of the social sciences would be blunted. How would you otherwise visualise as concrete and real such invisible entities as capital, social structure, instrumental rationality, and so on? And without these categories, how would one develop modern critiques of social relations?

Museums, being public places where one does not usually require special qualifications to enter, have been more open to the pressure of mass democracies and have had to address more directly issues of experience. They have therefore also had to be more sensitive to the politics that question the presumed primacy of the analytic over the lived. In his well-known essay “On Collecting Art and Culture”, the anthropologist James Clifford gives an early instance of this from the life of the Musée de l’Homme in Paris. He cites an essay published in 1986 by Anne Vitart-Fardoulis, a curator at the museum. Vitart-Fardoulis describes how one day a Native American man walked into the museum and suddenly, by talking in a personal and intimate way about “a famous intricately painted animal skin”, challenged the primacy of the analytic over the lived:

The grandson of one of the Indians who came to Paris with Buffalo Bill was searching for the [painted skin] tunic his grandfather had been forced to sell to pay his way back to the United States when the circus collapsed. I showed him all the tunics in our collection, and he paused before one of them. Controlling his emotion, he spoke. He told the meaning of this lock of hair, of that design, why this color had been used, the meaning of
that feather ... This garment, formerly beautiful and interesting but passive and indifferent, little by little became ... [an] active testimony to a living moment through the mediation of someone who did not observe and analyze it but who lived the object and for whom the object lived. It scarcely matters whether the tunic is really his grandfather’s.

I do not have to remind the reader that this Native American man could have walked into a museum in the nineteenth century and said the same things but he would not have been heard. Why do we hear him now? Because the politics of identity — the question of who can speak for whom — are, like it or not, part of the cultural politics of a liberal democracy. The more our attention has turned to the formerly ‘colonised’ within the West, the more anti-colonial themes and questions have come to mark liberal democracies’ attempts at multiculturalism. The history of colonialism and of colonial knowledge shows how the universalistic and humanist analytic frames of the social sciences were once used to classify, control and subordinate the colonised both within and outside the West. It was the same process that also resulted in the pre-colonial knowledge systems of the colonised now living subjugated lives, relegated to the supposedly parochial and untheoretical realms of ‘experience’. It is precisely against such politics of knowledge that the cry goes up from time to time from the ranks of the historically-oppressed, “to hell with your archives, we have the experience!”.9

In opening themselves up to the politics of experience, museums have gradually moved away from the archives, a modern institution with which they once shared paradigms of knowledge. For the politics of experience orients us to the realms of the senses and the embodied. This is never achieved by the capacity for abstract reasoning. It takes us away from the senses, it trains us to be sceptical of the evidence they produce about the world. University education, on the other hand, can train us, as I have said, to visualise as concrete that which is invisible to the natural eye. But it speaks to (and of) a disembodied subject of history, a position that we individually are called to inhabit when we know the world from that position. The museum of today, however, increasingly opens itself up to the embodied and the lived. It provides as much ‘experience’ as abstract knowledge. And this is directly a part of my second model of democracy.

Let me illustrate this briefly with the example of the District Six Museum in Cape Town, South Africa. As many readers will know, District Six was a well-known ‘mixed’ neighbourhood in Cape Town that was literally bulldozed between 1966 and 1984 to make it into an area for the Whites. Thousands of people lost their dwellings...
overnight. Families and neighbours were torn apart and dispersed. The museum grew organically out of the protest movement that fearlessly challenged this brutal act of undemocracy. Started in 1994, the museum developed into a site for communal memory, not a nostalgic monument to a dead past but a living memory that is part of the struggle against racism in post-Apartheid South Africa. Older residents and their children visit the museum to imbibe the memories that inform their present struggles. The museum makes special effort to remember the streets of the neighbourhood. Here is a part of a testimony from one of the visitors to the museum, showing how the logic of remembering, as distinct from that of history, leads inexorably to the realms of the sensory and embodied:

The streets of my childhood in Sea Point survive as the bones of an articulated skeleton remain preserved. On visiting there, my memories jostling, it occurred to me that this act of remembering can be likened to watching a video — in reverse motion … Around the bones grow organs for living and sometimes flesh … But the process of remembering is filtered and textured, entangling stages of then and now. It culminates in an evocation of old-new things, rather than the ‘flesh’ of what was once there. A process that is at the same time so intimate and yet beyond our grasp…

Along streets we all made our way, linking beacons of home, school and the shop. In a recurring dream verging on nightmare, I pick my way in nauseating dread along the Main Road toward school, bearing a heavy suitcase … And memories push forward; hot pavements, the scream of seagulls and the droning foghorn, yellow-foaming sea and crackling palm fronds; but the strongest memory-sense of all, the smell of watermelon, permeating from the fresh-cut grass of the beachfront lawns, to the residents of the nearby hotels, flats and scattered houses.¹⁰

You can see in this quotation how memory, eventually, can never be separated from the domain of the senses, for memory always has elements that are embodied. We cannot even predict these embodied memories in their entirety. This actually produces a paradoxical result for what is often disparagingly called ‘identity politics’. It is true that the politics of diverse identities in democracies often lead people to make indefensible claims connecting experience with identity. For instance, it could be claimed — and often is
— that only the members of a particular group have the right or the capacity to understand/represent the group because they have the necessary and requisite experience. Sometimes, as I have already said, knowing particular histories of oppression helps us to empathise with these claims. But the very nature and politics of experience actually belies such claims. The realm of the lived ultimately belongs to embodied existence. And experience always touches on this level. It follows then that experience does not have to always connote a subject (or an identity) defining the experience as such. Experience is not always subjective in a psychological sense, if by psychology we refer to processes that go on only in the brain. The body also has experiences and remembers them. The politics of identity thus often reaches out to a level that actually defeats any project that the ‘politicians of identity’ may have of making identities appear fixed, immutable and essentialised. For who can tell ahead of any event what the mind-body complex may or may not remember? Experience, thus, does not have to speak to a politics of identity.

By opening out to questions of the embodied and the lived, museums address certain formations of the public in modern democracies that academic disciplines do not address. A democracy needs an informed public and public debates. Academic models of knowledge privilege information that, supposedly, the brain processes. These models of knowledge marginalise the senses. Democracies have moved on to a variety of politics in which information is not simply packaged for the brain to process; information is now also what addresses other senses — of seeing, hearing, smelling, and touching. In the democracy of the masses and the media, the realms of the embodied are increasingly politically powerful. It is not that the expertise and rationality produced by the traditional academic disciplines are redundant or irrelevant. But their traditional scepticism towards the embodied and the sensory will not help us in understanding why memory and experience — in other words, embodied knowledge — will play as important roles in the politics of democracies as the disembodied knowledge academic disciplines aspire to. Museums, more than archives and history departments, have travelled the distance needed to keep up with changes that mark late democracies.

Endnotes
1 See the Introduction to Simon During ed., The Cultural Studies Reader, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) for a discussion of these issues.
6 Joan Scott’s much-cited essay, “The Evidence of Experience”, in Critical Inquiry, 17, Summer 1991, pp. 772–797, reproduces, this time with a post-structuralist suspicion of the subject, the social analyst’s scepticism about the usefulness of “experience” as a guide to social realities.
8 Bernard Cohn, Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998) is a classic statement of some of the issues involved here.
9 I discuss this more in my essay “Globalization, Democratization, and the Evacuation of History?” in Jackie Assayag and Veronique Benei (eds), East in West, (Delhi: Permanent Black, forthcoming).


11 Joan Scott’s essay “The Evidence of Experience” seems to make this assumption.
Dramatic change, geopolitical, economic and cultural, marked late twentieth-century Asian countries. In this article I will discuss how four Asian museums — two in China and two in Japan — are participating in cultural exchanges and engaging cross-culturally in their exhibition and curatorial programs in ways which negotiate past and future for their communities.

How does a museum in the twenty-first century celebrate and at the same time transcend history? How does such a museum engage productively with other cultures internationally and with ethnic minorities within a country, in ways that ensure justice and sensitivity?

The issue of cultural identity has often been associated in both Asian and Western museums with the concept of 'nation' and also, perhaps inevitably, with the idea of a 'homogeneous' society and culture within nations. Enshrined values of the dominant culture and ethnographic perspectives towards 'the other', especially minority cultures, often do little justice to contemporary and changing living cultures inside and outside national boundaries. In Australian museums, for example, the issue of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples is of profound importance, as is the need to represent increasing cultural diversity within a multicultural country. Although progress has been made over the last twenty years, these issues have not been resolved, as debate at the time of the opening of the new National Museum of Australia in 2001 revealed. The Asian museums which are the subject of this article, I will argue, are taking a leading position in reconciling past and future for their communities, as well as being at the cutting edge of developing models in their exhibition and curatorial practices for engaging productively with other cultures internationally or ethnic minorities within their own countries.

Museums have to be contextualised in terms of their own histories as much as do the objects on display in those museums. The role of state and community groups is a critical factor in understanding those histories. The Shanghai Museum, founded in 1952 and born out of war and revolution, was, and indeed still is, a product of Communist China. Now recognised as one of the great museums of the world, its new building, opened in 1996, is also a symbol of China's future as an international cultural powerbroker and superpower. The Shanghai Art Museum, its sister institution, has a history of forty years of working with local art, often through bureaucratic associations of artists, but is now, through the Shanghai Biennale of 2000, taking on a role of international engagement and becoming a site for debate of controversial issues which give it a leadership role for art museums in China in the twenty-first century. The National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku), Osaka, Japan, founded in 1974, emerged from post-occupation Japan. This was an era when the Japanese economic miracle had brought extraordinary confidence and allowed Japan to join the first world community and challenge Western notions of 'Asian' economic
and cultural dependency. It now holds the largest collections of ethnological material from the second half of the twentieth century of any museum in the world and is developing policies redefining the nature of the genre of ethnological museums. The new Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, opened in 1999, is a product of Japan’s postmodern present. It has been a pioneer in contributing to the emergence in Japan and internationally of appreciation of contemporary Asian art, and is at the forefront of critical debates regarding a new paradigm for Asian art.

THE SHANGHAI MUSEUM: ASIAN PHOENIX

Nowhere are the dramatic changes in twenty-first century Asia more apparent than in Shanghai, a city of 19 million people (China’s largest city) dominated in its skyline by the futuristic television tower ‘The Pearl of the Orient’ in the twin city of Pudong. Yet just as appropriate a symbol of Shanghai today is the new Shanghai Museum, opened in 1996.

Designed by Xing Tonghe of the Shanghai Architectural Institute at a cost of 70 million Chinese Yuan (approx. AUD$15.5 million) — eighty-five per cent from government and the other fifteen per cent “by generous donations from home and abroad” the building is in the centre of one of the city’s most impressive plazas, Peoples’ Square. Covered in pink granite and with a construction space of 39,200 square metres, its architectural form is circular on a square base, in line with the Chinese philosophy of a square earth under a round Heaven. The design is also derived from a ‘ding’, one of the ancient storage and offertory vessels from Bronze Age China (eighteenth to third centuries BC).

It is not just the striking and futuristic building, however, which has led the Shanghai Museum to be regarded as one of the most dynamic museums of Asia. That reputation rests on the collections built up in times of extreme difficulty, and even more on the influence the Museum has had internationally through sending exhibitions all over the world since 1980. Unlike the Palace Museums in Beijing and Taipei with their inherited collections, the founding of the new Shanghai Museum in 1952 was a deliberate decision on the part of then Mayor Chen Yi. In an article for the Art Newspaper at the time of the official inauguration in 1996, Jason Kaufman notes that many of the original collections came from those fleeing China who sold their works at bargain prices. Nevertheless, it seems all the works were paid for and, as I shall argue, the decision to establish the Museum was a stroke of great prescience. The result was of critical importance to China at a time when so much of Chinese cultural heritage had been removed to Taiwan. The city’s collection was augmented by important archaeological discoveries (acknowledged to have helped reshape thinking in the West on China’s past), purchases of works within China which might otherwise have gone to Hong Kong or to Western museums, and supplemented in the 1990s by a new freedom to purchase abroad and by a recent influx of gifts from expatriates. One of the reasons the Shanghai Museum collections are so respected internationally is the breadth of research and scholarship which has gone into building and explaining them. Shaping the collections, however, has not been an easy task.

I first went to China and met then Director, Dr Ma Chengyuan, in 1984. Then everyone in Shanghai and throughout China still wore Mao suits and the extraordinary construction boom had yet to begin. The Museum (like most municipal institutions in China) was in a run down and shabby building — a former bank on Henan Road. Nevertheless, the displays were of high quality and the scholarship demonstrated in the labels and publications spoke of tremendous commitment on the part of Director and staff. During the Cultural Revolution Dr Ma and his staff had been under serious physical threat from the Red Guards, and he had chosen to sleep with the objects in the Museum to try to protect them. In an interview with
the Far Eastern Economic Review in 1996, he stated that the Red Guards had in fact locked him inside the Museum for several months as punishment for being a "suspected class enemy". However, it seems the Red Guards did not try to destroy all relics, and at a later stage would ring up Dr Ma after they had broken into a collector's house to tell him to come and see if there were any relics worth saving before they started smashing everything. The complexities of this era of political ferment and challenge to authority, by workers' groups as well as Red Guards on the local Shanghai level, needs more research, but suffice it to say that there is no question that saving a priceless heritage for future generations of Chinese has clearly been the mission of Dr Ma throughout his tenure at the Museum. He has also overseen many of the archaeological discoveries and international exchanges which have made the Museum's reputation, as well as the planning for the new building opened in 1996. His contribution has been immense and commands much respect internationally.

Today, there are over 120,000 pieces of art in the collection, and the Museum is divided into eleven permanent collection galleries each consisting of extraordinary objects: ancient Chinese bronzes, ancient Chinese sculpture, two galleries of Chinese ceramics, ancient Chinese jade, painting, calligraphy, seals, coins, Ming and Qing furniture, and Minority Nationalities. The Museum's bronzes collections, in particular, are justly famous: many are technological and artistic masterpieces, beautifully cast and with exquisite decoration of geometric and zoomorphic designs. Each gallery also has stunning display techniques and lighting effects, rivalling any museum in the world today.

This is a museum where it is difficult to resist superlatives, especially when one considers the astonishing development over a short period of fifty years. We need to see the Shanghai Museum's achievements, acknowledged by foreign observers, in the context of many much more static and conservative museums of Asian art worldwide, where the art works may be of high standard but there is little interpretation or ongoing cutting edge research. At the Shanghai Museum there are library, conservation and research areas (and a wonderful scholars' garden complete with rocks, a tea house and artificial lights simulating stars). Education and training are a critical aspect of the Museum's mission, as are symposia; and the new Museum has bilingual labels and a digital audio tour in eight languages. Computers are much in evidence in the new Museum and there are theatres and a high definition graphics hall for videos and educational films. Programs for school children are a key aspect of outreach (and a high proportion of the visitors are from schools).

The scientific conservation laboratories have developed from a small laboratory in 1960 to a major research institute dating and conserving paper, metal, lacquer, wood and stone and publishing important papers related to this scientific research. The archaeology department has worked on twenty-seven historical sites, including local sites proving Shanghai had a culture in ancient times, something not previously well understood.

Equally impressive is the Museum's international outreach. The Shanghai Museum has, since 1980, been sending exhibitions abroad not as fundraising or empty cultural relations exercises, but in a genuine scholarly and cultural exchange from which many museums abroad have benefited and learned much. This has been a major factor in the Museum's international influence: since 1980, the Shanghai Museum has sent over fifty exhibitions to sixteen countries in Asia, America, Europe and Oceania (Australia and New Zealand) and also held sixty art exhibitions in Shanghai from outside, including contemporary art from Europe and Australia. I worked with Director Ma and staff in 1990 on one of these exhibitions of bronze treasures, which was shown in Australia as part of the Museum's international program, and on the return exhibition of contemporary
Australian metalwork, which was shown at the new Shanghai Museum in 1997 as one of its first international exhibitions in the new building. I came to appreciate at first hand the professionalism and scholarship that characterised the Shanghai Museum's dealings with museums abroad. For example no fee was charged for this exhibition at a time when many Western museums were charging hundreds of thousands of dollars on top of freight and other costs for exhibitions from their collections. Nevertheless, as with any exchange with any country, a framework of national and political realities has to be taken into account. Both the Queensland exhibition of 1990 and an earlier San Francisco exhibition of 1983 were in response to sister state and city initiatives that included trade agendas on the Australian, US and Chinese sides, and the catalogue published by the Queensland Art Gallery in 1990 carries the corrigendum: “Despite the different colours used in this map, Taiwan is acknowledged to be part of China” — an issue avoided by the US museum catalogue which used black and white maps.

One of the Museum’s most interesting display areas is the gallery devoted to Minority Nationalities’ art, although minority art is integrated into the other displays, especially in the Bronzes Gallery. There are fifty-five officially recognised ethnic minorities, that is, not Han Chinese, in today’s China, about eight per cent of the population, equalling at least 70 million people. Of the twenty-three provinces of China (Taiwan is the twenty-third), five are Autonomous regions. Dr Ma initiated a policy of exhibitions of the art and culture of minority peoples and of exhibitions from Autonomous regions and to date three major exhibitions have been held — from Xinjiang, Mongolia, and Tibet. Exhibitions of the art and culture of minorities pose a challenge for any museum, including in Australia as already noted. The display of the culture and art of ethnic minorities is inevitably related to government policy in every museum worldwide. Official policy in China is that all ethnic groups are equal and that local nationalisms should be opposed. From a museum professional’s perspective the fact of showing those cultures and the way in which those cultures are presented, and whether respect for achievement is accorded, are critical issues. Dr Amareswar Galla, Australian-based President of the International Council of Museums’ Asia Pacific chapter, maintains that the Shanghai Museum is leading the way in opening up Chinese museums to representation of autonomous minorities. The fact of having a permanent gallery of Minorities’ art is impressive and the Shanghai Museum certainly sets a high standard with regard to presenting the art of minority peoples. Since most are from Western regions of China, their artistic production may not necessarily be well known or understood in the East, such as in Shanghai.

Dr Ma curated the first major exhibition from Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region with the Museum staff (including, as is clear from the catalogue, ethnic minority staff). In no sense is the approach ‘anthropological’ — the works are presented as art objects in a formal sense. The exhibition catalogue in Mandarin and English presents a panorama of extraordinary and beautiful objects — sculpture, painting, calligraphy, jewellery such as gold and beads, ceramics and textiles, including exquisite embroidery. It also delineates the civilisation and cultural exchanges in the region of the Silk Road over centuries and in particular recent archaeological research (especially, the catalogue emphasises, finds since the implementation of “the policy of reform and opening to the outside world”) including by a Sino-Japanese joint project. Among the most fascinating objects are documents in Chinese and Aramaic systems and languages including Kharosthi, Sanskrit, Khotonais, Koutcheen, Sogdian, ancient Tibetan, ancient Uygur, and Qarakhanid. The splendidly illustrated and researched volume can be read as a celebration of cultural exchange within and outside China.
The displays and information throughout the Museum and in catalogues produced for international exhibitions constantly talk in terms of engagement with other cultures and exchange of ideas, including, for example, in relation to the importation of Buddhist ideas, the influence of these ideas from India, Pakistan and Afghanistan on Chinese art and their adaptation in the Chinese context. The displays in the bronzes area likewise talk of bronzes found in border areas, showing valuable evidence of cultural exchange. Artworks from the Tang era are described as revealing that dynasty’s tolerance of other cultures, allowing settlement by foreigners and its openness to Western ideas. Thus the Museum displays and publications stress a rich heritage, not only of China’s influence on other cultures but also of border crossings leading to culture exchanges and of the enrichment of Chinese culture from other sources, including minority peoples’ culture.

The Shanghai Museum’s overall focus then is on dynamic exchange as part of China’s cultural history. This approach opens up new ways of seeing national culture. What is presented is a complex multi-layered history which gives evidence of cultural crossings over the centuries. Moreover, the Museum’s own history is an inspiring story of survival and resurgence: it has reclaimed and rewritten history through scholarly research, including the local history of Shanghai; asserted the importance to community of this history; defended China’s culture against iconoclasm; combined history and the past with living culture (and symbolised this with its stunning architectural design); and made an effort at cultural inclusion on the basis of reasonable equality. The Shanghai Museum gives a possibility of examining history in the context of 4,000 years, a history which might otherwise be lost. Its international exchanges include a contemporary focus on living cultures and contemporary art from abroad. It thus shows a living face and breaks down the barriers between past and present, dead art and living culture. There is a somewhat ambiguous Chinese saying that whoever controls the past controls the future. The Shanghai Museum’s efforts at researching and preserving the past are, without question, an important contribution to China’s future.

The Shanghai Museum is also an example
of the strength of survival of scholarship and thus a symbol of survival for all museums. While working within official policies, and with a strong relationship to local Government in Shanghai in particular, the Museum has won international respect. A new arena for the Museum is opening up in the critical area of training in the Asia-Pacific region. The Museum will host in 2002, for international participants, an International Council of Museums (ICOM) workshop, in partnership with the Asia-Pacific Executive Board of ICOM, on globalisation and conservation of intangible heritage. This gives it a leadership role in shaping Asia-Pacific museum dialogue, including on issues of representing diversity and minority cultures.  

THE SHANGHAI ART MUSEUM AND BIENNALE: AT THE CROSS ROADS

If the Shanghai Museum negotiates past and future with deceptive ease, the Shanghai Art Museum by contrast represents the disaffections and divides of contemporary art in a rapidly changing society. It has become a site for the negotiation of ideas of living artists trying to find a pathway through the complexities of the present. While the Far Eastern Economic Review described a hushed crowd at the opening of the Shanghai Museum in 1996, the opening of the new Shanghai Art Museum four years later, which coincided with the opening of the Third Shanghai Biennale on 6 November 2000, presented a quite different scene of noisy debate and even challenge to authority. It has been described as “one of the defining moments in contemporary Chinese art".  

Although China was never colonised it was subjected to the indignity of encroachments from 1842 onwards by Western imperialist powers and finally by Japan. Shanghai was a centre of foreign ‘concessions’ and of Western and Japanese trade and influence prior to the Second World War. The 2000 Biennale, which inaugurated a new direction for the Museum, was also the opening exhibition in a new facility for the Art Museum now located in a former art deco library built in the 1930s, the era of foreign control. It is ironic that the Museum is the new building and the contemporary art museum the old building; but there was a certain sense of historic appropriateness in that the old building represented Shanghai’s semi-colonial and cosmopolitan past, while the new Art Museum was inevitably to become a site for ‘postcolonial’ reaction. The Shanghai Art Museum was founded over forty years ago, so it was already a postcolonial institution. Its own collection is of Chinese art, including a fine representation of the school of Shanghai from the early twentieth century. The First and Second Shanghai Biennales, held in the previous inadequate premises, had been devoted only to Chinese art and largely to traditional Chinese art. The Third Shanghai Biennale, in combination with a challenging series of satellite shows, chose deliberately to address issues of globalisation, regionalism and local identity in a postcolonial world. The Third Shanghai Biennale in such a vital centre and city as Shanghai was immediately recognised as a very important event by foreign curators, including myself, who flocked to the event. The exhibition was put together by a team of curators, including some from Shanghai and two from overseas. The local Chinese curators were, Fang Zengxian, head of the curatorial team, Zhang Qing and Li Xu. The overseas curators were Hou Hanru, an expatriate Chinese curator of considerable international reputation, living in Paris, and Toshio Shimizu, also a very well-known and respected curator internationally, based in Tokyo. Major sponsorship also came from Japan. Hou Hanru and others saw the Biennale as a breakthrough because, as Wu Hung, a scholar at Chicago University has argued, it broke long-standing taboos about who controlled contemporary art in China. In an era when boundaries are breaking down and change, fluidity and mutability are the order of the day, this internationalisation of the Biennale was seen as a victory for the concept that art can be apre-
associated for itself rather than only as part of a local or national context. Yet the situation regarding contemporary art is fluid and unstable and there was much at stake here, not simply whether older artistic bureaucracies should continue to control the art scene, but also issues of engagement and freedom in a much broader sense. Interestingly the great majority of artists was Chinese, with Japan the country next most dominant in numbers; but the selection included not only European and American art, but several artists from elsewhere in Asia. Indonesian artist Heri Dono won a major award, and two Indigenous Australian artists (the only Australians represented) were included — Emily Kngwarreye and Gordon Bennett. Taiwanese artists were included in the Shanghai Biennale (something only possible since the late nineties), identified as from, for example, “Taibei, Taiwan, China”.

At the official opening of the 2000 Biennale, nothing could strike one more forcibly than the refusal of many of those locals present to listen to the official speeches. One Western critic leapt on a chair to call for silence but was completely ignored. If government presence had given the new Shanghai Art Museum its building and funding, many Chinese artgoers at the new Museum were, it seemed, determined to ignore that fact. Of course this lack of interest in official speeches did not necessarily signify lack of support for the Biennale and is not unusual at contemporary art shows worldwide. Although the banquet, sponsored by Coca Cola, was more relaxed, the symposium that followed was not. Wang Namning, in a paper entitled “The Shanghai Art Museum should not become a market stall in China for Western hegemony”, argued that the Western world was forcing Chinese art to conform to its own image and the Shanghai Art Museum, in which the symposium was taking place, should first of all be concerned with Chinese art and not the Western marketplace.

Yet the catalogue essays, especially by Chinese curators, had already made the point that in no way was the Biennale to blindly follow ‘the West’. The emphasis of the Biennale was that it would go beyond Westcentrism and also embrace a new internationalism. This was made quite explicit when Hou Hanru posed the key question (a question undoubtedly circumscribed by the politics of the Biennale which needed government backing): “In today’s post-modern world, Shanghai serves as a model for a new specific and indispensable position in the cultural negotiation between global and local cultures in non-Western societies. In this negotiation a ‘core’ question is often raised: ‘What is Oriental modernity?’” Many artists and curators, including Hou Hanru, today are working beyond the nation and beyond East and West. Hou Hanru’s question regarding Oriental modernity was brilliantly insightful in the context in which the Biennale was being held. He described to me his emotion in coming back to Shanghai to work on international contemporary art, and his personal journey since leaving China and now returning to help begin a process of connection. This is the eternal dilemma of the expatriate. In an interview with Zhu Qi, Hou Hanru also stated:

Artists should not make art that is just easily accessible to the public. Today, the intellectual no longer exists. Even more tragic, is happiness has ceased to exist … exhibitions lacked, just like Chinese culture as a whole today, a sense of humour, an unbearable lightness of being … I think today’s art in China is too utilitarian, over-mediated. There is no personal freedom to look at and evaluate the root of a problem or issue.

The Biennale was an exciting and diverse exhibition of international contemporary art, including Chinese art. More controversial were the satellite shows and especially the alternative Biennale (with its own curators and not in any way part of the official
program) held in a disused warehouse near Suzhou creek. As Western critic David Barrett noted:

There are several reasons why this show was so talked about: it presented work by the youngest artists; it took an aggressive stance towards the Biennale; and it was deliberately shocking. All these attributes were embodied by the exhibition’s succinct title: F*** Off. (The translation was a brilliant underplay; the Chinese title was The Uncooperative Attitude.) … Recombined horses, diseased and wounded humans, tests of physical endurance, raw flesh. These were the enduring images of F*** Off.13

Rotting meat and its stench were indeed the keynote of this alternative exhibition and the rumour spread that the authorities, who had closed many such shows in the past on opening night, had allowed this one to remain open as a test of endurance for foreign curators and locals alike!

The artist Ai Weiwei, a member of the post-Tiananmen diaspora and one of the organisers of the alternative Biennale, provides an insight into the sense of disillusionment with contemporary Chinese art which undoubtedly partly inspired the alternative Biennale, declaring in an article in 1997 that the “history of modern China is a history of negation, a denial of the value of humanity, a murder of individuality. It is a history without a soul”, in which artists “reflect degraded standards and a lack of heartfelt values”.14

The whole Biennale, including the alternative shows not part of the official Biennale, was correctly seen as a test case for freedom and internationalism within contemporary Chinese art. The robust debate was in itself a breakthrough and an indication that Chinese contemporary art and the city of Shanghai were becoming a vibrant force in the international art scene. The international interest also reflected the impact of Chinese artists on the world scene since the post-Tiananmen diaspora sent them to exile in Europe, the US and Australia. The fact that so many are returning to exhibit in Shanghai or were involved in the Biennale and alternative Biennale, signalled a new beginning. (This international focus is continuing with a European and a New York curator working alongside Chinese curators for the 2002 Biennale).

Engaging with the World: The National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku) Osaka, Japan

The Japanese National Museum of Ethnology (Koruritsu Minzokugaku Hakubutsukan known as Minpaku) was founded in 1974 (and opened in 1977) as an anthropologically focussed and ethnological museum on the site of the former Osaka 1970 World Expo. An Inter-University Research Institute under the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, it has been recognised as one of the top 100 public facilities in Japan. It is an example of both a university research centre and a high-tech museum created out of the wealth of Japan's post-war recovery and the resurgent economy of the 1970s in Japan's second largest city of Osaka, a powerhouse of industrial energy with a population of over 2.5 million.

Like many Japanese museums of the second half of the twentieth century, Minpaku is characterised by stunning architecture. Designed by Kisho Kurokawa to harmonise with the Senri Expo Park, the emphasis is on horizontal roof lines to suggest traditional Japanese eaves. In contrast to the Shanghai Museum, which covers only China in its permanent exhibitions, and the National Museum in Tokyo (Tokyo Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan known as Tohaku) founded in the nineteenth century which is a Museum of Oriental arts and of the Imperial Household, the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, like the Expo before it, covers the world. The museum “aims to promote a general und-
standing and awareness of people, societies and cultures throughout the world". Its staff are engaged in extensive fieldwork internationally in many countries including, for example, research into Aboriginal cultures in Australia. One leading scholar, Professor Masatoshi Kubo, has been visiting Aboriginal communities for over a decade to study their languages. There is not, however, unlike many older ethnographic museums, a hierarchy between cultures; and the lifestyles of Europeans and Japanese are included in the displays, although undoubtedly the emphasis is on ‘folk’ culture and festivals rather than modern urban cultures.

Education is a special issue here as everywhere in Japan. The Museum holds numerous symposia, mainly for academics. It has an international reputation as a major university research centre and has a graduate school. Public education programs operate on several levels, including for schools, and multimedia is very much in evidence, but there are no specialist education staff. Like its sister institution, the National Museum of Japanese History at Sakura, outside Tokyo, it is heavily focused on university-style academic research and training; but Minpaku’s focus on other cultures evades the torment experienced by the history museum which ends its exhibits in the 1920s because no way has yet been found to address the highly sensitive issues in Japan of the Second World War.

This academic and research orientation of Minpaku is both a strength and a weakness. Moreover, attendances have been dropping in recent years, possibly because of the out-of-the-way location in the former Expo Park, although the Museum staff attribute the drop in part to the effect of television documentaries. In an effort to reverse the attendance downturn, the Museum is planning to do a series of international exhibitions. The first, timed to coincide with the World Cup jointly hosted by Japan and Korea, is about contemporary Korean lifestyle and is an interesting example of the Museum’s emphasis on living culture. A whole Korean house is to be imported. The question might be raised whether Korean contemporary lifestyle is so different from lifestyle in Japan but it may also be that the average Japanese knows little of the contemporary lifestyle of Koreans, given the divisions that still exist between the two nations as a result of Japan’s colonisation of Korea. One might also ask whether the exhibition will feature the lifestyle of the large Korean population living in Japan who still experience discrimination with regard to political rights. However, the Museum is undoubtedly moving to tackle some of the very difficult issues related to display of other cultures.

The issue of cultural identity in museums, as I have already suggested, is tied to that of ‘nation’ and the idea of a homogeneous society and culture. The values of the dominant culture and ethnographic perspectives towards ‘the other’, especially minority cultures, often do little justice to living cultures. Here, however, the Minpaku record is impressive.

One example is the championing of the culture of the Indigenous people of Hokkaido colonised by Japan in the nineteenth century. The National Museum of Ethnology has been displaying Ainu culture since 1979, when Ainu culture was not recognised as a separate entity. The Ainu are in fact a tiny population numbering less than 100,000, and the Japanese Government was still maintaining in the 1990s that Japan was a monocultural country, until persuaded by Ainu activism to retract this position. However, the Museum was well ahead of these changes and has assisted in setting up new Ainu museums in Hokkaido, at least one of which is run by an Ainu board. Another of these museums is largely the inspiration of Shigeru Kayano, the only Ainu person elected a member of the Japanese Parliament and an Ainu activist, who is also a major adviser to Minpaku on Ainu culture. Professor Kazuyoshi Ohtsuka, of Minpaku’s staff, is a leading expert on Ainu culture and assisted in the development of the Hokkaido
Museums. He is a key figure in researching and presenting Ainu culture and his displays at the National Museum of Ethnology are both culturally sensitive and allow real insights into Ainu culture and society. He also believes in living culture and will be bringing one hundred contemporary Ainu artists together in the first permanent exhibition of their art works with those of traditional artists who influenced them. This exhibition will be epoch-making by allowing Ainu to select what should be exhibited; previously this was done solely by Japanese curators. The Ainu people are regarded in Minpaku as the absolute owners of the Ainu collections, and five Ainu artists are brought in every year to scrutinise the collections.  

As Elaine Gurian has argued, the involvement of native peoples challenges fundamental rules of museums and Minpaku's policy here is in advance of many museums worldwide.

As a museum primarily of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Minpaku also questions differences between art and ethnology and even what ethnology and ethnography mean in a twenty-first century context. As Kenji Yoshida notes, the Museum has some nineteenth-century colonial type collections, such as those from Melanesia, but the majority of the collections are contemporary, that is, the last fifty years. While its collections are smaller than those of the Ethnological Department of the British Museum or some of the great European ethnology museums such as the Musée de l'Homme, Paris or Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, it is the world's largest ethnological museum of the second half of the twentieth century. This focuses much of the research on the modern era. The impressive Images of Other Cultures curated by Kenji Yoshida and John Mack from the British Museum offers an example of a new direction and way forward for museums.
his catalogue essay Yoshida argues it was unfortunate that the Japanese adopted what he sees as the Western notion of seeing other countries and cultures as exotic or alien. Of course, as Yoshida points out elsewhere, this is a worldwide issue for ethnographic museums: one Swiss museum has changed its name from a museum of ethnology to a “multicultural museum”.[20] The National Museum of Ethnology accepts that its displays are beset by a legacy of cultural relativism but does seek to go beyond this, in particular by including Japan and Europe in the displays and not seeing cultures as static. Contemporary Indigenous art and cultures are included as well, for example, the work of the Australian urban and activist Aboriginal artist Lin Onus, of Yorta Yorta descent, (now deceased) and Gordon Hookey (Waanyi language) whose painting *Naïve Title Fight* (1999) points to difficulties of Australian reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and continued racism in Australia. The artists’ Aboriginal language groups are acknowledged (something not always done in Australia) and the information sheet has the artist’s words, not a mediated curatorial version.[21] A process of inclusion means also a fundamental reassessment of contemporary cultures, such as the modern shields from Papua New Guinea displayed in the *Images of other Cultures* exhibition with their references to beer and football.

The dominant feel of the open and frequently touchable displays at Minpaku is of vibrant displays of living culture and of a Museum and staff in touch with and often in advance of public attitudes especially towards other cultures and thus serving a vital educational role within its community.

**WINDS OF CHANGE: THE FUKUOKA ASIAN ART MUSEUM AND FUKUOKA TRIENNALE**

In 1274 and again in 1281 the Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan sent great invasion fleets to the part of Kyushu where the city of Fukuoka is now situated. On both occasions a typhoon wreaked devastation on the invading armies. The Japanese called this divine wind that saved Japan on two occasions ‘kamikaze’. This name has a more immediate association today with Japanese suicide pilots in the Pacific war, a war still remembered with considerable bitterness by many of Japan’s Asian neighbours. But neither the ancient history of over seven centuries ago nor the more recent history of the last sixty years, characterise the mood of Fukuoka. Today, Fukuoka is a dynamic modern city of just over one and a quarter million people, exuding considerable prosperity, extremely cosmopolitan and a city committed to exploiting its position as a natural Japanese gateway to Asia. (It is three hours for example by hydrofoil to Korea and there are also direct connections to Shanghai). It is the only city in Japan, and one of the few in the world, with a museum devoted to contemporary Asian art.

The Fukuoka Asian Art Museum officially opened in 1999 is an offshoot of the Fukuoka Museum, and was constructed to house the parent museum’s considerable contemporary Asian collections and be a site for the highly acclaimed Asian Art shows (now called Fukuoka Triennale) begun in 1979–1980. This was the first major show of this kind in any country and the most continuous, except for the Bangladesh Biennale. The collection, developed over more than twenty years, is the finest collection of contemporary Asian art in the world.

The new purpose-built Museum is situated on the seventh and eighth floors of the Hakata Riverain complex, a magnificent new shopping centre in the up-market and central downtown area of Kawabata, known for its cinemas, bars, restaurants and designer fashion boutiques. The Museum has an excellent library, video and new media documentation centre and a research centre. One of its most successful programs involves residencies for Asian artists. Many of the programs are aimed at community, schools and young people. The Asian art fair generates a fun family image — for example Pakistani craftsmen
Visitors can move amongst the open access displays at the Osaka Museum, Japan.

Photo: Caroline Turner.

Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan: art fair associated with the 2nd Fukuoka Triennale.

Photo: Caroline Turner.
decorating mobile phones for young adults, or children participating in an interactive display with blow-up rubber elephants created by a Thai artist. The Asian art shows have always been chosen by Fukuoka curators working with artists and curators in the different countries of Asia and a huge emphasis has gone to country visits and research.

The Fukuoka Triennale is supported by a number of organisations, including the Japan Foundation. The latter, through the establishment of its own Japan Foundation Asia Centre in Tokyo a decade ago, made a policy decision that Japan is part of Asia. This is significant because for many in Japan the nation has not been seen as part of Asia but in a position somewhat analogous to the UK in regard to Europe. The Asia Centre in Tokyo has funded joint projects all over Asia and the Asia Centre Gallery has made a special feature of exhibitions and symposia about contemporary Asian art.

The Fukuoka engagement predates this by another decade and the city Government has clearly played the key role in financing and supporting the contemporary Asian focus of the Museum. Its activities are thus very much concentrated on Fukuoka city and region although that does not diminish the Museum’s significance or the contribution it has made to contemporary Asian art development, particularly in Asia, which, along with the activities of the Japan Foundation, has been monumental.

If the Fukuoka Triennale has a subtext that Japan is part of Asia or at least must engage with other Asian countries in a spirit of harmony and cooperation, another subtext of the exhibition is undoubtedly, I believe, that Japan is not necessarily part of the ‘West’. While this is not an official policy, it is a thread running through much of the discourse surrounding the Triennale and this in turn echoes a common theme in contemporary Asian art of rejection of the ‘Western paradigm’. At conference after conference I have attended over the last ten years in many countries in the Asia-Pacific region, the belief that contemporary Asian art should be about building a new approach to art is dominant in discussion. This is not, however, about building a wall around the region of Asia (a term used by Hou Hanru to argue against such a concept in one such conference) or a rejection of international art — merely a rejection of Western art ideas (and curators) continuing to dominate the international art world and its theoretical directions.

Masahiro Ushiroshoji, Chief Curator of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum and one of the critical figures in the Asian Art shows, writes in the introduction to the catalogue of the collections of the new Asian Art Museum of the need to move away from older definitions of art imported from Europe. Describing Japanese history over the twentieth century, he writes “Japan aimed to build a modernised Western nation and carried out an imperialistic war of aggression in this region under the slogan: ‘Extricate from Asia, Join in the West’. This is a negative legacy”. Ushiroshoji’s vision for art has led to incorporation of craft with fine art in the exhibitions and curatorship of an extremely important exhibition, The Birth of Modern Art in South East Asia. This exhibition, for the first time, raised some of the issues about Japan’s wartime role in the developing modern art of countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines.

Ushiroshoji urges a different model for art today: “the significance of an Asian art museum lies in the attitude of re-questioning the European centralized value system that dominates the space and system for art…” He points to the theme of the 4th Asian art show 1994, which included socially and politically challenging works under the title “Realism as an attitude”, and to the emphasis on collaborations between artists.

The Birth of Modern Art in South East Asia, recent Asian Art Shows, and the Fukuoka Triennales focussed on issues of importance to Asia, not the West. In fact such an approach is unusual in Japan, where political
and socially conscious art is a rarity and art exhibitions addressing the theme of the Pacific war almost non-existent. The very concentration on 'Asian' artists is unusual. Just how radical the Fukuoka Asian Art shows and Triennales are in the context of Japan has not been clearly recognised in the art world or even in Japan, where the show is rarely referred to as a major art event and where it is often criticised as too community oriented. My contention is that the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum is without question a museum of the future, engaging with community but also addressing issues of social significance for that community's future, including multiculturalism. Japan's birth rate and population is falling and the possibility of immigration raises highly contentious issues within the country. Programs such as the ones I have described help create an understanding of other cultures which can have long term impact.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion points to the evolution of a non-Western museological discourse that is grounded in Asia, inclusive in both professional orientation and cross-cultural dialogue. These four museums are returning an Orientalist gaze, engaging internationally and shaping museological debate for museums in the Asia-Pacific region but with implications beyond the region. The Shanghai Museum is a centre of cultural stability, researching and displaying the past but introducing living culture, including that of minorities, and open to interaction on terms of equality with the rest of the world. The Japanese National Museum of Ethnology is breaking away from static culture to living culture and in the process tackling critical issues of defining culture and of minorities within countries, including Japan. For the Shanghai Art Museum the issue of the moment is internationalism versus local 'Chinese' art but this is likely to be transient, and the Museum has the opportunity to be a leader in art in China and internationally, especially by reconnecting with Chinese diaspora art and artists and by including other Asian artists in its exhibitions in the future. For the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum the issue of internationalism is encapsulated in a policy to overcome Japan's isolationism from Asia (and contested history when it did engage with Asia) in a brave and radical approach which is also potentially redefining Japan's artistic future as non-Western yet culturally inclusive.

Endnotes

1 In no way do I wish to imply that these policies have been imported. Asian museums today are not an offshoot of European museums or clients of Euro-American museum philosophies and aspirations. Asian museums are part of international networks and participants in professional debates on new roles for museums and new approaches to collection and display. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) and its Asia-Pacific chapter play a significant role. For information on Asian Museums see the Bulletin of ICOM Asia-Pacific (ASPAC-ICOM Bulletin); see also Amareswar Galla (ed.) Protection of Cultural Heritage in Southeast Asia: Workshop proceedings, Hanoi, Vietnam, 9-13 April 2001, (ICOM-ASPAC, 2002).


4 Pamela Yatsko, “Culture — Triumph of the Will”, Far Eastern Economic Review, 7 November 1996, p. 48. The current Deputy Director, Gu Xiang Yu, noted in an interview with Richard McGregor in the Australian, 13 December 1996, that he had been a Red Guard and that young people then did not understand the importance of heritage.


6 Amareswar Galla, interview with Caroline Turner, June 2002. See also Shanghai Museum: Chinese Minority Nationalities’ Art Gallery, (Shanghai Museum, set of boxed introductions to museum collections (Chinese and English), n.d.). See for the
exhibitions: Archaelogical Treasures of the Silk Road in Xinjiang Uygar Autonomous Region, (Shanghai Museum, 1998); Treasures on Grassland: Archaelogical Finds from the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, (Shanghai Museum, 2000); Treasures from Snowy Mountains: Gems of Tibetan Cultural Relics, (Shanghai Museum, 2001). Of course ‘minority’ histories are presented in a frame that includes, especially in the Tibet volume of 2001, prefaces from political leaders regarding Tibet’s status, for example, from Lek Chok, Chairman The People’s Government of Tibet Autonomous Region, that the occasion marks “the 50th anniversary of the peaceful liberation of Tibet” while before this ‘liberation...Tibetan culture moaned for the sufferings under the cruel rule of the feudal slavery system with integration of politics and religion’ (Forewords — not paginated). The introductory paragraph to the handbook on Minority Nationalities’ art at the new Museum talks of the great contributions of minority cultures to: “our splendid and glorious Chinese civilization”, also noting “assimilation of various nationalities”, (a word, which, in the English translation, is an often resisted term).

For details see: <http://www.asiapacific.icom.org> or <http://www.icom.org>.


15 Survey and Guide 2001, (Museum publication), p. 3; Kenji Yoshida, “ ‘Tohaku’ and ‘Minpaku’ within the History of Modern Japanese Civilization: Museum Collections in Modern Japan”, in Tadao Umesao, Angus Lockyer, Kenji Yoshida (eds), Japanese Civilization in the Modern World, XVII, Collection and Representation, (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2001), pp. 77-102. Kenji Yoshida, an African expert and Professor at the Museum, comments that the two museums are in many ways opposites, with the National Museum in Tokyo limited to the ‘Orient’ while the Ethnology Museum is truly global: one is art and the other aspects of everyday life and the collections of one can be designated ‘treasure’ and of the other ‘trash.’ (p. 100). He points out the Museum includes urban and rural but had a cut off with the introduction of plastics (p. 96) but this, I feel, can hardly hold for future displays considering that film and video are now so prominent in the collections.

16 Caroline Turner, interviews with Museum staff, March 2002. A European museum director credits Kumei Sasaki, former director general, with a major role in Ainu displays.

17 Elaine Heumann Gurian “What is the object of this exercise”, in Humanities Research, vol VIII, no.1, 2001, p. 31.


21 Gordon Hookey (Waanyi language) “Native Title fight” 1999. The Museum’s official handout states: “The Native Title Fight painting is about Aboriginal resistance to Australian Government’s oppression, continual colonialism and multi-national corporation’s (sic) destruction to Aboriginal lands. It depicts a boxing ring in which a kangaroo kicks the snout off a pig whilst racist redneck politicians look on worriedly in disbelief”. The information sheet goes on to talk about Prime Minister John Howard, Pauline Hanson and racism in Australia and is obviously written by the artist although it is unsigned. Thus an Aboriginal person speaks for himself in the displays and not through the mediation of a Museum curator.

22 See: The 1st Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale 1999, (Fukuoka Asian art Museum, 1999); The 2nd


Note: The article is also based on interviews with Ma Chengyuan, Hou Hanru, Kenji Yoshida, Masatoshi Kubo, Kazuyoshi Ohtsuka, Masahiro Ushiroshoji, Amareswar Galla, as well as visits to the museums over the years. This article is related to an Australian Research Council funded research project, “The Other Within”, on Asia-Pacific museums which includes the National Museum of Australia, and which will culminate in a major conference at the Humanities Research Centre, The Australian National University, in early 2004.
How should non-Indigenous Australians reconcile with Indigenous people? The Aboriginal Reconciliation Council urges newcomers to view the land through the eyes of the Indigenous owners. Keith Windschuttle insists that the narrative of frontier violence has been greatly exaggerated. Mainstream country musicians reconcile their place in Australia by a kind of belonging-in-parallel justified by hard rural work while Indigenous musicians more commonly celebrate what can be celebrated, and set aside the rest.

Do we need a knowledge of inter-racial history for genuine reconciliation? I heard a young Aboriginal ranger at Kakadu explain to his audience the work of the National Park without reference to, and possibly even in ignorance of, the murderous violence which had occurred in the area within the lifetime of his grandparents. By contrast the Indian-born Australian Manik Datar believes that historians must never cease their efforts to reveal and interpret the past:

Don’t cover it up. We haven’t finished with history, it’s not a report-collecting exercise. We can’t say ‘Let’s stop, we have enough for the datum now’.

In navigating routes towards reconciliation, I am drawn to Datar’s position. Yet consider the criticism that we historians have had a negative effect on young people’s self-perception, in portraying our inter-racial history as dismal, or worse. I am mindful of the calls to present the ‘other side’ of the story, that is, I presume, Aboriginal history in terms additional to invasion, massacre, exclusion, discrimination and child removal. It is not clear, though, what might be an educational converse to Aboriginal accounts of the Coniston massacre. The viewpoint of the white-washing Inquiry of 1929? A contemporary account of peaceful coexistence drawn from another part of the Territory? A story of a pastoralist who saved Aborigines from persecution? Possibly all of them.

It was with such thoughts in mind that I accepted an invitation, in October 2001, to present a three-hour workshop on reconciliation to the annual conference of Adult Learning Australia. The setting was the Gagadju Crocodile hotel at Jabiru set on the edge of the Arnhem Land reserve and the Kakadu National Park.

My plan was to use local Aboriginal accounts of Top End history to present an understanding that Australians cannot achieve true reconciliation until they acknowledge the past, nor acknowledge the past until they know actually what happened. Nor, like Manik Datar, can we ever be satisfied that we know enough. Having established these principles in the first hour of the workshop, I would then present some kind of ‘other side’, and lastly attempt a resolution. Anticipating the difficulty of returning participants who might well be tearful, shocked, silenced or angry, to a point where we could attempt a constructive resolution, I videoed the Kakadu sunrise on
the morning of the workshop to project
during the final half hour. I bought a water-
melon whose seeds and fruit I planned to
distribute at the conclusion.

Early in the conference I met the four
adult educators, including an Aboriginal
friend, who had volunteered to act in the
performances. Serious debate between us
began immediately. Was it appropriate that
we should be as confrontational as I had
planned? The Vice President of Adult Learn-
ing Australia affirmed that 'Reconciliation'
had been added to the aims of the
Association the previous year: but what of
the immediate protocols? We agreed that it
was necessary not only to consult the local
community representatives for permission to
enact the stories, but also Aboriginal
educators from other parts of Australia.
Everyone who was consulted agreed that the
exercise was not only necessary but would be
beneficial.9 The workshop was set for the last
session of the conference.

The team began with a graphic represen-
tation of the extraordinary story collected by
the anthropologist R.M. Berndt in 1952 on
the Daly River:

The allocation of food by Jesus.
Jesus grew to a big man. He had a large
garden, in which grew many vegetables
and fruits; he watched the apples
ripening. He had twelve men (Apostles)
to help him.
He got his twelve workers to make a long
table. When it was done, he set in the
middle a plate on which rested one apple,
and all those present (the twelve
Apostles) ate of it until they were full.
Then he, Jesus, replaced the apple —
they had not finished.
Then Christ spoke: 'I gave you one kind
of food, the apple. Later I will give you
another food'.
So they returned to their garden. Later
they grew wheat, and made flour. Then
Jesus made a big damper. When it was
ready, they all sat down at the long table
and ate of this damper until they were
full. But they did not finish: Jesus put it
away, as he had done with the apple.
And the Father talked to Jesus: 'All of
this is for the white men — they will
have iron, houses and everything'. Thus
the Baijang [God] put motor cars,
aeroplanes, houses, horses and so on for
all the white people: he also made rifles,
guns, pannikins and knives; and Baijang
spoke to Christ, 'That is the Dreaming for
all of you lot'.
Jesus Christ was on the side of the white
people — he gave all that food to them.
Adam had only native food, for Adam
and Riva were Aborigines. They had
nothing when they left the garden owned
by God.
Chinese grew rice and made grass
houses: white men saw these, and the
Chinese saw the iron houses: the white
men saw the rice, and the Chinese saw
the flour: each bought from the other.
Only the Aborigines had nothing.10

One of the actors read the story aloud,
pausing while the others carried the items of
the White Dreaming — including the water-
melon — to the table. The very asymmetrical
last supper remained in place on its table for
the rest of the morning.

At the end of the scenario I warned the
participants that a very painful performance
would now follow. Nobody left the room.

A MASSACRE AT MIRKI

These diabolical events, told by a
Milingimbi man in the 1970s, took place
about 200 kilometres east of Jabiru, and
eighty kilometres south-west of Milingimbi.11
Here in 1885 White pastoralists occupied a
run they called Florida Station. The narrator
describes how the Whites met two Aboriginal
women and learned the whereabouts of the
camp. A man they saw and chased down
confessed to cattle killing, and was murdered.
At night the Whites attacked and shot the
adults who were hiding in the trees surrounding the camp. On the following day the boss returned to kill the surviving children. There are five speaking roles in the story, including the narrator’s. In traditional story-telling style, the narration is carried mainly through dialogue, and is set in the several locations.

I asked the conference participants to remain facing the front looking at a slide of the Arnhem Land escarpment, while the actors performed out of sight at the back of the room. As the action shifted between Murwangi the pastoral station, the open bush, and the camp at Mirki, the actors moved about, until, for the final killing of the children, all the voices were grouped in the left back corner of the room.

These are some extracts from the story. The narrator begins:

More people came on horses
‘Hey! Let’s go and have a look on the plains over there. We’ll go and see if we can find some of the Aboriginal people cooking on the plains over there.’
And they went, with ten horses. They went, and they came right out on the plains at Dharmala, and they went round the edges, and right into the middle. They kept going, then: two women.
‘Look! There! There! There! Someone’s coming!’
The women were coming from getting shellfish and crabs. They rode up to them and quickly met them...

The killing of the adults:

So they [the pastoralists] went back to Murwangi. They arrived.
‘We’ve killed one Aboriginal, he’s lying out there somewhere.’
‘Serves him right’, said the boss to them,
‘Serves him right. Where are they all?’
‘Well’, he said, ‘they were in the jungle. We’re just off there now’.
Up they got, galloped away, and it was night. Through the night they galloped and arrived at Mirki, spreading out to surround the place. Surrounding, meeting around the other side.
In the jungle at Mirki, and there they heard something: they heard the people playing the djunggirriny ceremony.
Didgeridoo, clapsticks, dancing, in the jungle.
‘They’re dancing right here!’
Like that.
‘They must have come into the jungle.
Good’, they said.
‘Hey, we’d better watch out for ourselves: some of those bad White people might come from Murwangi’, the Aboriginal people said to themselves, ‘but we will look after each other, won’t we?’
‘Yes. We’ll keep a look out, because it’s dark now. We’ll go out and have a look though the jungle.’ Like that.
But when they went, they saw the horses, surrounding them completely.
Only the horses, the White men had got off their horses and were standing up.
The Aboriginals stood there and looked at the Europeans. The Europeans could not see them.
One of them said...
‘We saw all those horses. What are we going to do? How are we going to escape?...’

After anxious Aboriginal exchanges about what to do next, the story refocuses on the Whites:

The White men arrived, and went into the thick jungle area. They entered and stood there.
‘This is their place. Where did they go?’... ‘Here they are. They’ve all climbed up into these trees’.
‘We’ll shoot at them. Straight up into the trees...’
One stood here, one stood there, one stood there. Think about the noise that those guns made, shooting up into the trees.
Shooting, shooting, shooting up into the trees.
They all fell down onto the ground, and just lay there all over the ground, every one of them, they were all dead...

The last part of the story tells of the killing of the children after the boss returns the next day:

You see he had a repeater rifle, one which fires a lot of bullets. That's what he had, that White man.
‘You watch me carefully! Just watch me. Don't look anywhere, keep your eyes on me.’
And he pulled the trigger, I think.
And they all just went falling down onto the ground. Every one of them, just lying there, and not only a few, lots of them.
Children, just like we have here at school, girls and boys. All those children, just like our ones here at Milingimbi.

The effect of the performance on actors and listeners was one of more or less acute distress, not least because the story is emotionally unresolved. The narrator ends at this last sentence.

Of course, Arnhem Land culture continues to flourish. The room still darkened and the audience sombre, I showed a series of images of visitor signage in Kakadu such as the creation-story of Namanjolg's Feather.12
The series ended with a shot of Aboriginal children playing and swimming in the Katherine river. Throughout the sequence I played a recording of Kev Carmody's From Little Things Big Things Grow:

Gather round people I'll tell you a story, I'll tell you a story of power and pride
Opposite people on opposite sides...
Vincent Lingiari was little, dirt was his floor...
This is the story of something much more:
That power and privilege cannot move a people [Who] know where they stand and they stand in their lore.13

Now followed the painful account, illustrated with pictures of Aboriginal institutions, of the removal of children from the former Oenpelli Christian mission in the 1940s:

At last, in the morning, that 'white' man went to look for them, and got them. He kept on doing that. Some he couldn't find, of those young girls and boys; but some, he took their arms. Then they were frightened: they cried loudly when he touched their skin, those children. That child had no sense, because they hadn't explained to him properly; so he just got frightened of the 'white' man when he came up there talking. He tried to cry, and urinated in fear when the 'white' man touched his skin. He tried to run away. He tried to run away but those Aborigines standing near took hold of his arm. He tried to bite them, but at last they got a lot of those children; they brought them up and the 'white' man got them. The child tried to bite the hand; then they said to him, 'You stay quiet with that 'white' man, or he might shoot you with his gun!' Then the child stopped crying altogether.14

It seemed, as I suppose I had intended, that there was to be no release from persecution. I followed the story, with an exchange drawn from the 1976 Ranger Uranium Enquiry before Mr Justice Fox. Here the lawyer W. Gray was cross-examining a Mr O'Connor, who evidently at this point was representing the view of an entrepreneurial Oenpelli company called FAMCO. O'Connor, clearly inexperienced in court procedures, was trying to argue that if in fact uranium mining was to take place, the Indigenous community should have a stake in the venture. The lawyer Gray, in a manner which will be disagreeably familiar to all
those who have been cross examined in land claim proceedings, seized upon an unfortunate but irrelevant weakness of the witness to discredit his area of expertise. Playing the lawyer, I made myself as obnoxious as possible. This is an extract from our presentation:

O'Connor: Yes, there are a number of people at Maningrida that are affiliated, the...
Gray: What language do they speak?
O'Connor: The Rembarunga group. I'm not certain — actually certain of their —
Gray: The Rembarunga group.
O'Connor: Rembarunga group.
Gray: What is their country?
O'Connor: I think it's near Mount Brockman, in that area.
Gray: Near Mount Brockman?
O'Connor: Yes.
Gray: Are you certain of that?
O'Connor: No I'm not, I can just say it's hearsay. I'm not absolutely certain of that —
Gray: And I take it that you haven't really studied the area either?
O'Connor: Not of Mount Brockman, no.
Gray: Not in terms of Aboriginal affiliation?
O'Connor: No, not in that way.
Gray: No. This particular document which was handed to you by Sam Wagbarra, but you don't know where it comes from and you didn’t ask him, refers to Mount Borradaile. Does this particular area fall within the area which is currently being looked at by FAMCO?...

Later Gray very neatly side-stepped O'Connor's strongly stated position that, should mining actually occur, the FAMCO directors would want to be involved.

Gray: Well what's the general thrust of your argument in favour of mining of uranium in general?
O'Connor: In general I think that — personally I think that if this Commission or any Commission says there's no more mining tomorrow that would be the end of it. If the Commission says or anybody says there's going to be mining, with our people, by their intention of being in it, well they should have a foot in it and some right to have equity in it. Gray. But that isn’t getting down to whether or not there are dangers associated with uranium mining or not, is it? What's your particular belief there?15

Two hours into the workshop, and despite the interpolation of the optimism of Kev Carmody, the atmosphere was, I thought, dejected and depressed.

What should follow? If educators should present 'alternative views', with what should we juxtapose these verbatim representations of northern Aboriginal history. A story — if one existed — in which Aboriginal people escaped from the pastoralists would demean those who died at Mirki. A story — if one existed — of Aborigines killing Whites in the area would compound violence with violence and possibly sicken us still further.

This is the nub. In a fundamental sense there isn't much of a good side of Aboriginal history to present. My experience of listening, reading and thinking about Aboriginal history for the whole of my professional life reinforces the view that the life of most Aborigines living with Whites has varied between unpleasant to unbearable. Australia has a very bad record indeed of clandestine and administrative violence. To present a pastoralist's or official's view of this history to me would do no more than belittle the agonising Indigenous experience. Of course on the frontier there were kind missionaries and responsible officials. Indeed, a principal reason for altering Northern Territory child welfare policy at the same time as the Oenpelli children, who were removed from the Christian mission, was the welfare officer who wrote to his superior to inform him that he could no longer carry out such painful and destructive practices.16 That uplifting story is
worth repeating, but it should not be allowed to distract us from the fact that many hundreds of Northern Territory children were removed by officials and suffered painfully for many years as a consequence.

This doesn’t mean that there is no ‘other side’ to present. In seeking what to do next in the workshop I was influenced by the views of the Cuban-born Australian Marivic Wyndham, who explained in Belonging:

[Aboriginal people] are our elders. But that doesn’t mean... that I’m prepared to say ‘I’m very sorry for what’s happened to you, now how much land do you want back?’ Bloodshed, literal or figurative, holds a power of redemption. Soft love of the land will hand it back. Hard love says, we both love this place to death, that’s where warriors ought to meet. ... You say to Aboriginals, ‘You have a better political case than I do, but I’m not giving it up, because if I don’t love it as much as you do, then I should just give it to you’.

Before they rush to apologise for the course of Australian history, therefore, I believe that non-Aborigines should think hard about what the Australian land, society and nation means to them. This is not to deny that sometimes Aboriginal people won battles against pastoralists (which of course they did); more importantly, educators should reflect that Australia now is the physical — and emotional — home of many other peoples besides the Indigenous peoples — whatever happened in the past. Reconciliation at once becomes much more complex, much more painful, much more traumatic. This is as it should be.

In support of this general position I now presented a series of pictures of Australia, rural and urban, northern and southern, coastal lakes and desert mines, hot and cold, sandstone and granite, dwellings, open space, parks, harbours, lakes, paddocks, old, modern, homesteads, streets, to some of which I hoped everyone would identify. Simultaneously I played Neil Murray’s song from his recent album Native Born.

Murray, former guitarist in the Aboriginal band Warumpi, is a white musician who has spent most of his life amongst Aboriginal peoples. He knows the history, he has been to the massacre sites, he knows Aboriginal pain intimately. Yet he sings in Native Born:

Australia,
Where have your caretakers gone?
I am just one who has been battered
By the damage within your shores.
Australia
I would not sell you for a price,
I would not strip you of your forests
Or pollute your clear blue skies
I would not desecrate your sacred lands
I would not plunder on your shores
I would not foul your precious waters
For I am your native born.

I am always greatly affected by this brave and emotional song. In the shocked silence which followed, I seized the hand of a woman weeping at the front row and for long moments we sat in tears together.

But at this point the workshop faltered. Maybe I should have thrown the initiative back to the participants. Perhaps I should have suggested that the company return to the groups in which they had met during the week to plan a creative response to the morning’s traumatic display. Probably I should have pre-arranged a more formal Aboriginal response.

What I actually did, with the actors helping to write the suggestions on butchers’ paper above the table of the ‘last supper’, was to brainstorm suggestions as to how to rearrange the ‘last supper’ table more equitably. Obviously aeroplanes could be moved about so that all Australians could share them, but not everyone agreed that cars were an unmitigated benefit. Much of the imagined Aboriginal contribution unperceived by the Daly River missionaries (for example, consensual decision making) could not be
physically represented, nor could we assume that Aborigines would want to share their own culture with other Australians at all. We persevered for some minutes, but the change of mood was too abrupt, the exercise a little perfunctory. The video couldn’t be seen very well on the small monitor, there was not much enthusiasm for the watermelon seeds. I did not manage the emotional closure in the way I had intended.

My mistake, I think, was that I had delved too deeply into our collective and individual psyches for a mere rearrangement of the table to be an intellectually or emotionally satisfying closure. In truth I had underestimated the profound effect of juxtaposing these two aspects of reconciliation — the agonising history and the implications of Native Born — both on the audience and on myself. But wait: genuine reconciliation surely has to be a bit painful.

Maybe I didn’t have the confidence to invite the participants to reflect for several minutes before handing out the melon in silence, pondering the implications of the videoed sun rising over our heads that very morning and speaking about our feelings. That would, in retrospect, have been preferable.

Endnotes


3 See the discussion in P. Read, Belonging, (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 118-120.

4 In his most recent album, They Don’t Make’Em Like That Any More, (Sony 2000) the Koori vocalist Troy Cassar-Daley celebrates the careers of ten Australians, including Don Bradman, Mum Shirl, Albert Namatjira and Betty Cuthbert — without reference to their racial heritage.

5 Personal visit, October 2001.

6 Quoted in Read, Belonging, p. 207.

7 A series of organised killings of Aboriginal people in Central Australia in 1928, following the murder of one White man and an attack upon another.


9 A member of the volunteer team teaching at Milingimbi, who personally knew many of the local community members, discussed the proposal with them.


12 A traditional story associated with a rock formation which presents its account not as ‘Aborigines believe that...’ but ‘This is what happened’.

13 Kev Carmody, From Little Things Big Things Grow, (Larrinig Music Publishing Pty Ltd.).


16 Patrol Officer Evans, 23 December 1949, Commonwealth Archives of Australia.

17 Read, Belonging, p.146.

ENGAGING ARTEFACTS

URBAN ARCHAEOLOGY, MUSEUMS
AND THE ORIGINS OF SYDNEY

GRACE KARSKENS

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF CONVICT SYDNEY

A family — mother, father, children — sits down on chairs at a table for a meal. Their table is set with good quality edged-ware, with a blue-rimmed, rather deep-welled dinner plate and matching bread and butter plate for each person, lidded tureens and large meat platters. The walls in the room are tinted pink and there are pictures and ceramic plaques with religious exhortations, decorated with borders of leaves and flowers. The windows are hung with curtains, there is a wash-set with ewer, basin and porcelain soap box and a chest of drawers. On a small table, or perhaps a mantelpiece, stands an elegant, tasteful and expensive piece of bocage, a modelled tree with leaves and flowers which supports and frames an elegant figure.

Are we peering into the home of a middle-class family, comfortably settled in a stucco and iron villa in one of Sydney's better new suburbs of the 1840s? No, this is the home of a Rocks family, probably that of a tradesman and woman, and it might date anywhere between 1790 and 1810. One or both of the adults arrived in Sydney as convicts under sentence of transportation. In the 1790s the house itself was a wattle and daub hut, with doors hung on leather straps and windows with woven wattle panels instead of glass, and a roof either of fire-prone thatch, or porous, sagging clay tiles. By 1810 though, this early hut might stand to the rear of a more substantial house of rubble stone, with walls finished in tinted plaster, a shingle roof, proper glass windows and a large stone hearth and chimney.

The Rocks, rising abruptly in rugged tiers and outcrops of sandstone on the western side of Sydney Cove, was the convicts' side of the town from the earliest years of European settlement. The neighbourhood that grew there represents the emergence of Sydney from their perspective. It also represents the rest of convict Sydney, for the same sorts of people lived in the same way on the east side in George, Pitt and Castlereagh Streets and down to the south. When we remember that convicts made up the bulk of the population, the importance of the view from the Rocks becomes clear: convict settlers were the prime makers of early Sydney.

The recovery of the archaeological record of convict Sydney, together with the archaeology of the documentary record, have revealed the convicts' unequivocal interest in domesticity, cleanliness and comfort, in refinement at the table, and in the consumption of goods which made it all possible. It is a vision which certainly jars with, even upends, the more traditional portrayals of early Sydney. The 'gaol town' is supposed to have been a place of misery and exile, imprisonment and forced labour, poverty and scarcity. Life for the faceless prisoners was supposed to be nasty, brutish and short, and the profile of their material life should include the ball and chain, the wooden bowl, the whips and barred windows, a paucity of food remains. Alternately, or perhaps in addition, the convicts were a proletariat, arriving
with a ready-made sense of class-consciousness and grievance, exploited by the capitalist system dressed up as the convict system, haters of authority, forerunners of the independent, self-reliant, roaming bushmen of the Australian Legend.5

A culture of consumption and domesticity is, of course, antithetical to both the prisoner and the proletariat model. Yet archaeologists and historians who explore the culture of convicts, rather than their civil condition as prisoners, have revealed a most acquisitive set of people, a society driven by possessive individualism, marked by constant buying and selling, and a strong and lively popular culture.6 We know from archaeological evidence and detailed historical research that these convicts, men and women, dressed like dandies in fine figured satins and well-made shoes, drank tea from handleless Chinese porcelain tea cups, stirring in sugar with silver teaspoons, and some of them ate soup from beautifully decorated porcelain bowls.7

Perhaps this domestic and consumer culture at the heart of our European origins should not be so surprising. If we look at the findings of Stephen Nicholas and his team in Convict Workers, it appears that a considerable proportion of convict men and women had valuable skills, and a higher rate of literacy than their English counterparts. Most came from the recently and rapidly urbanised towns and cities of England, though Irish convicts tended to come from rural areas.8 This is reflected in their deep reluctance to go to rural areas once they got to New South Wales. They 'congregated' instead in Sydney, grabbing and occupying land, building houses, vigorously leasing and selling as though they held title to it (which many did in the end). And many of those feverishly building, buying and selling, on the Rocks in Sydney at least, were women convicts and ex-convicts. As Portia Robinson and others have exhaustively demonstrated, the women of Botany Bay were energetic businesswomen, marriage partners and family women.9 The household, not the gaol or the gang, was fundamental to both early Sydney's society and economy.

The convicts, then, were for the main part not from the mass of the very poor of Britain, who, as historian Neil McKendrick argues, did not have the means to participate in the new consumer behaviour spawned by the commercial revolution of eighteenth-century England. This revolution was one of things and everyday domestic life and its impact was not limited to the wealthy and comfortable ranks. As historian Carole Shammas has shown, over the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, even sections of the lower orders, artisans, small shopkeepers, labourers, had begun to seek some measure of comfort in their homes, to own and use ceramic dishes, cutlery, to drink tea and coffee laced with sugar, to buy from shops rather than making at home, and to wear fashionable clothing.10

But while archaeology shows that early convict Sydney shared a culture of domesticity and consumerism with succeeding generations of middle-class emigrants, it also demonstrates the ways in which these groups were clearly distinct from one another. Rather than being a fixed template, the same in every place and time, consumerism expressed as gentility and domesticity appears to have had as many permutations and versions as there were social and economic groups who practiced it.11 So my opening vignette of the convict household was carefully censored to exclude all the things which could not have occurred in the homes of the better-off, better-educated and far more genteel villa-dwellers of the 1840s and thereafter. I left out the servant, assigned or free, who, as part of the household, probably shared the table, food, drink, crockery and glassware with the family. In later middle class household servants were not thought of as 'family' members, and kept much more at arms' length.12

I neglected to mention that this house, though it could be large, probably had only
middle classes, who owned not only sufficient
glasses for each person, but also different
glasses for each type of drink.14

The culture of the first convict genera-
tions thus drew together disparate elements:
unrespectable, pre-industrial culture, and the
more genteel culture of domestic and person-
al commodities spawned by the commercial
and consumer revolutions. Archaeology
reveals much that is surprisingly familiar to us
— matched dinner sets, walls painted in soft
colours — particularly in the context of com-
mon assumptions about life in early Sydney.
But, combined with detailed documentary
research, it also challenges our mental associ-
atations, it reminds us that the past
is a “foreign
country”.15 The juxtapositions of early
Sydney are strange to us: refined, individu-
alised tableware and communal drinking and
gambling; crude hand-made pottery hung
over the open fire and sophisticated, elegant
figurines; curtained windows looking out
onto slaughteryards; good clothes, clean
bodies and the bloodied noses of men and
women unaccustomed to notions of individu-
al decorum and the increasingly constrictive
rituals of self control.16 In these contrasts we
can glimpse acceptable lifestyles and
behaviour, aspirations, and notions of
‘respectability’, from the convicts’ own per-
spective, rather than that of their Victorian
successors, or from our own standpoint.

The Cumberland/Gloucester Streets
project: An integrated approach to
urban archaeology

The radically new view of convict life,
culture and society in early Sydney presented
here would not have been possible without
archaeological evidence. While references to
houses and rooms, bowls and tumblers, shoes
and buttons abound in early official reports,
letters, newspapers and advertisements,
properly researched archaeological sites offer
an actual record of material life which can be
matched to real people — groups of convict
and ex-convict residents with names,
families, histories. An archaeological site17

Inside the hotels and around those domes-
tic tables, the neat, good quality individual
plates were filled with stewed meat and
vegetables ladled directly from a common
cooking pot hung over the open fire in
the same room. And men and women who were
friends commonly shared the ‘circling glass’,
most likely the plain, hand-blown tumbler
filled with rum or other spirits from a
decanter or bottle. Two or three people passed
the glass from hand to hand, mouth to mouth
as they talked and sang together. This cultural
practice, together with the excise on glass,
which made it quite expensive in the early
colonial period, may well explain the
relatively low numbers of glasses found in this
period. It seems that while eating had been
somewhat refined, modernised and individu-
alised, drinking still belonged to an older,
more communal realm of behaviour. Of
course, this was unthinkable for the later

one or two rooms, with all the functions of
the household, eating, cooking, sleeping,
dressing, and caring for children, integrated
therein. There was little sense of privacy, and
few or no separate rooms for designated
functions, like halls for receiving guests,
rooms solely for beds, drawing or dining
rooms and so on. While, as historian
Linda Young has outlined in her study of
genteel culture in Australia, the hallmark of
the middle class was the gendered separation
of work and home, in many homes of early
Sydney both men and women worked to
contribute to the household. Home and work
were often seamless, since tradesmen and
women, shopkeepers and publicans operated
from their own homes and yards. Bakers built
stone bakehouses at the rear of their houses,
butchers slaughtered cattle in their own back-
yards, so the fragrance of baking bread or the
stench of rotting offal mingled with the
smells of the household. The yards were
regarded as useful and valuable in a practical
sense, spaces for growing fruit and vegetables,
drying laundry, storing building materials,
rather than as ornamental spaces for flowers,
shrubs and paths.13
also offers the kind of integrity that, say, a
collection of objects drawn from different
places and times cannot. Archaeological
investigation allows us to make associative
links through observing and recording the
patterns of deposition, it insists that we
examine the less engaging artefacts along
with those that delight us, the ubiquitous
fragments as well as the things which
survived pleasingly intact. The jarring
juxtapositions and the flashes of recognition
are essential if we are to grasp the material
world of early Sydney in its entirety, rather
than only aspects which catch our eye.

In this paper I have drawn largely on the
findings from the Cumberland/Gloucester
Streets archaeological project (1994–1996),
with some comparative and corroborative
material from other sites and excavations.
The Cumberland/Gloucester Streets site, in
Sydney’s historic Rocks area, encompasses
two half-city blocks and the remains of
forty-two dwellings, shops and hotels, togeth-
er with yards, lanes and outbuildings. Its
European residential history dates from the
1790s to the early twentieth century when it
was razed and redeveloped for industrial pur-
poses. The site was excavated for the then
Sydney Cove Authority in 1994 by a team
assembled by consultants Godden Mackay
Logan Pty Ltd and directed by Richard
Mackay.18

This project was an opportunity to try a
new collaborative and integrated approach to
urban archaeology. It drew together the skills
and knowledge of the archaeologists and
specialists, the broad concepts, ideas and
research of social and cultural historians and
archaeologists, the local history of the Rocks
from my own work, and the detailed research
of family historians.19 A number of compo-
nents was essential to the project’s successful
outcome. Most fundamentally, it involved
exemplary archaeological method and a high
standard of completed post-excavation
analysis. The process of excavation and
recording in the field was followed by the
preparation of coherent accounts of the site’s
development, providing a permanent record
of how and where the thousands of archaeo-
logical contexts had occurred on the site and
how they were related to one another.

Specialists skilled in various fields — ceram-
ics, bone, glass, metals, building materials, as
well as palynology, soils, and macrobotanical
remains, also prepared detailed reports. Part
of my task as project historian was to
integrate these findings for the interpretative
volume, that is, to partly dismantle the
boundaries between artefact categories, to see
across them. This interpretative report was
then rewritten for a general audience and
published in 1999, while Godden Mackay
Logan published the excavation and artefact
reports for the specialist audience.20

Archaeological context is of course
essential to the interpretative phase. For
example, on its own, that marvellous
fragment of expensive bocage mentioned
above is merely an object which conveys
little beyond its own aesthetic qualities and
its method of manufacture. But knowing that
this particular piece was from a very early
context, and associated with a convict hut
dating from the 1790s, it takes on enormous
cultural meaning. It helps to open up the
world of convict taste, consumption and
aspiration hidden for so long behind images
of chain gangs, floggings and ‘desolate shores’.

In order to grasp the significance of this
particular artefact, how it changes our ideas
about the past, we have to engage with those
ideas. We cannot simply ‘dig up the past’.
Contrary to the more traditional rhetoric of
archaeology and of some “born-again materi-
al culturalists”,21 artefacts do not ‘speak’ for
themselves. In the absence of words, and
historical and cultural contexts, they sit there
“mutely, like toads”, to use Jane Lydon’s
memorable words.22 On their own, artefacts
and buildings cannot really tell us much
about the people who used them, beyond
such basic observations as ‘they smoked clay
pipes’ or ‘they bought pickles in bottles’ or
‘their houses were small’. These historical and
cultural contexts were not, and should not be,
ironclad, seamless grids of ‘facts’ into which archaeological evidence is slotted, allowing it only to ‘fill in gaps’ or ‘illustrate’ what we ‘know’ already. As Graham Connah argued in 1983, “problem oriented research” is needed if archaeology is to yield “increased understanding” rather than being an activity akin to “stamp collecting”.23

Before the excavation commenced, I was asked to develop, in consultation with members of the team, a series of open-ended questions especially for urban sites in Sydney. At one end, these were broad, dealing with the impact of the Industrial Revolution on a city which had begun as a largely pre-industrial town; changes to women’s lives and experiences; the debate about standards of living; the changing role of government; and querying the historical reputation of the Rocks as a disease-ridden slum, a place which, it seems, had always been something of a ‘separate space’. At the other end, there were ‘small’ questions, tailored specifically for the site, and focused on, say, buildings we wanted to find, or people we knew about. For example, we wanted to know whether the convict butcher George Cribb slaughtered his beasts in his own backyard, in the more pre-industrial fashion, or whether that noisome work was already carried out far from home in the 1810s (the former was the case). In the middle, there were questions about changing patterns in the built environment and consumer behaviour, readable in the series of artefacts and the buildings. When did houses begin to follow street-lines, when did the town become more orderly? Did people eat in a communal, shared fashion, or did they use the matching sets of individualised crockery we are familiar with today? When did they start buying manufactured toys for their children? How did they dispose of their rubbish? Did the methods change? These questions (there are many more) tried to suggest ways of observing patterns of change and continuity over time, and so make the major questions more accessible.24

At the same time, we also built up a kind of ‘historical assemblage’ of the site, by gathering as much data as possible about it, and its occupants. Although it is often said that convicts and the later generations of obscure working people are not recorded, this is not so. With the help of scores of family historians from all over Australia, a database of residents, now numbering nearly 500, was built up, recording names, callings, births, deaths and marriages, period of occupancy and so on. Some people even sent precious photographs, personal recollections and family stories about their ancestors. The database provided a family and community context for the archaeological evidence. It gave us an accurate picture of the residents’ socio-economic standing, the gender ratio, family and household structure and how often people moved house. It made women, children, and lodgers visible, countable, it put names, histories and sometimes even faces on the anonymous mass of people who moved over the site for just over a hundred years. This kind of intimate understanding was an essential step, for it allowed us to provenance the artefacts in an accurate and meaningful way, to say, for example, that convicts and ex-convicts were the owners and consumers of the artefacts from the early contexts. In some cases it even allowed us to discern the possessions of particular people on the site.25

At the same time, it is clear that artefacts and structures, and sites as a whole, are not equally yielding in significance and meaning, and also that no single approach, model or research question will serve to access that meaning. The material culture of convict Sydney was complex and diverse, and each strand of this tangled skein — food, drink, houses, personal items, has its own history and ‘genealogy’.26 The archaeological record, a fraction of the original totality, is itself shaped by deposition patterns, site formation and incursions, and also by excavation methods and the current, fairly rigid, notions of artefact categories.27 This record, like any other, informs us in different ways and at dif-
ferent levels. Some artefacts tell us a great deal, and offer unique evidence; others corroborate one existing interpretation over another; still others are ambiguous, and suggestive. Some can be read as a single artefact, others must be seen in concert; some seem incapable of telling us very much at all, while others are enigmatic, and leave us to wonder. A good measure of flexibility, a realistic eye, and the avoidance of over-rigid models and approaches are necessary when examining, recording and researching the assemblages.28

It did occur to me as I was working on the interpretative volume that my being directly involved in the project itself, particularly through the regular research meetings, and being completely familiar with the history and archaeology of the site, helped enormously with writing its story. I could also readily consult the other members of the team for further explanations or information. How will a future researcher manage without these advantages, and distanced from the excavation by time and space?

Paradoxically, an archaeological excavation is at once an act of preservation and of destruction.29 Although elements like artefacts, samples and structures may be preserved, the site itself is utterly destroyed, lost forever. This is why recording of the excavation, the site, in as much detail and in as many media as possible, is essential. In the case of the Cumberland/Gloucester Streets site, a great deal of time and effort went into ensuring the adequate recording of the site for posterity. It was exhaustively numbered, mapped, photographed, and recorded. The three-quarters of a million artefacts were entered on a database, which is now available for statistical research.30 The specialists who prepared the artefact reports tried as far as possible to include observation of value to all future research, not only current interests. While the site itself will probably eventually be redeveloped, the artefacts, wrapped, tagged, numbered and boxed, are stored by the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority, and hopefully will remain safe and intact. (Not all collections are so fortunate).

But even with the most meticulous recording, recapturing that level of immediacy, the familiarity with the site and its excavators, would be extraordinarily difficult, and take an inordinate amount of a future researcher's time; perhaps it is important excavations provide an interpretative framework, and ask appropriate questions. Briefs and tenders ideally should include costing for interpretative work, something which rarely happens at present.

HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND MATERIAL LIFE

At the core of the innovative approach to the Cumberland/Gloucester Streets project, then, was that concern to integrate history and archaeology, springing from the recognition of the essentially inseparable relationship between things, ideas and experiences, between material and mental worlds. If we think about the nature of everyday life in early Sydney, and the role of material culture in it, it is immediately apparent that material and mental worlds are indivisible. Every artefact has a history, a cultural context, and practically any document from early Sydney contains some reference to material life — bodies, things, food, clothing, buildings, roads, the environment — underscoring the entanglement, then, as now, of things, words and actions. It is artificial, and distorting, to consider one without the other, as separate spheres.31

Then there is the role of objects in this particular society. Mihaly Csikszenmihalyi argues that, in Western culture in particular, material objects help us locate ourselves, “keep our ideas straight”, acting as the “sensory template that gives boundary and direction”. “Without external props”, he says, “even our personal identity fades and goes out of focus”.32 Surely this is especially true for those who emigrate, willingly or unwillingly, to a new land. Convicts made or bought, left or brought a great range of things to exploit, to make the new land familiar, to hold fast to
who they were, and to remind those they
would never see again of their existence.
Those about to embark smoothed coins to
blanks, then scratched, stippled or engraved
them with messages of love, remembrance,
promises of fidelity and gave them to the
loved ones left behind.36 Other messages,
“puncture[d] with gunpowder”, pricked with
ink, were carried on their skin as tattoos
whose iconography opens a window onto
emotional life: hope, devotion, despair, defi-
cence, humour, a bitter kind of triumph.37 Clothing and accessories brought along found
a ready market in fashion-conscious early
Sydney. Bought, bartered, stolen and sold,
they might allow one woman to get enough
capital to start a little shop, while another
decked herself in the sort of finery which
defied the very idea of the degraded, banished
convict.38 Every stage of life has its material
dimension, setting, and expression, from the
first step out of the jolly boat onto the shing-
ly shore to the hammocks slung in rows at the
barracks, or the ticking mattresses laid in the
corners of skillions and smoky kitchens; from
glances exchanged over a tumbler of rum and
water to the exchange of a wedding ring or a
pair of earrings, the setting up of a new house-
hold; from cradles and baby clothes to
shrouds and cedar coffins. At every point,
every juncture, in every journey, objects and
ideas, things and meanings were inextricable.

So much energy was expended on the
sheer, pragmatic quest for material well-being
and the accumulation of property in early
Sydney. As I have shown above, and argued
elsewhere, the convicts were very materially
minded people. Their material worlds were
not all of a kind, but multifarious, an aston-
ing profusion of things and structures, each
with its own history, with multiple layers of
significance and meaning, these in turn shift-
ing and transforming in different contexts.
Things, like their owners, moved constantly
along their own historical trajectories in the
early town, they passed from hand to hand,
were arranged in certain ways with other
things, shucked off when people moved on,
recycled, exchanged, auctioned, lost,
reappeared in other forms.36

People knew their possessions, and those
of others, instantly, by sight. They could
identify the body of a murder victim by the
print of the gown she was wearing, by the
cloth-covered wire buttons which had
fastened the sleeves at her wrists.37 People
described lost possessions in great detail and
posted rewards for them: “Reward for a single
silver spoon”, ran Daniel Mackay’s advertise-
ment, “1oz weight colonial made plain with
an impression something like a lion on the
back”. Women in particular had the quality,
patterns and textures of fabrics firmly fixed in
the minds.38 People also enjoyed simply
looking at objects which were artful, unusual
or curious. Mrs Ikin had a fine model of a brig
on display at her house on the Rocks in 1805.
The grief-stricken parents of a child who died
of snakebite seem to have taken some
comfort in the “stone intended to entomb
the relics” which they had carved with a
heartfelt poem. It was proudly “exhibited to
public inspection” before being erected at the
burial ground.39

We even know that the populace was
most likely familiar with the term ‘cabinet of
curiosities’, for Jane Jones, evidently an
incorrigible magpie, had a house on the
Rocks in 1805 which was “tolerably furnished
with articles which were mostly recognised as
having been only borrowed from her
benefactors”. The ‘benefactors’ were probably
the Atkins family, for whom she worked as a
charwoman. Sydney Gazette editor George
Howe went on, tongue-in-cheek, “Her cabi-
net of curiosities contained a number of toys,
to which several members of the junior order
preferred an undisputed title.”40 Her,

ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE MUSEUM

Perhaps it is appropriate, then, that many
archaeological collections, after their strange
and roundabout journeys, come to rest in museums. The sheer bulk of material retrieved from Sydney sites over the last two decades or so presents the formidable and utterly pragmatic problem of where these millions of artefacts can be safely and permanently housed. Without such arrangements, artefacts have a tendency to wander off, continue along their historical trajectories, and we lose sight of them once more. About half the material excavated from other urban sites in Sydney has therefore found its way into museums; the rest is in private hands or with government authorities such as the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority. Museums, more particularly those committed to social history, seem to offer appropriate havens for these collections. Ideally they provide safe and secure storage of both artefacts and supporting documentation, conservation skills, access for future researchers to study them, as well as the hope that archaeology will be made widely available as part of exhibitions.

Museums of social history are appropriate in another important way. As Margaret Anderson and Tom Griffiths have argued, the idea of social history museums is itself relatively recent, for until the infiltration of social history curators, history and museums had little or no common ground at all, museums being more the ‘realm of the scientist’, and the connoisseur. This shift was also a potentially radical one. Some social history museums began to challenge long-held ideas about empire, nation, race and gender, and about science and progress; hence they turned a critical, searching eye upon the purposes and agendas of the museum itself. The archaeology of urban sites dovetails with these concerns: it most often deals with the structures and artefacts of workplaces, households, neighbourhoods, and thus women’s, family and community lives in extraordinary detail. It retrieves and works from a direct record concerning the lives and experiences of people often entirely omitted from ‘dominant consensus models’ and unquestioned, ‘given’ narratives about progress and nationhood. Archaeology has the power to shock, to silently but insistently destabilise long-held assumptions about ‘the masses’ — convict people, ‘slum’ dwellers, the ‘working class’.

Museum curators are assured by archaeologists that archaeological collections are valuable and irreplaceable, that they can ‘tell us about people’s lives’ or have the potential to open ‘new views of the past’, both for museum visitors and future generations of researchers. And so they do, as our excursion into the material life of convict Sydney reveals.

But some curators can see little evidence so far of these values and benefits, are frustrated by the costs of keeping the material, and impatient with these seemingly dumb, often most unlovely mountains of artefacts. Broken, stained by long burial, frequently mundane and stubbornly unyielding to boot, they seem like Cinderella collections, compared with whole, provenanced and often more artistic, or otherwise engaging artefacts which museums collect. Michael Bogle at the Hyde Park Barracks Museum points out that historians, many evidently still convinced of the primacy of the written word, seldom consult any of the collections held at the various properties maintained by the Historic Houses Trust in New South Wales. More surprisingly, few archaeologists seem to use the collections either. Several thousand dollars a year, and a great deal of curatorial time and space are devoted to thousands of boxes of artefacts which, so far, are mute, and which very few people ask to see. Here it seems that archaeology has not been a rich and irreplaceable resource, but simply a financial and administrative burden.

The keen professional and public awareness of the value and potential of archaeology is enshrined in legislation and expressed both by the vast amounts of money invested in it, and in the intense public and media interest whenever archaeological sites are excavated. Why, by contrast, do some curators throw their hands up in frustration over

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the archaeological collections? Why have the collections been ignored once they are ‘safely’ in the museum? The usual problems spring to mind, of course: inadequate funding, and a consequent lack of researchers available to undertake such projects. But there are deeper cultural explanations as well, concerned with ways of seeing material things, and ways of making histories. For archaeological artefacts still hang in the uneasy, as yet unresolved space triangulated between the idea of museums as repositories for scientific research, their aesthetically-inclined collection and presentation, curation and exhibition regimes, and the more recent, potentially radical inroads of social history.

There have been long-standing problems in the short history of urban historical archaeology in Sydney, concerning the lack of interpretation and integration, problems which the Cumberland/Gloucester Streets project was specifically designed to address.46 As archaeologist Susan Lawrence points out, there has been an odd lack of interest in artefacts among archaeologists themselves. In spite of the rhetoric about their importance and research potential, some of the assemblages remain uncatalogued; sometimes reports have been left uncompleted. Countless boxes full of objects, some separated from their archaeological contexts and with dubious documentation, have told us relatively little about the past. Until very recently there were few published articles based on artefactual evidence and fewer major texts.47

The beginnings of historical archaeology in Sydney coincided with the rise of heritage movements in the 1970s, and its early efforts were most often similarly focused on the struggle to save and conserve our material inheritance. Many archaeologists entered the varied fields of cultural resource management, while freelance consultants carried out excavations required by the Heritage Act 1977, and assessment components of heritage and environmental impact studies.48 The essential, increasingly complex battle for heritage and conservation means that archaeologists, like architectural historians, have tended to focus on structures, their histories, their composite materials and finishes, and their conservation and recording. Scatters of window glass or brick fragments, peeled-back layers of wallpaper, drains and bricked-up doors have eclipsed the rather more problematic, less tightly measurable people who occupied the structures, and the things they lost or threw away.49

Archaeologists are thus collectors, compelled by the discovery of sites, artefacts, buildings and landscapes to record, retrieve and inventory for posterity, and for the great desideratum, ‘future research’. The early ‘rescue archaeology’ carried out in Sydney and on the Rocks in the 1970s and early 1980s in particular distills the ethos, the urgency of heritage collecting, for the archaeologists’ endeavours were indeed “suffused with a sense of salvage, objects are rescued from out of time itself”.50 This collecting has had far less to do with iconoclastic social history, than with the eighteenth and nineteenth century traditions of systematic collection. The “great enterprise of collecting the world”, as archaeologist Denis Byrne puts it, saw objects of all sorts converge in the great museum, which could then become a microcosm of the world.51 But in another sense it constitutes significant social history, that of the heritage and conservation movement itself. As heritage planner Meredith Walker recently pointed out, actions taken to save, to collect, to salvage were necessarily political acts, concerned not so much with meaning and research as with the struggle to ensure that material heritage survived in the first place.52 In both these ways, collecting became an end in itself.

What is significant here is the separation of collection and interpretation. Standard archaeological practice still tends to place them at opposite ends of the procedures: first excavation and the assigning of artefacts into categories, followed ideally by thorough post-excavation cataloguing and analysis; and finally, if at all, interpretation — often
regarded as someone else’s problem. Peter Emmett accuses archaeologists of becoming “bored, myopic” once the excitement of the dig was over and the sifting and sorting of artefacts began.53 Research into wider historical and cultural contexts was, as a result, not generally considered essential for archaeology-as-collection. If contextual research was carried out at all, it tended to be rudimentary and site specific: perhaps a list of names of occupants from directories, a timeline of development on the site. Even in the better researched excavations, the focus tended to be upon explaining how the site developed, the more detail the better, rather than on asking what important things it could reveal about the past.54

As well, there are inherited intellectual traditions which set things and words along divergent paths. While many historians eschew objects as “merely the brute outcomes of thoughts, feelings and actions, without any active role of their own”, some archaeologists, equally, deeply distrust the written word (both primary but more particularly secondary sources) as something which will only confuse, prejudice and corrupt their pure and direct examination of material things.55

The separation of collection and interpretation also, ironically, fractures the continuity of collecting itself, that “very human activity”.56 The work of archaeologists and curators is, after all, distantly descended from the convicts’ collecting. They too, as we have seen, were avid hunters, collectors, creators, keepers and arrangers of all sorts of mementos, souvenirs, household goods and objects of monetary, symbolic or sentimental value. In this sense archaeological assemblages are collections-of-collections, steadily diminishing, scrambled, reformed over time with each phase of assembly, loss and recovery. But collecting which is absorbed in itself, concerned only with retrieving and arranging objects for their own sake, cannot recognise this continuity, cannot glimpse the rationale, the desires, the aspirations, the curiosities, the reassurances that shaped those original collections. As Susan Pearce acutely observes, the “painfully familiar artefactual deadness arises from a failure to integrate the material world and the world of thought and action, and yet this integration is how we all live our lives”.57

How do these factors, problems and possibilities actually translate in the museum situation? Is it possible to carry out meaningful research on archaeological assemblages? How does one go about it? Imagine the case of a social history curator in one of Sydney’s large museums, already busy with diverse projects and the myriad tasks attendant upon caring for, curating, recording and keeping track of the vast universe of things which is a museum. She has been charged with the unenviable task of ‘doing something’ with sixteen boxes of carefully wrapped artefacts, allegedly from the site of the original wing of the Powerhouse, in Mary Ann Street, Ultimo, or possibly from the Old Sydney Gaol (now the Regent Hotel) site, an early ‘rescue’ excavation. They appear at a glance to be typical of assemblages from urban sites all over Sydney, indeed, all over the world: broken transfer-printed ceramics, shards of glass, and bones from meals eaten long ago. She asks “old timers” (as she calls long-term staff) where they came from, who excavated or collected them, but no-one can remember. So far there are no site reports, no artefact reports or catalogues, nothing to link these things with the place where they had come to rest, although, in an echo of the first archaeological search and recovery, they may yet be found.58

What, then, can be done with free-floating artefacts like this, ‘rescued out of time’? One could measure them, weigh them, describe, count and catalogue them, and as there are infinite ways of doing these, this could occupy a very long time. An imaginative museum curator may well find some eye-catching way of displaying them, perhaps in the way china doll parts are displayed at the Museum of Sydney: in a sleek and stylish drawer against a background of newspaper
stories about murder and dismemberment. Neither of these constitutes meaningful research, however, and would not offer us a greater understanding of our past. Depending on the extent of the collection, it might be possible to regard it as a, largely unprovenanced, generic ‘slice’ of urban material culture, whose numbers and characteristics could be quantified and compared to other Sydney collections, and the material culture profiles of other nineteenth-century cities.\textsuperscript{59} This would be the equivalent of analysing artefacts retrieved from, say, landfill, where the specific place, time and social context of their origins are unknown or lost. The loss of historical and archaeological contexts means that questions would always hover over the material. Where did it come from? What actors shaped its deposition and its recovery? And, perhaps most importantly, whose material culture was this?

These have been rather discouraging circumstances, and the potential of archaeology for research, and for informing us about our urban past through exhibition, have clearly been rather limited. For both research and exhibition, the existence and quality of supporting documentation and interpretative framework for the archaeological collections are obviously vital. If they are not available, the question is whether any of this can be retrieved or viably developed. Ironically, it is the disconnectedness of collection and research, between archaeology and history, which has diminished the very value of the material record which systematic collecting is supposed to create, protect and make available.

But here the more recent projects give grounds for optimism. The Cumberland/Gloucester Streets excavation, like other research projects carried out by archaeologists such as Susan Lawrence and Jane Lydon, demonstrates that historical archaeology, in its true sense, is a discipline which broaches the gulf between things and words.\textsuperscript{60} Properly carried out, it connects collecting and interpretation through cross-disciplinary, multi-sourced research and approaches; through looking outward from sites as well as intensely into them; and through devising and asking ‘important questions’ throughout the process, rather than shifting them to a chimerical ‘future research’ phase. The marrying of permanent, intelligible archaeological recording with the desire to ‘increase our understanding of the human past’ acts as a springboard, a starting point for further research. For example, archaeological collections held in Sydney museums are about to be reinvestigated in an ambitious and timely scheme successfully initiated by La Trobe University in partnership with the relevant museums, and heritage and management organisations in Sydney. Projects like Cumberland/Gloucester Streets have provided meaningful research directions which can be drawn out and further explored through the cataloguing and database analysis as well as the detailed historical research proposed for this new project.\textsuperscript{61} These strategies promise to unlock the dynamic potential of the assemblages held by museums by offering conceptual frameworks for understanding them. They ‘make history new’ by making accessible the stories, the patterns of material life, the great silent underside, which so often runs counter to complacent, unquestioned historical narratives.\textsuperscript{62}

Let us move out of the storage rooms, and visit those museums where archaeology is displayed, to see what is fashioned from them. THE ‘REAL THING FROM THE REAL PAST’: EXHIBITING ARCHAEOLOGY

Despite the paucity of research programs and the difficulty of working with the collections, a considerable amount of archaeological material has, nevertheless, been displayed at various Sydney museums. Although curators until recently had few interpretative story-lines to work with, a number of quite successful and visually impressive strategies has been employed in an effort to circumvent the general non-engagement of artefacts and specifically expressed
historical meaning. Themes and approaches include the wonders of archaeological discovery and the processes of excavation and analysis, with archaeologists themselves as key figures. Simple ‘lifeways’ themes are often employed: ‘this is what people ate, wore or used in the past’, with artefacts arranged in categories such as ‘recreation’ (always containing clay pipes) or ‘family’ (always containing children’s toys). Artefacts are sometimes displayed as though they were objects in art galleries, with low-key labels listing artist or artisan, date/s, material, and size. Other displays focus narrowly on the technical aspects of their production. “The tree-like pattern on this large [‘Mocha’ ware] bowl”, its label earnestly tells us, “was produced by a chemical process involving tobacco juice and urine”.63

At Sydney’s Hyde Park Barracks Museum, a striking display turns back to gaze at archaeology itself, for it recreates, in a glass case, the masses of artefacts as they were found, crammed under the floorboards of the building. Fabrics, clothing, jewellery, medals and a hundred other things had been dropped, stashed or carried about by rats during the building’s occupation by convict men and later by women immigrants. Here viewers may re-experience the astonishment of this discovery, the long-hidden cache coming suddenly to light during the restoration of the building in the 1980s. In the next cabinet, the processes by which archaeologists impose their order on material ‘chaos’ are displayed. Different types of artefacts are grouped on a vast table engridded with string, representing at once the measured, recorded trench or underfloor area, and the table where artefacts are sorted, examined and recorded. A transparent wall reveals the walls of stored artefact boxes, their colour-coded dots spelling out the time and money put into the endless cycles of conservation treatment.

In other displays at the Barracks, and at the Sydney Visitor’s Centre, curators and designers have generally selected artefacts from their archaeological collections which illustrate particular themes. The displays are visually highly sophisticated and pleasing, while the themes themselves are often fairly loose in focus — the female immigrants of the Barracks, for example, or a collage-like material ‘slice’ of ‘life in early Sydney’. The objects chosen — neat bonnets, paisley shawls and bits of pretty jewellery — are, understandably, generally those which appeal to the eye, to the senses, for what they convey in these ways about the fabric of past lives.

At the Sydney Visitors’ Centre, the former Sydney Sailors’ Home in George Street at the foot of the Rocks, a similar exhibition begins to recognise (albeit still rather dimly) the potential of historical archaeology. Here some new interpretations of early Sydney springing from archaeological assemblages had been undertaken, and ‘story lines’ and themes were available to curators and designers in one form or another. What is intriguing is that, despite this, history and archaeology are often literally, curiously, bifurcated, reflecting the continued gulf between the historian, archaeologists and the museum designers employed for this exhibition. On the first floor, along relatively narrow galleries which were once lined by sailors’ tiny cubicles, glass cases of archaeological artefacts from various Rocks sites64 stand on one side, while historian Max Kelly’s poetic historical narrative proceeds on the other. The two move literally parallel, now disengaged, now crossing, sometimes unintentionally contradicting one another, at other times consciously so. The words portray early Sydney as “a gaol ... at the world’s furthest end ... another planet ... the cruellest penitentiary on earth”, but the things beg to differ. The cases blithely display the solid clay tiles from the houses where convicts lived, oyster shells from the oysters they gorged themselves with, blue and green edged-ware from their dinner sets (relatively plain, but by no means cheap and nasty), a simple, full-bellied creamware jug. Do the visitors who come to the Rocks to see ‘the birthplace of a nation’, moving from side to side,
between words and things, catch sight of this marvellous rebuttal?

Further along, an attempt has been made to fit the archaeology into the standard historical understanding of the nineteenth-century Rocks as rigidly separated by class and topography — the wealthy lived on the heights of the ridges and the poor lived on the lower reaches. Accordingly, one case, entitled “Living on the Ridges”, gathers together seemingly “impressive” and “luxurious” items, stemmed wine glasses, a Chinese porcelain statuette, some fine Egyptian and Greco-Roman collectors’ pieces, the display crowned by a large, pink, exuberantly transfer-printed ewer. These are meant to demonstrate “the material comfort of those living high up on the ridge”, well-off people whose goods were “intended to affirm their status”. Links are made with such wealthy Sydney collectors as Charles Nicholson and the Macleay family. The next case, entitled, “Overcrowding” features much more modest pieces — earthenware bowls, tinware plates and teapots, blacking bottles and some endearing sewing equipment, demonstrating the lives of the poor who inhabited the lower streets of the Rocks. It is conceded that “contrary to the historical information” archaeology reveals “living standards ... were higher than, say, similar areas in London or Manchester ...” but overall, the ‘slum’ image prevails, for this display concludes that “poor sanitation and a low standard of building ... certainly earned the Rocks its slum reputation”.

But many Rocks sites are mazed with sewerage, water and drainage pipes, and with the foundations of solid and substantial buildings, alongside some of poorer quality. And what the designers completely missed in their search for suitable artefacts to illustrate this ‘historical’ dichotomy was the fact that these ‘fine’ and ‘modest’ wares alike came from exactly the same sites. Ordinary middling and working people of Cumberland Street, and not wealthy upper and middle-class people, were the owners of the faience Ushabti figure from Egypt, the large, flowery ewer, the elegant stemmed glasses, as well as the blacking bottles and the tinware. Archaeology forces us to look more closely at the idea of strictly class-based residential patterns gleaned from the scribblings of nineteenth century outsider observers. That so-called ‘slum-dwellers’ should so clearly aspire to, and often achieve, their preferred form of gentility, made available by consumer culture, industrialisation, and by their interest in collecting, is the sort of ‘shock’ insight archaeology delivers. It challenges long-held ideas about the culture and stance of working people, about the Rocks as a ‘slum’, about the very notion of ‘slums’ itself. It is indeed ironic that such an exhibition did not quite grasp these most obvious insights — new insights which are important for understanding our social and urban past. The problem here is one of museum practice, for clearly if historical/archaeological contexts are ignored, archaeological collections become merely vast repositories of things from which ‘appropriate’ selections are pulled out to ‘illustrate’ the very concepts or models they actually subvert.

Hence the power objects have in conveying a “more archaeological understanding of our history” is also dispersed, lost. As Pearce observes, words are such a clumsy, ineffective substitute for what the eye falls upon and grasps in an instant. No amount of written description can substitute for these treasures, for the sight of the elegant blanc-de-chine bowls from George Cribb’s well, delicately traced with red enamels and silver flowers. Displayed objects offer “sensuous enjoyment”, the wonder of the three-dimensional “real thing from the real past” which connects past and present. It is this sheer physicality which looms largest for curators, and so their focus is upon “the poetics of space ... the relation of things and senses, spatial and sensory compositions” in order to “exploit the sensuality and materiality of the museum medium”.
But looks are not everything. The deeper “erotics of the museum” as Julie Marcus observes, lies with both the pleasures of the material forms and with the “flashes of understanding which bring to light an unseen order with a bearing on daily life ... a moment of new knowledge”.71 The jolt of recognition partners the excitement of discovery through the “quick spirit that moves between people”,72 that arcing link museums provide between those who study, interpret and display the artefacts and those who come to see them. Marcus argues that the moment of enlightenment springs from the engagement of objects with narrative, and thus with connections and evaluation.

In the beautifully designed archaeological displays at the Museum of Sydney, however, such narratives, connections and evaluations were deliberately erased or avoided. There were no meanings here, only vague, pulsating themes such as ‘power’ ‘environment’, ‘trade’, and criss-crossing voices, murmuring and indistinct. Here, the separation of material from words, collecting from interpretation, reached its apotheosis, and intentionally so. The exhibition of historical archaeology took a strange, expensive, full-circle journey, for the deficiency in interpretation was transformed into a kind of virtue. It was argued that we cannot ‘know’ the past, that all our accounts of it will inevitably be mere constructs reflecting our own obsessions, and so archaeological artefacts were, for the main part, presented as a plethora of beautiful, curious, unexplained objects, jumbled flotsam and jetsam from an unexplainable past. The great glass wall encasing the major archaeological display is a reversion to the cabinet of curiosities, to ‘pure show’, eschewing classification (scientific, historical or functional) by arranging objects in deliberately improbable ways.73 Historical and archaeological contexts and provenance are evidently regarded not as the keys to understanding the material, but as yet more distorting encrustations, and so they are not offered. Apart from some Sydney place names and compass points artfully printed on the glass wall, viewers are not even told where the artefacts came from. They are ‘freed’ to make own conclusions from what they see, filtered through individual experience and cultural background, so all meaning collapses into individual response, each as valid as any other.

But how can this approach, this refusal to narrate, to inform, fulfil the important, critical objectives of the social history museum? How can it overturn oppressive narratives about race, class, empire, nation, power and science, the very narratives this museum especially sought to critique and subvert?74 What can the visitor seeking an insight into early Sydney as it was lived, rather than as the authorities portrayed it, discover from a profusion of things floating in “text-free innocence”?75 Concerns of this sort seem to have prompted the museum’s curators to reconsider, for more recent exhibits do offer narratives. One of them, a space “dedicated to the Cadigal people and all surviving Aboriginal descendants of the Sydney region” acknowledges, documents and memorialises the fate of Aboriginal people dispossessed by European invasion. The story is told simply and firmly, with words and things.

The additional archaeology exhibit does not fare so well. Mounted beside the first, it attempts to provide some themes and contexts for further ‘small things’. A range of small artefacts is set in glass boxes accompanied by contemporary pictures and maps, some archaeological plans, labels and text. Close-up, though, we find the display has relapsed into simple collage, with the familiar, myopic, now perplexing disengagement of history and archaeology. A brief paragraph of historical data is followed by an equally brief paragraph describing archaeological sites and artefacts. Some of the artefacts have nothing to do with the themes outlined, apart from a rather tenuous geographic proximity,76 while some of the themes do not ask the obvious questions: those about power and negotiation. “Redemption”, dealing with the
building of St James' church, makes no mention, for instance, of the convicts' spiritual beliefs, or lack of them, or of the complex and contradictory role of the church in maintaining the rule of governors, law and administration. Despite the availability of interpretative research on Rocks sites and artefacts for some years now, the theme entitled "Rocks" once more focuses lightly on the social heterogeneity of the area. The text mentions ironwork and snuff bottles, which stand for a convict blacksmith and residents of an "affluent dwelling" respectively. It wonders idly whether a pair of discarded shoes found in a well is "perhaps the handiwork of an 1830s cobbler?"

Let us pause to look closely at one particular artefact, the age-blackened cedar coffin from the early Sydney burial ground, now located in the first, large display, the process of its decay suspended surreally by careful conservation and clear perspex props. The new display offers some explanation of this item. We are told of its archaeological discovery, and something of the old Sydney Burial Ground where it was first interred. The accompanying quote tells of the burial ground's poor, neglected and disorderly condition in 1849. The small display box holds some cedar fragments and corroded iron coffin-handles. But no questions are asked of the coffin itself, or, despite the theme-title "burial", about what a burial like this might have signified in early Sydney. Proper coffins, with nameplates, handles and rows of coffin nails or studs (still evidenced by the groove around the perimeter of the lid and the retrieval of some studs), were unambiguous marks of care for the dead person, of concern for the security of the corpse. This coffin means that a proper funeral and burial had taken place, and this in turn indicates that the deceased (who could easily have been a convict or ex-convict) had at least some means, as well as a circle of family and friends to mourn him or her. These are sympathies and communal networks which run counter to the images of a brutal penal society, inured to death and suffering, incapable of human sympathy and care. Here, then, is an eloquent artefact which informs us about early Sydney's deathways, about an aspect of popular culture determinedly established in the new country, in a way which documents alone cannot. Again, the point of what archaeology is about has somehow been missed. Despite the Museum's courageous decision to step outside the historiographical scaffolding of empire and authority, order and progress, these excursions do not ask the very questions of the material which might reveal the 'lived town', the town of the people, surging beneath.

CONCLUSION

Historical archaeology, in reconnecting objects and meaning, integrating things and words, in examining changing or continuous patterns of use and discard over time, has the potential for much more than "straightforward show-and-tell presentation". It can move beyond the slightly self-absorbed displays about archaeological processes, or uncritical 'lifeways' themes which somehow miss the meanings of the material evidence itself. Historical archaeology can challenge both disabling historical stereotypes and more complacent, comforting visions of the past, the notion that past peoples were "little different from us". It can convey those startling recognitions — a lively consumer culture among people portrayed as degraded prisoners or hapless slum dwellers, for example. But at the same time, it reveals the equally significant discontinuities, the now-unfamiliar outlooks and habits which make us realise that the convicts of early Sydney, with their eighteenth century pre-industrial culture, were in many respects not "like us" at all.

Museums are slow-moving bodies, as Griffiths cheerfully observes, for they "can only reinvent themselves slowly" and find it difficult to erase the outlines of their "earlier selves". It is not surprising, then, that the demonstrated potential of archaeological
collections, the new insights, the journeys into past material and mental worlds have yet to work their way through the “stilling qualities of minds and institutions”,82 the inertia of accepted curatorial practice and ways of seeing and displaying objects, not to mention the realpolitik of dominant narratives and interests which often decree who and what is represented in museum exhibitions.83

Most archaeological excavations attract thousands of visitors interested in seeing the structures and artefacts resurrected slowly from the earth, and in watching the archaeologists and volunteers at work. Especially popular are the boxes of (unstratified) artefacts which people can pick up, hold in their hands, and examine closely. Over 10,000 people came to see the Cumberland/Gloucester Streets excavation in 1994, while intense media coverage brought the site to tens of thousands more. Public interest in archaeology, the way people are drawn to the earlier places, structures and artefacts of their city, and to gaze into the glass cases of museums, suggests that the funding of genuine interpretative research projects is justified and worthwhile. But this will involve a considerable shift in the way much public archaeology is currently carried out, both during the excavations and in the museums. It requires an incorporation of genuine interpretative work into the processes of meticulous collecting and recording, a heightened awareness of the human context of rediscovered artefacts, and a recognition that “sensuality and materiality” must partner “rational analysis and synthesis”.84

For archaeological understandings, we also need real conversation, interchange and collaboration between archaeologists, historians and museum curators, rather than compartmentalised approaches. We need to set aside the defence of disciplinary and institutional boundaries, to see what lies beyond the confines of narrow specialist interests, to continually confront the entanglement of “the written and the wrought”.85 We must write and speak so that others can understand us; we need to be generous, to keep open minds, to exchange, to cross over.

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Endnotes


7 Karskens, The Rocks, pp. 152–3, 206–7, 238; Karskens, Inside the Rocks, chapters 1 and 2; Elliot, “Convict dandy?”, Wilson, “Ceramics”, pp. 312–13; Rebecca Bower, “Leather Artefacts Report”, in Godden Mackay Logan, Cumberland/Gloucester Streets Site, the Rocks, vol. 4 pp. 123, 131; Wendy Thorp, “Report on the excavations at Lilyvale”, (draft), unpublished report prepared for CRAI, (Sydney, 1994), section 4.2; silver teaspoons were often reported stolen in Sydney Gazette, for example 7 April 1810.


11 Compare with Linda Young, “The Struggle for Class: The transmission of genteel culture to early colonial Australia”, PhD thesis, (Flinders University of South Australia, 1997).


16 Karskens, The Rocks, chapters 7 and 19; compare with Young, “The Struggle for Class”, especially chapters 3 and 6.

17 By ‘site’ I am referring not only to the area investigated, but also to all its archaeological contexts, features, structures, and the artefacts and samples drawn from it.


GRACE KARSKENS Engaging Artefacts

20 Karskens, Inside the Rocks; Godden Mackay Logan and Karskens, The Cumberland/Gloucester Streets Site.


27 The collections themselves are sorted and catalogued not by historical period or by thematic or functional relationship, as they might be from a social history perspective but largely by material, so that specialists find themselves researching objects which are incidentally related, for example, ceramic tea-sets and clay pipes, or metal pots and bronze drawer handles, rather than tea-sets and teaspoons, or butchered bones and the pots in which they were cooked. See artefact reports in Godden Mackay Logan, The Cumberland/Gloucester Streets Site, The Rocks: Archaeological Investigation Report vol. 4; for further discussion see Birmingham, “A Decade of Digging: Deconstructing Urban Historical Archaeology”, in Australian Journal of Historical Archaeology, vol. 8 (1990), p. 16 and Lydon, “Sites: Archaeology in Context”, pp. 143–4.


33 Michael Field and Timothy Millett (eds), Convict Love Tokens: The Leaden Hearts the Convicts Left Behind, (Kent Town, South Australia: Wakefield Press, 1998).


37 Accounts of murder of Mary Smith, Sydney Gazette, 18 and 25 January 1807. Smith was murdered by John Kenny when she pursued him for the return of some property he had stolen from her some months before.

38 Sydney Gazette, 14 August 1803; 2 July 1814 (evidence of Mary Anderson at trial of Samuel Pasfield). 7 February 1827 (evidence of Thomas Sidderson at trial of Samuel Pasfield).

39 Sydney Gazette, 13 January, 17 February 1805.

40 Sydney Gazette, 20 May 1805; 30 June 1805, 27 April 1806; Robinson, The Women of Botany Bay, p. 169. Sentenced to seven years transportation, to follow on from her original sentence, she was sent to Kings Town (Newcastle) in April 1806, but not before Mrs Rafferty (most likely Rocks dealer Elizabeth Rafferty) successfully charged her with having in her possession yet more “sundry articles ... stolen from her house”.


43 Compare with Birmingham’s wry description of historical archaeology as an “aesthetically challenged discipline” whose possibilities in the museum were “never marketable”, Judy Birmingham, “Museum of Sydney: An Archaeological Focus” in Museum of Sydney, Sites: Nailing the Debate, p. 257–8.


46 Mackay, “Political, pictorial, physical and philosophical plans”, pp. 128–9; Egloff, “From Swiss Family Robinson”, pp. 53–4; Karskens and Thorp, “Historical Archaeology in Sydney”, pp. 52–3.

47 Susan Lawrence, “The Role of Material Culture in Australian Archaeology”, Australasian Historical Archaeology, vol. 16, (1998), pp. 8–15. In response, the following volume of Australasian Historical Archaeology published a number of papers focused on artefacts, as well as soils and pollens, see vol. 17, (1999).


51 Denis Byrne, “The Ethos of Return: Aboriginal Visibility in the Historical Landscape” in Lawrence...


54 As Birmingham observed, the archaeological and documentary evidence usually “go past each other without apparent engagement”; see “A Decade of Digging”, p. 14.


56 Pearce, Museums, Objects and Collections, p. 91


58 Personal comments by Wayne Johnson, Archaeologist, Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority; the curator wishes to remain anonymous.

59 Personal comments by Eleanor Casella, (29 October 1999).

60 Susan Lawrence, Dolly’s Creek: An Archaeology of Goldmining, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000); Jane Lydon, Many Inventions.

61 Personal comments by Tim Murray, Department of Archaeology, La Trobe University; the project is entitled “Exploring the historical archaeology of the modern city: Sydney 1788–1920”.


63 For discussion of the usefulness of ‘lifeways’ themes in interpreting archaeological sites and artefacts, see Karskens, “Crossing Over”, pp. 37–8. The mocha ware bowl appears in case 3 (item 4) of the historical and archaeological exhibition at the Sydney Visitors’ Centre, George Street, the Rocks.

64 For an overview of these sites, see Lydon, “Archaeology in The Rocks”; see also Max Kelly, Anchored in a Small Cove: A History and Archaeology of the Rocks, Sydney, (Sydney: Sydney Cove Authority, 1999).


67 Smith, “History and the Collector”, p. 100.


76 For example, the theme ‘Toll’ is focused on the early toll-gate on George Street West, but the sole link with the artefacts displayed seems to be that they were found in same general area (site of...
Dixon's steam mill on Darling Harbour, the Brickfields, and University Hall, Glebe).


81 Griffiths, “Social History and Deep Time”.


The title of my presentation is my effort to construct an analytic umbrella large enough to encompass several interrelated aspects of the term ‘authority’ that have piqued my interest in my capacities as Director of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian and former Chair of the American Association of Museums. Indeed, in both of these capacities and over the past several years, I can think of no other word in the English language that has come up with more frequency in American museums than the term ‘authority’.

I want to discuss today the issue of authority as it relates to the interpretation and representation of the objects, ideas, and peoples that are encompassed by the work of a museum. I would like to do so, initially, by tracing, ever so briefly, the history of museum representation and interpretation, following it through its evolution to its rather changed present state in America. I then will turn, by way of practical example, to the work of the National Museum of the American Indian regarding matters of representation and interpretation, not because I consider it the definitive illustration, but only because it is the institutional setting for this issue that I obviously know best, and where, I might add, these questions take on the reality of virtual inevitability.

Historically, most of us who have been involved with museums for any length of time would agree, I believe, that museums have been rather precious places - indeed, temples where representational or interpretive truth has been the sanctuary of a narrowly defined and largely self-appointed museological priesthood. To this point, in an article entitled, “The Museum: A Temple or the Forum”, Duncan Cameron has described this past in the following way:

... [T]hose segments of society with the power to do so ... created museums which were the temples within which they enshrined those things which they held to be significant, important and of value. The public generally accepted the idea that if it was in the museum, it was not only real, but represented a standard of excellence. If the museum said that this and that was so, then that was a statement of truth. [Emphasis added.]

Even though this cultural preserve known as the museum was monopolised from the inside of museums for the better part of a century, over time, due to this very aura of cultural and artistic authority that was ascribed to museums, they ultimately and almost inevitably became contested ground. As Carol Duncan has observed and predicted in her essay entitled “Museums and Citizenship”:

Museums and museum practices can become objects of fierce struggle and impassioned debate. What we see and do not see in our most prestigious ... museums - and on what terms and whose authority we do or don’t see it -
involves the much larger questions of who constitutes the community and who shall exercise the power to define its identity.

These tensions derive, as Duncan points out, from the belief on the part of those outside of museums that authority with respect to the representation and interpretation of objects, ideas, and peoples should not be imposed exclusively from within. In a thoughtful essay entitled “Exhibition in Japanese Culture”, Masao Yamaguchi explains how the very presentation of Japanese objects in an art museum can represent, in effect, the elevation of an art curator’s authority over the authority of those who created the objects in the first instance:

Commodities in their original context were not meant to be of artistic value. They turn into a kind of simulacrum of life once they are taken out of the flow of life, and acquire a kind of autonomy at the cost of their position in relation to everyday life.

In a recent article that appeared in the Bulletin of the Smithsonian’s Center for Museum Studies, Jonathan Yorba, a faculty member in a department of museum studies, offers a second and almost identical example from the viewpoint of Latinos and the Latino community:

Objects entrusted to museum collections did not appear magically; they were/are shaped by human hands - by people who were/are part of a community. Therefore, at the fore of any museum’s mission statement should be a sincere commitment to community, in all its multifarious meanings. Community members bring a fresh perspective - a lived experience from within the community.

We need to move so-called mainstream museums beyond their ... often one-dimensional representations of Latinos/as by bringing together diverse representatives from Latino communities and museum professionals to discuss ways to more fully represent the material and visual culture of Latinos/as.

Duncan Cameron, whom I quoted earlier, has echoed these sentiments by arguing that, as an antidote, we need museums that honour a new and different model and that provide different conceptual space. Quoting again from his essay, “The Museum: A Temple or the Forum”:

[Museums] ... must meet society's need for that unique institution which fulfills a timeless and universal function - the use of a structured sample of reality, not just as a reference but as an objective model against which to compare individual perceptions. At the same time, and with a sense of urgency, the forums must be created, unfettered by convention and established values. The objective here is neither to neutralize nor to contain that which questions the established order. It is to ensure that the new and challenging perceptions of reality, the new values and their expressions, can be seen and heard by all.

In the Introduction to the book they edited entitled Exhbiting Cultures, the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display, Steven Lavine and my former colleague at the Smithsonian, Ivan Karp, emphasise the importance of Cameron’s point in somewhat different and more purely museological terms:

Museums attempting to act responsibly in complex, multicultural environments are bound to find themselves enmeshed in controversy. Only when as a society we have achieved sufficient opportunity for art and artifacts of “other” cultures to be seen can we expect this kind of controversy to become less heated....

In the meantime, the museum world needs movement in at least three arenas: 1. the
strengthening of institutions that give populations a chance to exert control over the way they are presented in museums; 2. the expansion of the expertise of established museums in the presentation of non-Western cultures and minority cultures in the United States; and 3. experiments with exhibition design that will allow museums to offer multiple perspectives or to reveal the tendentiousness of the approach taken.

So what do I infer from this theory and these examples about the present state of American museums and their possible future directions? With the essential qualifier that I am only one museum director among many whose views often are as diverse as our numbers, let me offer the following two observations and comments - with a dash of value judgment.

My first observation is that American museums are well on their way, and have been for the better part of the past decade, to a position of shared authority with respect to the representation and interpretation of cultures and the arts that is their raison d'être. The components of this movement are twofold and are both external and internal to the museum community.

First, much of the motivation comes from within the museum community itself, as museological theory and associated best practices have altered, sometimes only incrementally but almost always ineluctably, through the past generation, moving from the temple of yore with its metaphorically locked doors and few windows to a place and space with many more doors and windows that connect to the outside - and that open more easily and frequently. Second, from an external standpoint, America's museums have had - and perhaps should have had - little choice given the rapidly diversifying contemporary cultural makeup of the United States and an associated recognition that much of this diversity has existed within the United States for generations in any event. This awakening has caused the realisation, which continues to gain wider credence in the museum community, that perhaps all people with a legitimate claim to representational and interpretive authority may not view material culture and art in the same way.

My second observation is that this dynamic, the widening of the concept of authority within America's museums, is having a singularly transformative effect on these institutions - they are becoming by nature and in concept somewhat different places. Obviously, the voices visitors hear in museums, through scholarship, exhibitions, and public programs, under these circumstances, are more multiple and often more diverse in viewpoint. The transformation I refer to, however, goes beyond this kind of distinction about what visitors see and hear to the essential nature of the institution, and it is this: America's museums are becoming far more the forums of which Duncan Cameron spoke earlier and far less the unitary temples of the past.

Here I will add a value judgement, which I emphasise is only my own and which I appreciate is debated, sometimes vigorously, within the American museum community: I personally applaud this transformation of American museums and for several reasons. First, I believe, based upon my own experience at the National Museum of the American Indian, which I will describe in a moment, that an approach based upon shared authority can enhance dramatically the quality of the museum's work because it widens and deepens the scope of museum scholarship, exhibitions, and public programming - and thus redounds to the direct benefit of those millions of people who walk through these places every year. Second, I also believe that the concept of a museum as a true forum, a gathering place where a multiplicity of diverse and authoritative viewpoints can coexist and even be debated, has a salutary impact on
museums and the communities in which they sit. The museum as forum draws closer to the community of which it is a part, has a more multifaceted and integral set of connections to it, and, in relation to the community, becomes perceived by its members as a different kind of place - as a bona fide and essential civic place and space rather than only a cultural destination to be visited periodically if possible.

As an illustration of all of the above, I would like to turn now to the National Museum of the American Indian and, more specifically, to its experience in developing the inaugural permanent exhibition installations for its museum on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., which is currently under construction and scheduled to open in the fall of 2004. I wish to emphasise again, as I mentioned before, that I do not presume the status of sacrosanctity for anything we have done, but it is museum work that is relevant to what I have just discussed and with which I am intimately familiar.

As a starting point for what I am about to describe, I would like to offer the following comments by way of introduction and brief background. I begin by invoking the eloquence of my first boss at the Smithsonian Institution, Secretary Robert McCormick Adams, who oversaw the agreements and congressional legislation that established the National Museum of the American Indian as a part of the Smithsonian Institution in 1989. Here is how he conceptualised the intellectual superstructure of the Museum at its inception:

...[W]e move decisively from the older image of the museum as a temple with its superior, self-governing priesthood to ... a forum ... committed not to the promulgation of received wisdom but to the encouragement of a multi-cultural dialogue.

This is a national museum ... [that] takes the permanence ... the authenticity ... the vitality and the self-determination of Native American voices ... as the funda-mental reality ... it must ... represent.

From this vision of the National Museum of the American Indian, with which I concurred explicitly and wholeheartedly and without which I would not have become a recovering lawyer, the staff and Board of Trustees of the Museum fashioned the following Mission Statement, which to this day remains the NMAI's controlling guidepost in all its work. The Statement reads as follows:

The National Museum of the American Indian shall recognize and affirm to Native communities and the non-Native public the historical and contemporary cultural achievements of the Native peoples of the Western Hemisphere by advancing, in consultation, collaboration, and cooperation with Native people, knowledge and understanding of Native cultures, including art, history, and language, and by recognizing the museum’s special responsibility, through innovative public programming, research, and collections, to protect, support, and enhance the development, maintenance, and perpetuation of Native culture and community.

Based upon this Mission Statement, drafted by its staff and adopted by its Board of Trustees a decade ago, the Museum has been committed, explicitly and consistently, to a fully collaborative and mutually participatory relationship with Native communities throughout the Western Hemisphere regarding its representation and interpretation of Native peoples and cultures in its research and programming, including exhibitions. To this end, in the case of all exhibitions we have undertaken to date, including those planned for the opening on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. in
2004, the Museum has involved those being represented directly in the development of exhibitions, including themes, ideas, and the selection and interpretation of objects. I cannot overemphasize the importance of this process element that is embedded in the Museum’s Mission Statement - it is truly process so important that it rises to the level of substance or, to state the point slightly differently, it is process that is substance for the NMAI.

The process for creating the permanent installations for the NMAI’s centerpiece facility on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. was no exception to this operational rubric. Through a series of consultations that took literally the better part of three years and involved some two-dozen meetings with Native peoples from throughout the Hemisphere, the overarching themes or concepts for the three inaugural exhibitions were developed. Described by functional titles, the three exhibitions are Our Universes, which addresses Native philosophy, worldview, and cosmology; Our Peoples, which focuses on Native histories told in the first person rather than the third person voice; and Our Lives, which traces the personal and community identities of contemporary Native peoples and communities.

In addition to these three themes and as adjunct to their implementation, the NMAI developed five guiding principles that were based directly upon its consultations with Native communities regarding exhibitions and were to inform their development. The five Exhibition Principles are the following: (1) community: our tribes are sovereign nations; (2) locality: this is Indian land; (3) vitality: we are here now; (4) viewpoint: we know the world differently; and (5) voice: these are our stories.

With these themes and Exhibition Principles in hand, the Museum then followed a very specific protocol for approaching Native communities to invite their voluntary participation in creating, developing, and finalising the three permanent inaugural exhibitions. The protocol, briefly summarised, consisted of the following specific steps: (1) my letter of invitation to the specific Native community explaining the Museum’s intentions and inviting the community’s participation; (2) if the invitation was accepted (and to date none has been declined), a visit by the NMAI’s staff to the community to explain further the thematic superstructure of the exhibitions; (3) the community’s visit to the NMAI’s Cultural Resources Center near Washington, D.C., where the collections of the community were assembled; (4) the community delegation’s selection of objects for the exhibition and, through additional consultations, what the community wished to say about the objects and related ideas; and (5) a second return visit by NMAI staff to the community for its advice and counsel regarding the final exhibition product, including both content and design. At the present time the National Museum of the American Indian is working in various stages of this protocol with some twenty-nine Native communities throughout the Western hemisphere, six of them from Latin America, two from Canada, and the balance from the United States.

The Museum’s engagement with its constituent communities, however, does not end with the completion of the exhibitions that will be the core of its inaugural installations in its centerpiece building on the National Mall in Washington, DC. Over time the NMAI intends to rotate each of these twenty-nine components out of Washington, D.C., and in some form, to the communities who originated them. This approach, as a quite practical matter, allows the Museum both to freshen periodically its permanent exhibitions and to invite other Native communities into its galleries. In my mind, literally and metaphorically, it also completes the circle of sharing, fuses the connection, makes
truly real the collaboration, between the National Museum of the American Indian and contemporary Native communities throughout the Americas.

To conclude this illustration, let me describe as succinctly as possible the linkages between it and the museological theory I discussed earlier in my presentation. First, the National Museum of the American Indian is seeking, consistently and methodically, to share its authority with those whose voices, views, and cultural expertise it feels are equally authentic and valid. Second, the NMAI does not pretend to be a temple where ‘truth’ carries an upper case ‘T’ and is singular. It respects the reality that views of objects, ideas, art, and history can be multiple and still be individually valid, worthy, and truthful, and it also affirms the proposition that Native peoples themselves should have a place at the table and a role in the conversation. Finally, it seeks to build, to maintain, to sustain through time the relevance of the Museum as a cultural and social place and space to the Native community of which it should be an integral and important part.

In closing, I hope that this presentation has provided for you some sense and understanding of what at least one American museum director and former chair of the American Association of Museums thinks is going on in American museums. You should also know that, for better or worse, you are more responsible than you might appreciate for what this American museum director thinks. When I was a newly recovering lawyer and a puppy museum director a decade ago, I surveyed the museum world as best I could at the outset and immediately headed for the southern hemisphere where, in Australia and New Zealand, I saw progressive efforts and developments occurring that were directly relevant and highly instructive regarding everything I have discussed here today. They informed my thinking both as the Chair of the American Association of Museums and as Director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian. I thank you most sincerely for that intellectual and spiritual mentoring and guidance - as I also thank you now for your kind attention today.

* Note: this paper does not include references to sources cited as it is a transcript of a speech.
CULTURE AND HERITAGE IN DEVELOPMENT
HA LONG ECOMUSEUM, A CASE STUDY FROM VIETNAM

AMARESWAR GALLA

The challenge for Vietnam at the turn of the millennium is the ‘renovation of national institutions to be compatible with world institutions and participate energetically in the formulation of global institutions’.1 (Vo Dai Luoc)

INTRODUCTION

Asia is currently witnessing the gradual transformation of heritage institutions such as museums, historic places and World Heritage Areas into postcolonial sites of cultural preservation and representation. They are increasingly becoming visitor-centred, exploring their relevance to neighbouring community stakeholders and confronting issues of sense of place and identity in an increasingly globalising environment.2 The challenge is to develop a post-colonial heritage discourse that is Asian in philosophy and locally grounded in context. This is largely dependent on the way we address heritage and community building and provide a focus for facilitating productive relationships for collaboration, cultural exchange and enrichment of the ‘culture in development’ paradigm.3

The overriding question facing heritage institutions today in several parts of Asia is that of their relevance and survival. Several of them mirror the reductive, sectarian and typological categories, used by colonial countries, to map, appropriate and control the biocultural landscape of colonised communities. There is a continuation of this paradigm even after decolonisation due to priority focus on social and economic agendas in nation building and community development. The heritage sector has often been left to fend for itself with minimal budgets in a policy vacuum. There have been only rare efforts to reflect or criticise the hegemonic textualisation of the variety, complexity and plurality of the local cultural and heritage contexts through institutions such as museums.4

In order to retain their relevance, heritage institutions have to play a role in combating the growing monoculture of life and mind with globalisation, by documenting, preserving and presenting the poly-cultural technologies of resource management, and life enhancing elements of knowledge and skill, transmitted by communities transgenerationally. They have to treat the community habitats as living museums, and collaborate with community groups, in reversing the process of univocal translation of their multicultural societies especially with the convergence of telecommunications. They can play a role in development, not just by commodification of heritage resources for display and representation, but by its revitalisation and replenishment. They have to defend communities against ecological terrorism, their habitats from bio-cultural piracy and museumisation and face up to the challenges of globalisation while taking advantage of new opportunities for strategic partnerships in exploring the economic dimension of heritage conservation in sustainable development.5
There is an increasing corpus of projects dealing with heritage in development in Asia which are informed by stakeholder group participation through collaborative partnerships to preserve, present and disseminate the specific knowledge systems, cumulative and received heritage of communities through centuries, by responding to different environmental and developmental challenges. These include coexist-curated and coexist-directed field initiatives to channel local governance strategies into sustainable developmental approaches that enable and empower stakeholder community groups in their endeavours for cultural and environmental self-determination. These collaborative projects cover various fields including traditional medicine, water harvesting, architecture, conservation of forests and sacred groves, inter-regional transfer of knowledge and technologies, inter dialect translation, locating culture in poverty alleviation and promotion of cross-cultural understanding.

The tensions posed by the centripetal and centrifugal forces of globalisation and localisation/indigenisation provide a contemporary background for heritage institutions in a world increasing governed by free trade market imperatives. In a range of economic and cultural forums, Asian countries have identified economic, telecommunications and cultural impacts of globalisation as of increasing concern for systematic action. The corporate and global process of market integration has affected not only primary industries of agriculture, forestry and mining, or secondary industries of chemicals, drugs and foods, but also tertiary industries of welfare, education, culture, research and advisory services, reducing all social and ecological categories to economic and industrial categories.

The challenge is to come up with principles and processes that govern the transformation of heritage institutions in the twenty-first century resulting in indigenous institutions that excel in the preservation, presentation, continuation and management of movable and immovable, tangible and intangible heritage resources of rich and diverse cultural and environmental systems. They can then play a catalytic role in relating heritage and sustainable development so that culture is seen as constitutive of and not instrumental in development. It will also assist in reorienting heritage tourism to conservation and appropriate economic empowerment of stakeholder community groups rather than the objectification and exploitation of community heritage. As one of the leading thinkers of heritage interpretation in post-independent India, Bendapudi Subba Rao, demonstrated in his work, the endeavour is about understanding and interpreting the personalities of places.

It is within this overall context that a demonstration project auspiced by UNESCO and facilitated by Vietnam will be discussed in this article. The location of the project entitled Ha Long Ecomuseum is centred on the World Heritage Area of Ha Long Bay. The framework used in the project provides a basis for community development that takes advantage of available economic opportunities, and ensures that the benefits flow on to neighbouring community groups. It explores an approach to build economic capacity in modest achievable steps, so as to minimise the risk of economic failure within a situation where heritage conservation and community development are both non-negotiable. And lastly, it aims to consolidate gains, so that each achievement opens up further opportunities and builds further capacity.

**HA LONG BAY**

Ha Long Bay is part of the province of Quang Ninh and is located in the northeast corner of Vietnam. It is an area of superlative natural beauty. It is also a treasure house of unusual and often unique geomorphic features, ecosystems and bio-diversity. There are many sites of historical significance and archaeological remains in and around the Bay and it is strongly represented in the myths and legends of the Vietnamese people.
Ha Long Bay is a unique cluster of landscapes and waterscapes created when the rivers and valleys were overtaken by rising sea levels at the end of the Pleistocene or last ice age and during the current Holocene or warm period. There is significant material evidence of human cultures during these transitional periods of climatic history.

The Vietnamese Government made Ha Long Bay a National Protection Area in 1962. It was twice inscribed on the World Heritage List by UNESCO, in 1994 for its outstanding landscape and aesthetic characteristics and then again in 2000 for its scientific and geological values. The Management Department of Ha Long Bay was established in 1995. It is a modest organisation with over 150 employees. The primary functions of the Department are to manage and preserve that part of Ha Long Bay within the boundaries of Quang Ninh Province, which has been inscribed on the World Heritage List and to develop and maintain its values. It provides the staff on the caves and islands, the tourist guides and from its offices in the centre of Hong Gai in Ha Long City, controls all development and activities that take place in the World Heritage Area and its immediate surrounds. The Department also undertakes limited research and development using its own team of professional and technical staff, often with support from national research centres and other countries.

The natural features and the enormously complicated interaction between them and the climatic, hydrological and human influences upon them are, as yet, little researched and therefore largely unexplained. However, it is part of the integrated environmental planning network of Vietnam with considerable focus on the area for future research and development.

The capacity of the management agency, and therefore the tourist potential of the area is reaching the limits of the Bay's carrying capacity. The bulk of tourism is made up of single-visit short stay visitors placing a maximum demand on the resource but making a minimum economic contribution. The present traditional approach to the management of the heritage area attempts to achieve a balance between the needs of the natural resources and those of economic development. The industrial, commercial, urban, historical and cultural components of the Bay area are managed and treated as separate units.

The Bay and its hinterland is a region which is experiencing significant conflicts between conservation and development. In order to address this emerging crisis situation, management department initiated a project to deal with competing priorities for development. A systematic analysis of the developmental concerns led to the identification of particular issues arising from this situation which are:

- environmental degradation from coal mining activities,
- discharge of industrial waste, sewage and stormwater run-off from urban areas,
- pollution and sedimentation from rural stormwater run-off,
- urban infrastructure that is inadequate to cope with development pressures,
- lack of institutional capacity to address development conflicts,
- lack of an appropriate regulatory regime,
- lack of an appropriate spatial plan that can resolve the tension between competing uses.

Pollution sources include the expanding urban population and small scale manufacturing industries as well as upstream coal
Views of Ha Long Bay.
Photos: Amareswar Galla.
mining. The pollution problem is compounded by the fact that there is no adequate waste water treatment facility in the urban area of Hon Gai, the central city area of the Bay. What infrastructure does exist is often old, and was designed for a much smaller population. This includes an estimated ten kilometres of old and leaking sewers. Pollution of land and water is likely to have long-term adverse impacts on the health of the local community, as well as discouraging tourist visitation. The environmental quality of Ha Long Bay will continue to deteriorate if there is no substantial investment in upgrading its infrastructure and management systems.9

In order to address these concerns the Management Department of Ha Long Bay and the Quang Ninh People's Committee (the provincial authority) have jointly developed a 'Master Plan for the Development of Ha Long Bay to the Year 2020'. This was ratified by the prime minister in January 2001. It will provide a coordinated planning framework to control development that could affect the Bay but lies beyond the protection of the World Heritage Area and the area of national protection. Nevertheless, many current, and possible future activities conflict with efforts to manage the sustainable development of the marine resources and World Heritage values of Ha Long Bay. Clearly identifiable examples of direct conflicts are the impacts of increasing numbers of tourists and the corresponding demand for wider access to caves and grottoes, expansion of commercial shipping and tourist vessels, fishing by using explosives and other illegal methods as well as coal mining.

In addressing the above mentioned conflicts between conservation and development the official and community stakeholder groups adopted in July 2000 the mediation processes embedded in the philosophical frameworks of ecomuseology. The directive was that both conservation and development were non-negotiable and that the Ha Long Bay Management Department had to come up with the best possible approach to establish a way forward. Hence the launching of the Ha Long Ecomuseum project.

RESOLVING CONFLICTS BETWEEN CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

The development of the ecomuseological approach to resolve the conflicts between conservation and development and the use of the Ecomuseum as a tool for conservation in sustainable development were the result of a year-long process of stakeholder meetings, workshops and mapping of community heritage values. Some of the findings of the community driven consultation process are as follows:

1. Income generation from the growth of tourism has become critical for mass poverty alleviation and job creation. But tourism is expanding rapidly and only exploiting a minimal product range. The carrying capacity of the Bay is at its limits based upon current levels of development and can only be raised by opening up more islands and caves or by diversification of the range of interpretive products for visitors beyond the confines of the World Heritage Area boundary.

2. The organisational and management capacity of the Management Department of Ha Long Bay is sound within its present limited role. Significant expansion of capacity is essential if more sophisticated planning, development, implementation and evaluation techniques are to be employed. Research indicates that capacity has to be built by intensive expertise and skills transfer activities starting from a primary conceptual base and taking deeply rooted cultural patterns into account. Experience shows that such investment in building basic management and planning concepts pays rich dividends in terms of subsequent
institutional change and rapid organisational development.

3. Extensive current and planned urban and industrial development outside the World Heritage Area is creating real and potential threats to the natural environment and, in particular, the tangible and intangible culture and heritage of Ha Long Bay. Whilst some of the pressures on the natural environment are being effectively addressed through infrastructure improvements and better equipment, measures to mitigate damage and pollution arising from the irresponsible activities of residents, visitors and local industries are minimally effective.

4. Although the local area is rapidly becoming more prosperous, there are increasing problems of occupational displacement, marginalisation and social alienation of vulnerable and minority ethnic groups and increasing relative poverty. Preliminary discussions and negotiations with individuals and groups of those affected demonstrate that the establishment of strategic partnerships, an integral part of the Ecomuseum development, will have a powerful mitigating effect on these problems.

5. Although definite projections have yet to be quantified, it is clear that the Ecomuseum will create a wide range of direct and indirect employment opportunities biased in favour of marginalised and poor people.

6. The limited range of activities undertaken to establish the feasibility of the Ecomuseum have already had a considerable effect upon raising public awareness of the importance of heritage conservation. It is equally apparent from the consultation exercise that there is a clear recognition that conservation is essential to ensure future economic prosperity. There is also surprisingly strong support for positive actions to achieve it through partnerships with the Ecomuseum.

7. The capacity of the Management Department of Ha Long Bay is limited by its present organisational structure and culture. The holistic nature of the Ecomuseum, which approaches development through interpretive themes and demonstration projects is a catalyst in breaking down the conceptual limits imposed by the present structure.

8. Liaison between agencies and departments at an operational level is very limited except in situations where cooperation is enshrined in a formal decree, as in the example of the inspection activities undertaken by the Department in collaboration with other agencies. However, during the Ecomuseum developmental process it is being discovered that informal relationships and partnerships are not only possible, but welcomed. Working together in this way is regarded as an innovative activity and offers manifold opportunities to explore inter-sectoral synergies.

9. Local authority administrative infrastructure needs to be improved. Considerable expertise is available in local government departments and offices but administrative procedures and processes need to be streamlined to benefit from rapidly growing markets and economic development. Nevertheless, there is a willingness among all the stakeholders to cooperate at a local level and to assist
with new ventures such as the Eco-
museum. However, it is important to
recognise that capacity building will
need to extend well beyond the con-
fines of the Management Depart-
ment of Ha Long Bay if
developments there are not to
founder in complex administrative
processes.

10. Perhaps the most important ele-
ment in the development of the Eco-
museum is its potential for energising
community support and conserva-
tion awareness. At present, most
members of the Ha Long community
are almost completely oblivious to
the global importance of the heritage
of the area and the great significance
of the culture and history of the Ha
Long Bay to the nation. This lack of
awareness leads to indifference to
attempts to control damaging envi-
ronmental activities by means of
exhortation and regulation. The
Ecomuseum development has shown
that, by engaging interest groups in
dialogue and partnership, it is possi-
ble to bring issues of conservation to
the forefront of public consciousness
and to have a substantial positive
impact on irresponsible patterns of
behaviour.

The Ecomuseum developmental study
contextualised all elements of its proposals
within the population profile of Ha Long Bay
and Quang Ninh Province. The demographic
profiles clearly demonstrated that there is a
significant youth population, both male and
female, especially in the rural areas of the
province. It is envisaged that the children
and young people, both male and female, will
be seeking new opportunities in the growth of
the provincial economy. They will also be the
critical players in dealing with new markets
and opportunities as well as being responsible
for conservation in sustainable development.

The Ecomuseum places special emphasis on
the women, youth and children of Quang
Ninh in all pilot or demonstration project
development. These groups and their partici-
pation and interest cut across all the current
and proposed projects.

HA LONG ECOMUSEUM CONCEPT

The Ha Long Ecomuseum has caught the
imagination of the nation through extensive
interest among the various conservation
agencies and the media. It is a flexible project
driven by the simple principle that the con-
licts between conservation and development
could only be dealt with by bringing people
and their environment together into produc-
tive partnerships. The following is a summary
of the project concept, which was developed
through a stakeholder participation frame-
work during 2000-2001.10

Theory: The Ecomuseum concept views
the entire Bay as a living museum and
employs an ‘interpretive’ approach to its
management.11 Interpretive management sees
the components and processes of the Bay and
its hinterland of Quang Ninh Province as
continuously interacting with each other in a
constantly changing equilibrium. By inten-
sive research and monitoring, managers and
stakeholder community groups seek to ‘inter-
pret’ what is happening to that equilibrium
and to make carefully planned interventions
to change the balance of the components
when necessary. An important feature of this
approach is that it views human activity, past
and present, as fundamental components of
the total environmental resource. The cul-
ture, history, traditions and activities of the
human population on and around the Bay are
as much a part of the heritage as the caves
and plants on the islands and are in continu-
ous interaction with it.

Assumptions: all human and natural eco-
systems are living, developing organisms that
cannot be ‘preserved’ in a particular isolated state:
• human and natural ecosystems are interdependent,
• the ultimate goal of conservation is the sustainable development of the resource,
• to sustainably use and develop the resource it is necessary to understand it,
• to understand the resource it is necessary to interpret its nature and processes,
• effective interpretation must be based upon a holistic view of the resource which recognises the interdependence of its elements, systems and processes.

In practice the Ecomuseum means different things for different stakeholder and participant groups as follows.

For the visitor: At the heart of the Ecomuseum is the Hub or a central interpretive centre under construction, the gateway through which all visitors pass en route to the Bay. It will be a large, well-designed building capable of dealing with a large throughput of visitors. Inside, there will be much that is reminiscent of a conventional museum — displays, dioramas, models, natural history exhibits, hands-on interactives and so on, but all carefully themed and relating directly to the various ‘ecosystems’ of the Bay and its hinterland.

The Ecomuseum Hub will provide an exciting ‘summary’ of the complexity of the area — its history, traditions, industries, commerce and so on, as well as the caves, islands, geomorphology and seascape. From there, the visitor can choose a ‘tour’ or cultural experience. A cultural tour might take in a fishing village, a temple, and a visit to a craft factory or a convenient local event — not something that has been specially staged. An industrial tour could take the visitor to a restored traditional coal mine, followed by a visit to its working counterpart with an interpretation of the mine workers and their role in resistance against colonialism and during the American war. The potential for interesting and exciting experiences that will give tourists a real insight into the area is almost limitless. Instead of a single visit to look at and photograph the islands and caves as is the current situation, a visitor could spend a fortnight in Ha Long City and immerse themselves in a different cultural experience every day if they so wished along different thematic cultural routes across the Quang Ninh Province that are being developed as pilot projects.

The Ecomuseum Hub will continue to research and examine these possibilities as well as considering options for expanding the recreational and learning facilities to support the Ecomuseum activities. It would also contain quality restaurant and refreshment facilities, a large outlet for locally-produced products and crafts and a performance space. It will also have a marine educational centre with exhibits and educational programs and outreach activities that focus on environmental education. The Ecomuseum would act as both a capacity-building mechanism and a quality control agency for all products — a certification that could extend into the wider retail community.

For the local people: Apart from justifiable pride in the establishment of the first Ecomuseum in Vietnam, local people will benefit in many ways. The Museum will generate direct and indirect employment opportunities and stimulate interest and a market for traditional local industries and crafts. Substantial additional revenue will accrue from the longer stays of visitors further stimulating the local economy. Those working directly in traditional ways will have the opportunity to become a living resource — in return for upgrading their workshop, boat or World Heritage Area or whatever, and undertaking appropriate training, they will be subsidised in the practice of their skill and become effective custodians of aspects of the Bay’s living culture and heritage.

The Hub will also have a significant Discovery Centre for use by local teachers and
Above: Me Cung and Ang Lake conceptual plan. Left: Cua Van Floating Cultural Centre.
Images courtesy of Staples and Charles Ltd, UNESCO and Ha Long Bay Management Department.
school children as a strategic partnership with the Department of Education. One of the exciting elements of the Discovery Centre is the Ecomuseum Boat, similar to a museum bus, which will go to the various schools of the Quang Ninh Province. The majority of them are located on the edge of waterways. Children will be given free educational experiences on the Bay. It will be developed and managed as a strategic partnership with the Quang Ninh Youth Union as a young people in heritage conservation project.

For the managers: The development of the Ecomuseum is of necessity accompanied by an extensive training program to provide the advanced skills needed to manage a complex organisation. The effectiveness of interpretive management depends upon the quality of the data collection, storage and retrieval mechanisms needed to update the information resource and further refine the interpretation of the heritage. This activity and the scientific research that will accompany it will become a much more significant task. Implementing the newly-established Interpretive Management Plan through the Ecomuseum process will involve learning new working practices based on information sharing, team working and more generic roles.

Improved skills will be necessary throughout the organisation. The use of computers and electronic aids to management and data processing will be essential. Tourist guides will become highly trained professionals: fluency in foreign languages and interpersonal skills will become even more significant.

For the local authority: The creation of the Management Department of Ha Long Bay was groundbreaking at the time inasmuch as it created an agency, which crossed the demarcation lines of different Departments of the People’s Committee. The establishment of the Ecomuseum will take that successful innovation a stage further by prompting more extensive inter-agency collaboration to promote conservation in sustainable development. There is already a careful consideration of the legal framework that presently governs activities on the Bay and refinements for the establishment of the Ecomuseum framework are in the pipeline.

HOLISTIC CONTEXT FOR HERITAGE IN DEVELOPMENT

The research and development for the Ha Long Ecomuseum are conducted with a focus on three issues that are of growing concern for developing community-grounded heritage projects in Vietnam. These are: integrated and holistic approaches to heritage management that are local in context and global in professional orientation, capacity building for all the stakeholder groups who are critical for sustainable development initiatives and quality heritage interpretation that is informed by the demographic and psychographic profile of diverse audiences. In the context of locating the human face in globalisation, a commitment to the framework of integrated heritage management has been adopted by Vietnam through the national cultural heritage law and its regulations in 2001.

It is within this context that the Ha Long Ecomuseum is informed by a holistic approach to natural and cultural environments and to movable and immovable heritage resources, including tangible and intangible elements. This approach adopted from the proceedings of the Nara Convention on Authenticity of the World Heritage Bureau is diagrammatically represented below.

Heritage interpretation through Ha Long Ecomuseum has been situated within this holistic context that brings together people and their environment, focusing on both natural and cultural resources. For example, effective presentation and interpretation can be a significant force for changing attitudes towards Ha Long Bay’s environment and its conservation. Interpretation can legitimise or challenge particular ideas and viewpoints. It can inform public awareness of key issues in Vietnamese society, such as the environment, sustainable development and understanding
the cultures of communities in the neighbourhood of the World Heritage Area. It can bring multiple publics to the World Heritage Area and the World Heritage Area to the multiple publics. Ha Long Ecomuseum aims to achieve a balance between area-centred and people-centred approaches to environmental and cultural conservation.

Appropriate heritage interpretation is seen as the key to the re-establishment of cultural pride and a sense of place to addressing social well-being and promoting conservation values. It requires an inclusive framework that recognises the cultural aspirations of different sections of the community, including groups that may otherwise be marginalised culturally, socially or economically.

An essential component of cultural recovery and maintenance is the passing on of cultural values to the younger generation. One of the pilot projects of the Ha Long Ecomuseum makes provision for heritage education for young people within the broader programs for economic development. The possibility for employment is likely to create a powerful incentive for young people to learn about their heritage, and provision of cultural education for youth is likely to encourage broad community support for economic development projects. In some situations, recognition and respect for traditional heritage is critical to maintaining the integrity of local cultural resources.

The capacity of the stakeholder organisations in the development of Ha Long Bay at present is heavily influenced by the organisational infrastructure available at a local level. Ha Long Ecomuseum development will specifically address issues of leadership, organisational capacity, governance, collaboration, core skills, information and resource management through an integrated stake-
holder participation framework. The typology of capacity building and the social context calls for community building through localised empowerment of communities for sustainable development. The tools will at once provide the skills for working in a holistic environment that reconciles concerns of globalisation with indigenisation and localisation.

They underline central issues in community building, sustainable development and the importance of professionalism, including the need for furthering scholarship. It is critical to offer an opportunity to think about attitudes, to acquire knowledge and to hone skills to all stakeholder groups associated with the development of Ha Long Bay, for this is the foundation of sound decision making and sustainable outcomes. Heritage in development is a process by which communities can recognise and assert the value of their cultural wealth, and thus protect and enhance their cultural resources in all aspects of planning for the development. It is essentially community based, founded in ‘bottom-up’ approaches to community empowerment and capacity building. Ha Long Ecomuseum development is applying a range of methodological tools, including community planning, cultural mapping and cultural planning. Community-grounded development is vital to Ha Long Bay through the Ecomuseum development because it has the potential to:

- strengthen and protect the cultural and heritage resource base for sustainable expression and practice through interpretation,
- engage the whole community in valuing and participating in heritage conservation and appreciation,
- provide relevant community infrastructure for the support of conservation activity,
- develop the economic framework for the promotion of the conservation values through resolving conflicts and maximising on the opportunities for job creation and poverty alleviation.

In pursuing economic development through interpretation, it is vital that the value of local resources is protected. This applies not only to the physical environment, but also to cultural and heritage resources. The frameworks of environmental impact assessments is being reworked to include social and cultural impact assessments as well. The Ecomuseum Hub has provision to establish and maintain stations in the province for effective monitoring of the impacts of all developments in Ha Long Bay.

A range of pilot projects that is being implemented by the Ha Long Ecomuseum provides a basis for community economic empowerment that takes advantage of available opportunities, and ensures that the benefits flow on to neighbouring communities of the Bay. These pilots will be used as a foundation for economic planning and action within each node of heritage resources in Quang Ninh Province enabling participation by all groups within neighbouring communities, Management Department of Ha long Bay and other external stakeholder agencies. They is a strong consciousness now to build economic capacity in modest achievable steps, so as to minimise the risk of economic failure within already disadvantaged communities.

CONCLUSION

Ha Long Bay is sometimes referred to as a microcosm of Vietnam. This is certainly so inasmuch as it clearly shows the conflict between conserving a rich, but fragile, heritage whilst simultaneously promoting the industrial, economic and tourism development that is essential to alleviate the severe poverty and impoverishment of large sections of the community. Traditionally, this has been treated as an ‘either/or’ issue and therefore frequently results in an impasse. The greatest challenge has been to bring together the Ha Long Bay World Heritage...
Area management and all the stakeholder groups into a participation framework that is facilitated by the Ha Long Ecomuseum development. The partnership promotes the identification of the aims, interests and values that inform interpretations of community, local history and holistic environmental values, including the intangible heritage values.

The Ecomuseum offers a way forward. Through the establishment of a far broader stakeholder base, involving communities, groups and organisations, in the management of the heritage resources, it seeks to establish a mutuality of interest and a sense of common ownership. Through interpretation it raises awareness and understanding, not only of the significance of the natural and cultural heritage, but also of the contribution of industrial and commercial development to the betterment of a poor country striving to recover from almost a century of war and famine. Better understanding of the critical importance of both conservation and development softens the polarisation of the debate and enables the two issues to be viewed holistically.

The development of the Ha Long Ecomuseum will examine some of the implications and dilemmas of interpreting environmental resources and cultural heritage for visitors while protecting the significance and integrity of the resources.

The role of the Ecomuseum can be summarised as:

- supporting communities in securing their basic living needs (this may require advocacy with other agencies),
- facilitating the community planning process within communities, including the identification of local resources,
- supporting the protection of local resources, including cultural maintenance,
- developing skills and providing other business support infrastructure, including funding and communications infrastructure,
- launching businesses through contracting and outsourcing, and provision of space for community markets,
- growing enterprises and employment through developing a prospectus for any business opportunity with good prospects for viability,
- supporting communities in making wise investments, and increasing their economic resources,
- facilitating demonstration projects such as the pilot projects that will be catalytic.

The Ha Long Bay dilemma is far from unique to Vietnam. However, whilst the application of "new museology" or ecomuseology has been recognised as a valuable tool to mitigate development conflicts in several countries, it has yet to become established in an Asian context. Projects such as the Ha Long Ecomuseum could become models for promoting heritage economics without compromising conservation values; models in which the economic dimension of conservation will be revealed in a World Heritage Area through community museological discourse. The Ha Long Ecomuseum development is being viewed as an exemplar for similar developments elsewhere and will be an important factor in the creation of a national policy for sustainable heritage tourism in Vietnam.¹³

Endnotes

1 Vo Dai Luoc, “Globalisation and Vietnam’s World Integration Issue”, in Vietnam Economic Review, special issue on Globalisation and Integration, National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities, No. 4, April 2000, pp. 10–11 focus on the importance of locating culture in development.


5 K.K.Chakravarty, Opening address, “Museums, Culture and Development, South Asia”.


8 I am grateful to the following who were critical for the development of the Ecomuseum Project where I worked as the capacity building facilitator and principal technical adviser. The project Management Team consists of the following: Mr Nguyen Van Tuan, Project Director; Dr. Amareswar Galla, Principal Technical Adviser; Mr Len Tooke, Project Manager; Mr Ha Huu Nga, Archaeologist; Mr Vu Nam Phong, Environment Expert; Ms. Ngo Thi Mai Phuong, Member; Ms. Nguyen Thi Kim Hoa, Member; Mr Nguyen Quang Hao, Member; Ms. Nguyen Thi Van, Member; Mr Nguyen Quang Vinh, Member; Ms Pham Quynh Lam, Member; Ms Nguyen Thi Huey, Member; Ms Nguyen Thi Tam, Member; Ms Le Thi Huey, Member. The project is facilitated by Ms Rosamaria Durand, Representative of UNESCO in Vietnam; Mrs. Nguyen Thi Hoi, Secretary General, National Commission for UNESCO of Vietnam and Ha Van Hien, Chairman of Quang Ninh Provincial People’s Committee.


17 A substantive monograph based on three years of fieldwork and first-hand project development is being finalised by the author on a Visiting Fellowship in the Humanities Research Centre at The Australian National University during 2002.
Most world coverage of the Centre Culturel Tjibaou (Tjibaou Cultural Centre), opened in Nouméa in 1998, has understandably featured the outstanding architectural achievements of Renzo Piano. Indeed the forms of the complex are overwhelmingly impressive when one visits the site. However the architectural reportage scarcely discloses the magnitude of the cultural implications at stake in the way this...
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The subtleties of cross-cultural dialogue and imagination that have occurred in the design development of the Tjibaou Centre go beyond formal echoes of Kanak traditional houses. Understanding this interaction does not diminish Piano's accomplishment, but particularises and enriches it. The following discussion, therefore, focuses more on the cultural context, to augment the already extensive commentaries on Piano's formal achievements.

The cultural centre in Nouméa is dedicated to the life and aspirations for Kanak culture of Jean-Marie Tjibaou. It is pertinent to consider how this remarkable man recast the terms of cultural debate in New Caledonia (and took his ideas directly into French consciousness) to appreciate the forces that conditioned the final form of the imposing Centre bearing his name.

Born in 1936 in Tiendanite, Jean-Marie Tjibaou had received a religious education initially through Jesuit mission organisations in New Caledonia (there were no public schools in his youth). He entered a small Catholic seminary at the age of thirteen; proceeded to undertake his novitiate on the Isle of Pines; and was eventually ordained as a priest of the Catholic Church when he was twenty-nine. He was later appointed to the cathedral in Nouméa, to practise his ministry there.

Three years after his ordination, Tjibaou was on his way to France for four years. Arriving in the revolutionary year of 1968, the young priest found that all the institutions of the colonial power were coming under assault at this cathartic historical moment. He studied in Lyon and Paris during this period (1968–1971), his studies being in sociology and, most importantly, anthropology. Having begun work towards a doctorate in anthropology at the Sorbonne, focusing his research on an academic study of Kanak cultural identity, Tjibaou eventually abandoned this work to return to New Caledonia. His rupture with Western academic study also instigated reconsideration of his future with the Catholic Church. He was granted release from the priesthood in 1972.

Jean-Marie Tjibaou had therefore been close to the most sophisticated theatre of francophone debate about the future of European social institutions in the late 1960s, at a time when he was forming a deepening critique about the future of institutions in his own homeland. When he returned to Paris in later years, it was as a mature agent and articulator of some of the most important discussions of cultural equity of another kind: the equity of cultural diversity, the rights of colonised indigenous populations to regain a sense of agency in shaping their destiny.

Jean-Marie Tjibaou's life and experience enabled him to take exceptional advantage of the historical juncture confronting him. Yet it requires more than strategic opportunity to engage in events decisively, or to produce the deep impression on others and profound legacy that Tjibaou achieved. His spiritual gifts, personal resourcefulness, and vibrant sociological imagination enabled a much greater accomplishment.

Tjibaou's conceptions of culture, while deeply drawing value from traditions of Kanak history, also sought to move beyond orthodox solutions. Bringing an innovative historical consciousness to bear on fervid events in a traumatic period, he knowingly risked alienating hard-line Kanak activists. Seeking to bring to an end a period of terrible violence for Kanak people in the 1980s—referred to as the 'colonial tragedy'—Tjibaou had assented to the Matignon Accords, signed with Prime Minister M. Rocard in June 1988. The resentment of some compatriots ran deep against such a détente, and Tjibaou and a close colleague were shot by a fellow Kanak on the island of Ouvéa in May 1989 in a fundamentalist act of reprisal.

One of Jean-Marie Tjibaou's assertions, quoted at the very beginning of this essay, is...
haunting in its resonance across the debates about indigeneity and the politics of cultural difference in the ensuing decades. The disarming simplicity of his statement barely holds the expanding energy of its insight: “Our identity lies ahead of us”. 5

Among many sibling struggles of indigenous populations and minoritised cultures around the world during the last thirty years, Jean-Marie Tjibaou takes up a strategically innovative position. He shifts the foundation of his claim for recognition and renewal of Kanak culture onto new ground, beyond a direct return to tradition. This is highly unusual in comparative terms. Though more localised in its first impact, the most striking parallel in cultural imagination across the fissures of a colonised society is with Nelson Mandela (especially Mandela’s plea to retain the monuments built during the apartheid era as tools for historical rebuilding rather than simply to be torn down, as happened so precipitately across the former Soviet Union in the 1990s).

Jean-Marie Tjibaou’s conceptualisation of identity as a journey unfolding ahead of Kanak people — its mobility beyond a utopian or static past, in favour of utilising tradition to propel a people forward into a world of change — is decisive. It is pitched windward. It seeks to gain mobility from prevailing currents, navigating the ebb and flow of events in time. It is tilted towards an evolving future for Kanak culture that is constantly to be negotiated and remade. Tjibaou’s approach to identity is deeply resourced by history but also cross-cultural and reflexive in its commitment to an evolving present.

There is a clear recognition in Tjibaou’s published statements that the way back to pre-contact Kanak traditions is irrevocably ruptured by the experience of European colonisation and modernity, and the changes entailed. A direct line of unmediated access to the past is understood to be impossible. However his vision of Kanak history is not conceived solely in terms of loss. He scopes all issues concerning the future of Kanak identity dynamically: emphasising a cultural politics-of-becoming rather than a politics-of-origins.

Pacific islanders, once assured of the conventional forms of response of their traditional cultures, which confirm them in their feeling of continuity and permanence, need new responses, suited to their new circumstances and using strong communication techniques ... We are always talking about traditional culture; but what does traditional mean? ... I think our conception of culture is too archaeological; people seem to think that authentic culture has to come from the past; on the other hand, all contemporary creativity is perceived as having to be authenticated, perhaps by time ... The existential dimension of our heritage is now emerging with today’s youth in styles of music and new formats, which do not express centuries-old life but speak of today’s suffering and joy, life as it really is today.6

Tjibaou’s rejection of an ‘archaeological’ conception of culture, anchored in fixed tradition and constrained by the recording modes of anthropology (as he himself had studied in France), called for new conceptions to be pursued. It was while formulating new ways forward, towards a truly post-colonial vision for New Caledonian society, that Tjibaou’s work was brought to a brutal termination.

It is against this highly inflamed background, charged by opposing views from within Kanak culture itself as to where Kanak interests lay — in a separatist return to tradition, or in a two-way engagement of both tradition and social evolution — that the forces shaping the mission and realisation of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre should be understood. The following remarks are by Alban Bensa, the anthropologist who worked most closely with Renzo Piano throughout the whole project (as noted in the Renzo Piano Logbook).7
The Centre would never have come into existence if it weren’t for the events which between 1984 and 1989 propelled Kanaks onto the national and international political scene. Architecture aside, the Cultural Centre marks the memory of a struggle and of the man who came to personify it: Jean-Marie Tjibaou.

This gesture was part of an affirmative action plan by the Territorial Government, spurred by commitment and funding from France. The aim was to pursue long-range plans to ameliorate the circumstances of an aggrieved colonised people (85,000 people of the Kanak clans who trace a common line of descent from their founding culture hero, Téâ Kanaké) and to develop a basis for more peaceful development across racial divides in the 200,000-total population of New Caledonia. This was perceived by French authorities as a graduated devolution, following a history of colonisation stretching back to 1853, prior to any referendum on political independence.

The decision was taken amid manifold political tensions, with direct commitment from the government of the French Republic in Paris, to create a public focus for Kanak identity. The new centre was to achieve a strong symbolic focus for Kanak cultural aspirations, close to the capital and ‘White’ area of the southern province of the main island of New Caledonia — whereas the
continuities of traditional life had been maintained further away from the southern province and main port of Nouméa, in the north and on the Loyalty Islands.

The Tjibaou Cultural Centre thus became the last of seven Grand Projects (or Major Projects) of the government of François Mitterand (along with the Louvre Pyramid and the new National Library). This final project, an astonishing monument to French political and cultural self-interpretation at the end of the twentieth century, was realised in the hemisphere opposite to France. However it is in many ways the most innovative of the projects that record the historical ambition of Mitterand’s presidency. Mitterand’s Tjibaou may be cast in one light as an ingenious successor to Pompidou’s Beaubourg. The earlier project dramatised France’s high-modernist aspirations in its capital and quickly became known to the world; the more recent project provides a focus for cultural pilgrimage in the next century, an achievement that will gain historical endorsement more slowly, but no less self-consciously.

The project, at a cost of 320 million francs, occupied a decade of governmental commitment, although construction time lasted only three years (March 1995–February 1998). The Matignon Accords first opened the way in 1988. In 1989 the Kanak Cultural Development Agency (ADCK) became a recognised administrative entity of the French Government. During the next two years an international architectural competition for the Tjibaou Cultural Centre — with one-third of the judging panel drawn from the Pacific region — was conducted. The panel of jurors shortlisted ten designs from the 175 entries listed for consideration by the Board of Governors of ADCK (chaired by Marie-Claude Tjibaou). The competition was won by Renzo Piano, of the Renzo Piano Building Workshop, in 1991.

Significantly, the project was not commanded by the Municipal Council of Nouméa, nor directly by officers of the French Government’s Ministry of Culture, the Secretary of State for Overseas Territories, or the Inter-Ministerial Major Projects Group — though all were involved at a sub-directive level. A decisive role was given to the Agency for the Development of Kanak Culture, as successor to an organisation that Jean-Marie Tjibaou himself had set up almost a decade earlier, in 1982: the ‘Office Culturel, Scientifique et Technique Canaque’.

The Kanak Cultural, Scientific and Technical Board, as this first body was known in English, lasted only four years before it was dissolved — through lack of support for its objectives and a political context still resistant to militant Kanak demands for self-determination. The dissolution of the first agency in 1986 (replaced by the Caledonian Agency for Cultures), and the tragic assassination of Tjibaou himself two years later, marked a time of continued colonial dominance, resistance, and thwarted aspirations for Kanak people.

The ADCK was accordingly given supervisory control of the Cultural Centre’s realisation. It was decided that the Centre should carry the name of Jean-Marie Tjibaou eponymously, and this was negotiated through customary protocol. In traditional Kanak custom, names are loaned (or ‘borrowed’) during a lifetime, and return through a process of ritual custodianship and recycling over time; a particular name could not usually carry any proprietary association in perpetuity. However in this detail, and many other aspects of the terms through which the Tjibaou Cultural Centre was framed, tradition was to be reaffirmed but also led along new paths of development. Cultural aspirations contoured the project throughout, and contributed directly to the outstanding outcomes achieved.

The manner in which Jean-Marie Tjibaou’s concepts were taken up by his widow and close associates, and subsequently embedded in the objectives and conduct of the ADCK, can be traced throughout the architectural development of the Centre. Marie-Claude Tjibaou carried forward her
husband’s vision in her chairmanship of the ADCK board of governors. High Chiefs and other Kanak representatives from the three provinces, along with government officials, were also represented on the board. And an ADCK team was constituted to oversee physical articulation and cultural interpretation of Piano’s designs. The Director-General of this team was a former colleague of Tjibaou, Octave Togna; and the cultural director was Emmanuel Kasarhérou — formerly the young anthropologist and Kanak director of the Territorial Museum in Nouméa.

Statements from the three individual identities just mentioned reveal the sense of convergence and strategic purpose of the project. First, Marie-Claude Tjibaou:

Before there was no one place in New Caledonia, the country of the Kanaks, containing all the available information about our society. The Territorial Museum [devoted to traditional Melanesian culture] represents the memory, while the Cultural Centre, although it is partly the memory too, is primarily our present and future mark on the landscape and the architecture. It will be a mirror for our continuous development and for the upheavals in our society and in our lives ... But the Cultural Centre is also a very suitable place for welcoming other cultures, those of the other people of this country and also the cultures of the world.9

The motif of ‘upheavals’ finely nuances and entextures this statement. It includes so much more than is normally allowed for in the rhetoric of institutional inauguration. Such rhetoric involuntarily freezes the pulsations and counter-movements through which culture is actually played out ‘in our society and in our lives’. Marie-Claude Tjibaou’s words acknowledge, perhaps through the tumult of her own experience, that culture moves forward through a field of contending and multiple possibilities; that it cannot be reduced to any simple blueprint for unitary development. Her last statement, however, including ‘the cultures of the world’, opens up the clear cross-cultural and international address (in the first instance, regionally) which the new Centre adopted in its founding framework.

Such objectives are amplified further by the Director-General of the ADCK team, Octave Togna:

The voice of custom, politics, culture, land: we can see the consistency that ran through Jean-Marie Tjibaou’s thinking. The ADCK’s four objectives also reflect the two-fold dimension which always suffused his approach: roots in the past, but a concern to integrate culture into contemporary society. The heritage collection and research objectives frame the two others: cultural exchanges in the Pacific and identification of new modes of expression. Herein also lay a political will to embed Kanak culture in its regional environment, rather than in the artificial environment that Western culture represents for it.10

Emmanuel Kasarhérou, as Cultural Director of the Centre Culturel Tjibaou and himself trained in anthropology in France, was meanwhile in contact with museum colleagues in both the Pacific and in Europe. He was charged with carrying forward the museographical translation of a modern cultural centre equipped to international museum standards. His own sense of mission and purpose was clearly summarised at the time of opening, in May 1998:

The Centre’s history is also imprinted with a broader vision, a reflection on the relationships that develop between a local culture moving towards various transformations and a universe in perpetual motion. The Centre asks questions about the globalisation of cultures as well as universality.11
A NEW ARCHITECTURE FOR A NEW TYPE OF MUSEUM

The Tjibaou Cultural Centre is exceptional in the world of contemporary architecture. This is not only because Genoese designer Renzo Piano has created such an astonishing architectural complex. The centre has drawn on the rich repertoire of resources offered by a cross-cultural dialogue with Kanak traditions and history. This has included a clearly articulated Kanak aspiration to take a forceful grasp of modernity while also supporting the continuing vitality of Kanak culture as part of the evolution of a modern nation in the Pacific. The Tjibaou Cultural Centre has thereby opened an indigenous society's traditions out towards the world, engaging them in a conversation with the most sophisticated resources of architectural practice internationally.

A huge distance separates the first 'museum' project of Renzo Piano's career, through which the young architect, in partnership with Richard Rogers, achieved world attention. The competition for the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris was won in 1971, and the structure completed in 1977. Twenty years later, in 1991, the international architectural competition was finalised in New Caledonia to choose an architect to design a new cultural centre in Nouméa. The choice of the Renzo Piano Building Workshop brought an architect who had already worked extensively in wood, and valued its potential as both structural material and language, together with a remarkable culture of wood usage and the deployment of natural fibres of the Pacific region. The resulting dialogue between two different cultural systems, and their contrasting syntax of construction, was to bring about a renovation in the repertoire of each. The result is an extraordinary new work.

The Tjibaou Cultural Centre occupies 8000 square metres and is situated on an impressive eight-hectare site approximately ten kilometres from Nouméa. The ten towering structures or 'house-forms', which spectacularly dominate and define the complex from afar, are disposed along a 235-metre spine across the Tina Peninsula, facing the ocean side of its lagoon precinct. These imposing structures (the tallest soaring thirty-three metres, or the height of a nine-storey building) are irregularly grouped to create three 'villages'. Their layout echoes the formal, axial approach to the large conical thatched huts of traditional Kanak culture. However they are a reflection only, and in fact also radically transform tradition.

A modern complex of rectilinear buildings opens in the opposite direction from the convex towers, looking out towards the more sheltered, ‘inner lagoon’ side of the site. It houses refined exhibition areas, public amenities, a multimedia library and a theatre.

The relationships pursued in the Nouméa complex between Kanak building traditions and the resources of modern international architecture are subtly developed. Piano has avoided any simple divide between originary Kanak meanings and internationalist 'transcultural' associations. In its reach for a new kind of organic unity, the building project returns to some of the early modern and even pre-modern aspirations within architectural history. It seeks a new kind of synthesis, arousing awareness of the past, but avoiding postmodern devices of quotation.

The sail-like structures that feather skywards out of a wooded landscape on the site have a soaring lightness and curvilinear energy from afar. However they are even subtler in their layering of irregular staves and joists, louvred screens, tie-bars, curved ribs and fretwork effects at close range. As Piano explains:

I think it is important to work on the intangible elements of space. Light, transparency, vibrations, grain, colour… In order to enhance the intangible elements, I started from…lightness. The need to lighten teaches you how to work on the form of the structures, to learn the breaking strength of the pieces, to replace
stiffness with flexibility… The quest for lightness automatically brings us to something very precious, and very important in poetic language: transparency.12

There are also three classic Kanak high chieftain’s huts erected by traditional construction methods on a ceremonial area of the site. According to tradition:

The grand-house [or Great House] is the result of collective work. The inherent decision to build the grand-house is the object of long consultations and palavers. During the consultations, each clan has to affirm its full consent to the construction project. Following the consultations, the labour is divided between all the parties. The work is thus organised not by individuals or clans, but by the collective.

The beams and posts all lean on the central post of the house, symbolising the clans closely linked to their chief. During the months (sometimes years) of the construction, the house becomes the visible sign of a joint commitment of the people and the expression of the solidarity amongst them.13

Each of the specially built Great Houses on a ceremonial area of the site (all sur-mounted by the Piano-designed towers situated along the ridge of the Tina Peninsula above) therefore represents a locus of ritual exchange and presence of Kanak tradition. Rising above these, along the brow of the land, the ten new double-roofed towers represent not only borrowing from tradition (Piano actually uses the motif of ‘theft’), but also reformulation and transformation.

Two aspects of Piano’s attitude in approaching this project are noteworthy by way of comparison with the dangers of cultural projection that stood in the wings of the jury’s choice of any well-established western architect. First, in terms of significant metaphors, Piano avoided the cliché of trying to engage with the ‘eternal’ of Kanak culture, in favour of recognising it in its dynamic outward forms — as ‘ephemeral’. Instead of a presumptuous quest for ‘core’, he focused on studying Kanak ‘materials’ and ‘patterns of construction’.

The spirit of the Pacific is ephemeral, and the constructions of the Kanak tradition are no exception. They are born out of the unity with nature, using the perishable materials it provides. The continuity of the village in time is not based on the duration of the individual building, but on the preservation of a topology and a pattern of construction.14

This leads directly into the second immensely propitious aspect of this project, which is the characterisation of Piano’s design attitude and practice as that of a building workshop. Instead of ‘architecture’ in all its universalising discourses and panoply of high-cultural forms, Piano brought an enterprising approach grounded in the skills of a builder. His work has never sought the signature of a recognisable style.

Piano also pursued a position that discloses an important consciousness of both the challenge and limits of the cultural ‘representation’ attending his commission:

[I]t was not a tourist village that I had to build. I had to create a symbol: a cultural center devoted to Kanak civilization, the place that would represent them to foreigners and that would pass on their memory to their grandchildren. Nothing
could have been more loaded with symbolic expectations.16

Instead of conceptualising his method as infusing an a-temporal Kanak repertoire with the progressivist tempo of late modernity, Piano’s insolent image of ‘cultural theft’ is a liberating one, marking a provocative inversion of terms: “From local culture we stole the dynamic elements, the tension that would serve to bind the construction to the life of the inhabitants”.17

Piano has spoken explicitly of the architectural project’s greatest danger — the trap of the folkloric:

The project for the Tjibaou Cultural Center... was the most reckless of my many ventures into other fields. The dread of falling into the trap of a folkloric imitation, of straying into the realm of kitsch and the picturesque, was a constant worry throughout this work. At a certain point I decided to tone down the resemblance between ‘my’ huts and those of local tradition, by reducing the length of the vertical elements and giving the shells a more open form; in the final version, in fact, the staves no longer meet at the top as had initially been planned. The wind tunnel [test] proved me right, showing that this produced a greater effect of dynamic ventilation...
Throughout the process I received a great deal of support and understanding... The Kanaks, convinced of the project’s worth, have helped me to improve it: Marie-Claude Tjibaou (Jean-Marie’s widow) and Octave Togna have been tireless fellow workers.18

Two statements by the Centre’s Cultural Director, Emmanuel Kasarhérou, are worth quoting in full for their revelation of the intimacy of cross-cultural dialogue that nurtured the details of ‘woven facings’ and Kanak-inspired ‘lashings’ in the final detailing of Piano’s architectural language:

Woven facings
Renzo Piano felt that the material covering the facades should evoke the idea of weaving, a kind of frugality in the natural material. Using references such as basketwork, mats and fishtraps, the architects did extensive research on how to use the materials, the structures of traditional objects, the various strata which overlie each other, to create the current façade with its overlapping wooden slats. You can sense the outline of a piece of weaving work, the interwoven materials which make full and empty spaces, light and shade.

Lashings
The house designs also result from a long process of trial and error. The first attempts were not satisfactory and the ADCK representatives could not identify with them. The architects ended up by basing their design on pictures of traditional building in which bindings and structures are always visible. Similarly, the details of the structural timber and the steel can easily be seen here.19

A remarkable aspect of Piano’s adaptation of traditional Kanak building idioms is the element of an ‘incomplete’ architecture. Emmanuel Kasarhérou again:

For the main part of the [centre]... Piano has incorporated the Kanak concept of a central avenue aligned with groups of grand case (Kanak chiefs’ houses). However, Piano has translated this form, giving it a profound new expression: the circular structures of the ‘grand case’ soar up to thirty metres in height but they are not thatched nor are the walls fully clad. ‘Reminiscent of (Kanak) houses but opening onto a dream of the future’, they have a feeling of incompleteness, bringing to mind that Kanak culture itself is not static but is always open to change.20
Le Chemin Kanak, the Kanak Path

A carefully planted ‘indigenous landscape’ surrounding the Tjibaou Centre celebrates cultural ideas that are far removed from Western landscaping. The Kanak Path commemorates the procession through rite-affirming stages of the Kanak culture hero Téâ Kanaké. At the same time it embraces a working Melanesian food garden.

Taro (female, moist, fertilising) is paired with the yam (male, dry-cropped, vine-like, and symbolising the human being), the staple food of Kanak diet and an item of ritual exchange at important ceremonies. The Araucaria columnaris or column pine, endemic to the Kanak landscape, is planted along the path to a Great House, and around houses, along with the coconut. These also are twinned and gendered in complementary metaphoric relationships.

Choice of plants, the arrangement of mounds of earth, and the differentiation between inhabited spaces and contrasting natural features, reverberate with cultural significance. They are deployed in traditional culture according to spatially embedded reference points that correspond to regulating social structures and patterns of filiation.

As throughout the Pacific, traditional horticulture is seen as a very close relationship between men and plants. This almost mystical relationship expresses itself through constant comparisons between agriculture and society, the produce of agriculture and the men who form the community ... For instance, the Kanak compare the birth and growth of their clans to the different stages in yam growth, since it is a piece of the old generation yam that is buried to grow the new crop ... It plays an important part in gifts and exchange ceremonies ... Its cultivation has determined a lunar calendar from which most other social activities derive ... The respect for the yam yields endless precautions in the way the tuber is handled, wrapped, offered and eaten. Therefore it must never be cut but broken like bread.

Spatially coordinated frameworks regulating traditional Kanak society before the arrival of Europeans were “disjointed by the process of colonization involving restriction to reservations and sale of land”. Consequently such ruptures: “added to the difficulties faced by … European ethnologists in trying to reconstitute the functioning of a society whose complex networks of alliances prevent its classification among the classical organizational systems of chiefdoms”.

Culturally-defined relationships between agriculture and society thus comprehensively surround and mediate the Tjibaou Cultural Centre’s architectural intervention in the site. The contemporary landscape setting presents an allegorical sequence of five ‘micro-gardens’, commemorating the five stages of the epic journey of Téâ Kanaké. Through careful planting according to Kanak references, the ritual progression along the Kanak Path socialises the architecture’s strange forms and ‘foreignness’ — providing initiatory echoes that connect it to social history and the resonance of ancestral memory. For Piano, finally:

The tops of the three Kanak houses on the Ceremonial Area are framed by the tall, tapering buildings of the Centre. The building’s strength lies in this gentle but clearly-asserted transition between the most perennial Kanak culture and the demands of the modern world for innovation ... Because we must not forget the 21st century is dawning; we may well now be able to use very advanced technologies, but we can also soften them, and use them as an efficient tool, complementing the idea of memory, rather than opposing it or being incompatible with it. We have to reconcile modernity and technology with nature and tradition.
A few final remarks on the collection and museum aspects of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, its exhibition programs and, most importantly, the conceptualisation of the role of artists in the evolving dynamics of contemporary society. Piano’s own exposition of the integrated functional areas provides a tight summary from a design vantage point, as well as revealing the defined interrelationship of various objectives (locally articulated) to ensure the vitality of the Centre’s future life:

The center is organized into three villages. The first is dedicated to exhibition activities. In the hut next to the entrance, a permanent exhibition introduces visitors to Kanak culture. The buildings devoted to the history of the community and the natural environment of the island are located further along. Not far off is a space for temporary exhibitions. This village also has a partially sunken auditorium with seats for four hundred. At the back of the auditorium is an amphitheater for open-air performances … The second village contains the offices used by the Center’s historians and researchers, curators of exhibitions, and administrative staff. The huts in front of the offices house a conference hall and a multimedia library. On the lower level, specimens of the island’s traditional crops are grown on a series of terraces … The village at the end of the path, set slightly apart from the flow of visitors, is devoted to creative activities. The huts house studios for dance, painting, sculpture, and music. On one side is a school, where children are introduced to the local art forms.

In this summary, various strands can be observed of the interpenetrating sinews of a living culture, radically reaching beyond the rejected model of a tourist village: commemoration and respect for the historical past; a comprehensive approach to the sociality of all cultural forms; learning, experience, study and research; international outreach; education of the young; new encounters (temporary exhibitions, visiting artists); and performance and workshops for ongoing creativity and social exchange. This is an audacious and multifaceted strategy, with purpose-built facilities to support it, for any museum to be pursuing today. Few museums indeed could claim to equal this mission in its comprehensive socialisation of purpose, addressing the society (and cultural geography of a whole region) in which it is located.

In other documents produced prior to opening, the ADCK — as the governing body of the Centre’s ongoing programs — elucidated a four-part mission statement of its purposes, of which the Tjibaou Cultural Centre was to be the most visible focus and physical manifestation. This is a summary of two slightly different statements:

1. Documentation, promotion and development of Kanak cultural heritage (archaeology, ethnology, linguistics…) both inside and outside the country.
2. Promotion of contemporary forms of expression of Kanak culture (creativity).
3. Study and development of cultural practices, enabling definition of a cultural policy turned towards the future, together with institutional partners (the three provinces) and cultural associations.
4. Promotion of international cultural exchanges, especially in the Pacific region.

Within the layout of functional areas of the Cultural Centre described earlier by Piano, are several spaces worth remarking upon and augmenting with Kanak descriptions.

A room closest to the entrance hall, entitled Kanaké, provides a multimedia introduction to Kanak culture and its self-placement in history. The video-film montages show images of nature, agriculture, and
ancient objects, with contemporary images of Kanak people, music, and continuing social forms. This eight-minute multimedia presentation marks the centre's strongest excursion into the high-tech language of virtuality, exceeded elsewhere by a commitment to actuality, and diversity of modes and content of experience.

Nearby, the Bwénaado House (or 'hut') is named in the Cemuhi language, one of the twenty-eight languages of New Caledonia — although the centre as a whole adopts a sampling of languages from the principal island of New Caledonia. The Bwénaado House, as explained by Cultural Director Emmanuel Kasarhérou, denotes "the customary gathering place", and is dedicated to the historical dimension of Kanak heritage. It houses major historical pieces of Kanak sculpture and implements, as part of a loan program from overseas museums to reinstall Kanak cultural items on an ongoing basis as the 'heritage collection' part of the centre's displays. There is also an implicit claim for restitution of cultural heritage behind this program, but with the novel twist of approaching the issue on a loans basis, a mechanism that can bypass current legislative restrictions of many museums.

Marie-Claude Tjibaou's words on the objects exhibited in the Bwénaado House are memorable:

Europeans go to look at objects. But Kanaks go to look at Things that their ancestors made two hundred years ago. These Things which come back after two hundred years of absence are alive for us... And aren't they also here to call out to us? 'We were here two hundred years ago, have you forgotten us?'... Even if our Things went away long ago, they aren't lost for us: we are still bound to them. Even if they may have been bought, they belong to the country, to the Kanaks... they represent them or bear witness to the fact that they are recognised... In spite of all that, it is a good thing for them to be in the museums around which they are scattered: we exist through them to some extent, all over the world... I hope many young people will come and see them... They need to see how Kanaks interpret all this today, in the computer age, in the age of space travel.

A magnificent, wood-panelled room of recently created works is encountered in the Jinu House, meaning 'the spirit' in the Kanak languages of the northern part of the main island. This room, presenting commanding sculptures of the Pacific region, forms the centrepiece of the 'village of the arts' in the complex. The majority of these tall sculptures, many relating to house-form carving traditions, were formally commissioned by the Centre from neighbouring cultures. Drawn from Irian Jaya, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Arnhem Land in northern Australia, and Maori culture in Rotorua, Aotearoa/New Zealand, most sculptures originated in the context of ceremonial ritual exchange. This relocated the earliest acquisitions made by the Centre within a social context of continuing artistic production in the region, bypassing the open market through which such sculptures usually reach museums.

The three rooms above constitute the 'village' housing permanent exhibitions. They are disposed leftwards from the entrance hall. The towers leading to the right of the main entrance, by contrast, are devoted to the multimedia library and ongoing research functions of the Centre.

On the southern side of the main axis linking the ten dominant tower structures externally are three areas dedicated to temporary exhibitions. Some of these are quite small, and the one important question to face the Centre in the future will be how to present larger installations of contemporary art on occasions. A more generous space is required to accommodate the energies of contemporary creativity, which can only be revealed when it is possible to install a quite
large and diverse exhibition of works by different artists — or even a more intense survey of the work of a restricted number of artists. Such a space would need to provide more lineal enclosure and area (walls or variable divisions) and controlled illumination (beyond large fenestration and natural light) to present works in a variety of contemporary media.

One of the temporary exhibition areas — the largest space, divided into two rooms — is called the Bérétara Room, measuring 410 square metres. During the opening period this area housed an exhibition of works selected from a slowly growing permanent collection of some 400 works, purchased through a special fund for the acquisition of contemporary works from the region — the 'Fonds d’art contemporain et océanien' (FACKO). All works date from the 1990s, and are drawn from both Kanak culture and the arts of Pacific countries. The works embody continuity and innovation, tradition and adaptation, and incorporate both indigenous cultural streams and a wider Western vision of art.

Such works mark a long-term collection plan to build the largest collection of contemporary Pacific art in the region of its production — an innovative concept of specialisation, conceived to nurture a unique local constellation within the operations of art museums internationally. It is a forceful response to the forces of globalisation, while also reaching beyond parochialism. The Tjibaou Cultural Centre's mentors aimed to expand and redefine cultural identity for the future evolution of New Caledonian society. This they have accomplished innovatively and comprehensively.

My former identity was defined by the voice of custom. My identity today, however, draws richness from yesterday's heritage but with this new dimension. The real challenge is to show that I am Kanak, but a Kanak of my time... This is also the challenge to be met in designing the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, which, to my mind, gives substance to two important things: the place where the Kanak memory will be passed on, symbolised by the multimedia library and by the classes in residence and all the artistic places, symbolic of creativity, and as such, carrying a vision of a society undergoing deep change.

The ambitious interplay of ideas that has gone into the Tjibaou Cultural Centre complex has also yielded a striking characterisation of the emergence of 'the artist' in New Caledonian society. The artist is linked to new modes of social imagining and transformation. Contemporary creativity is refracted through an audacious venture of cultural redefinition. The following quotation from Octave Togna forms a fitting grace-note to a remarkable enterprise:

Developing a culture means constantly being a catalyst to show how our society is evolving. This is one of the contributions of modern society to culture. The word 'artist' does not exist in any of the Kanak languages, but artists are needed today. They are becoming the mirror for our society, they reflect our image and our contradictions.

Endnotes

1 This essay is a revised and abbreviated version of a much longer text, “Projects in the Redefinition of Culture”, in Journal of Visual Arts and Culture, no. 3, 2001.

2 “Our identity lies ahead of us” is one of Jean-Marie Tjibaou's most famous and consequential statements, quoted in various translated versions in English. See Tjibaou Cultural Centre, English edn. (Nouméa: Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Agence de Développement de la Culture Kanak/ADCK, 1998), pp. 4–5. The present version of this statement is taken from a press booklet edited by ADCK Cultural Director, Emmanuel Kasarhérou, for release at the time of the Centre's opening in May 1998 (p. 30).

3. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” [1945; pub.1950]; in Walter Benjamin,

5. See note 2.

6. Cibau Cibau, pp. 40, 42.


8. Quoted in a press booklet at time of the centre’s opening; see note 2.


12. Renzo Piano, in Tjibaou Cultural Centre, p. 64.


19. Emmanuel Kasarhérou, Tjibaou Cultural Centre, p. 68.


25. Piano, quoted in Tjibaou Cultural Centre, p. 66.


27. Who We Are (see note 13), pp. 53–4.


