

A new beginning – why we need national guidelines for museum buildings.

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Abstract

Context

In 2009 we opened the Wanneroo Library and Cultural Centre, which included the Wanneroo Regional Museum.

The requirements for a purpose built museum were little understood by architects or project managers. It was a challenge to explain why a museum 'fit-out' was different to say, a library/office fit-out. Requirements for appropriate collection handling and storage, were 'foreign' to others. The biggest challenge were the actual museum requirements as our architects wanted to see published documentation for Australia.

Objectives

The recent National Standards for Museums and Galleries focus mainly on the operation aspects. During a building project such as ours answers had to be found elsewhere. I will highlight what other published information is needed by 'new' Australian small museums - whether in new buildings or the re-fitting of old buildings.

Key message

A definitive Australian handbook to provide standards / guidelines for 'new' museums is needed. Our collections need good homes. The little material that does exist is not consistent and sustainability in construction rarely mentioned. Our colleagues in Library Services across Australia can provide such a document and by comparison the museum sector looks uncommitted. In my paper I will outline the issues faced on our journey to create the best space for a new museum.

Conclusion

Australia needs a set of guidelines, with case studies, suitable for use across the museum sector for the purpose of assisting in the appropriate development of new facilities.

Paper

In 2009 we opened our Library and Cultural Centre at Wanneroo in WA, which includes the Wanneroo Regional Museum. This is a community museum, developed by an outer metropolitan local government. Previously the City's collection was housed at Gloucester Lodge Museum, a heritage building 'rescued' in 1979 and which like many heritage buildings at the time became a museum. However due to being built over a spring for a swimming pool the damp conditions in the building were destroying the collection.

I will outline some of the issues faced on our tiring, but exciting, journey to create the new museum showing the need for a set of facility guidelines, with case studies, suitable for use across the museum sector, especially for the smaller ones.

Crimm, Morris and Wharton in their publication '*Planning successful museum building projects*' note that in 2006 the American Association of Museums found that 'almost one-quarter of museum are involved in a **capital** fund-raising project'. If Australia has even 10%, then we need some guidelines for everyone.

The requirements for our purpose built museum were little understood by architects or project managers. It was a challenge to explain why a museum 'fit-out' was different to say, a library/office fit-out. Requirements for appropriate collection handling and storage were 'foreign' to others. The biggest challenge was providing the actual museum requirements as our architects wanted to see published documentation for Australia. US publications for example, no matter how good, did not cut it for our architect.

The recent National Standards for Museums and Galleries focus mainly on the operational aspects. During a building project such as ours answers had to be found elsewhere.

Principle A4: The Museum is a secure, well-managed facility that presents a positive public image.

A4.2 Museum dedicates appropriate spaces to all activities

A4.3.1 Museum premises provide a suitable and safe environment for all of the museum's operations, including the storage and display of the collection.

The key words are appropriate, suitable and safe – great words but not helpful for determining the practicalities.

The objective of this paper is to highlight what other published information is needed by 'new' Australian small museums - whether in new buildings or the re-fitting of old buildings.

A definitive Australian set of standards / guidelines is needed. Our collections need good homes. The documentation that does exist is generally not consistent and sustainability in construction is rarely mentioned. Our colleagues in Library Services across Australia can provide such a guiding document that prescribes fitout and by comparison the museum sector looks uncommitted, even amateurish.

So what about our exciting, journey to create the best space for a new museum.

Wanneroo Library and Cultural Centre

Our facility was created as a joint facility for a local library, regional museum and an exhibition gallery. It was also the hub for the other City museums and heritage places, central administration for the other City libraries and home to those working on building "community capacity". Being such a facility meant that the museum requirements were only part of those considered. Whilst a modern museum should be engaging and active it needs to maintain its professional standards alongside that of being a place of entertainment and ensuring that being collated does not lead to a loss of professional standards.

Non-public areas can be a particular challenge – for both work and collection spaces. Without a collection a museum loses much value, though for the public, engagement with stories may be their 'hook'. But the housing of a collection, where there is a majority in storage, means the development of non-public areas – maybe such

areas are not in the expensive new building locations but they still need to exist and wherever they are they need to meet certain standards. There is also the opportunity here to consider a sustainable, environmentally friendly solution.

When our building project began tenders were called for an architect who, along with a quantity surveyor was judged on whether they had a museum consultant and a library consultant in their team. The chosen architect was based in WA but the museum consultant was from interstate – not uncommon in WA to have t'othersiders. And the building itself was to be 'iconic' – almost a disaster call for museums.

Unfortunately the first visit by the team's Museum Consultant to WA resulted in his resignation due to size and scope of project not matching the architect's proposed payment. So onto consultant number two (design function mainly) – but they too were to part company with the architect. Now we were 12 months into the project with no museum designer and a museum layout design that could not be used. Onto designer number three – this time a different agreement was reached – initially he was contracted to architect and then for more detailed work reported to the City.

From the City's side – the project had three different project managers. These changes in personnel alone meant that arguments about physical space were replayed time and time again. Such debates were held internally in the local government as well as with the architect. Did we win? Yes, we won most of the debates ... but some are still continuing.

I did become known as the lady who hates windows very early in the project. At least that meant the concern about light was recognized. We do have some window space – into the children's area.

One win we did have, though probably by necessity given the time frames, was to have the museum design and fit out separated from the building contract. The builder basically built a box with services throughout. The rest was to happen later. There was so little understanding of the process of museum design that they had trouble

accepting that museum furniture design for plinths, etc couldn't / shouldn't be part of the building fit out. Unfortunately I don't think guidelines will change that but they will give credit to a process and can help educate people that a museum fit out is not the same as others. In the end the City took responsibility for the museum fitout and I juggled up to 8 contractors!

The mechanical services consulting engineers access material from Canada to push for particular standards in temperature and humidity control. Continually the architects demanded to see Australian standards for such. The Gallery (as distinct from the Museum), to be designed for national touring exhibitions, was to meet high standards, so we used guidelines from National Institutions for this. Even now there are still debates about the temperature and humidity controls e.g. humidity levels not properly managed – to the extent that defects and liability period has had to continue. For your information different spaces in the building do have different levels of temperature and relevant humidity.

The whole issue of environmental standards requires its own debate. This was highlighted in Julian Bickersteth's article 'Greener Museums and sustainable practice' in the June edition of *Museums Australia*. Stability is more important than actual temperatures or humidity and reduced electricity consumption is important, even vital, to many museums. However there has to be a way to ensure that the purpose of environmental control is understood and case studies produced to suit different situations. I look forward to seeing the AICCM Environmental Guidelines for Australian Museums and Galleries. This may be the starting point for Building Guidelines for Australian Museums.

Another issue is that air locks were little understood or valued and the external door nearest the museum 'lost' its airlock. And it has been a problem for ancillary displays in adjacent spaces on stormy days.

The types of questions asked included:

- What light levels are required? And Why? – this requirement applies to all and is not

just for those of us lucky enough to have millions of dollars spent on a facility.

- Why do you want double doors? – again anyone's storage area would benefit from this as well as OHS issues for handling boxes
- Why a quarantine area? – a lack of understanding of processes
- Why do you need different types of work areas (dry and wet)?
- Why do you want such a large lift with big doors – this was after the architect insisted on having the temporary exhibition gallery upstairs!
- Why can't certain materials / chemicals be used e.g. carpet on museum and collection room floors.

We did win most of these debates but consideration of 'green' factors was not so well addressed.

But also basic concepts had to be explained e.g. water pipes not passing through collection stores - but we still ended up with a fire service there. We couldn't get building sign-off without it. So need to add fire services to plumbing considerations.

Our loading dock environment is still in dispute as it is not sealed and clean due to door type and certainly not a stable environment. And sadly not all size trucks fit under the undercover access in front of the loading dock.

From a usage viewpoint there was a lack of understanding of how school groups would access a museum – a theatre does not equal an education space in the way it can be used but was linked to the iconic requirements for the building as a whole. Our solution was a corridor – fortunately we had one that opens through a large sliding door into the museum.

Conclusion

Had there been a better understanding, by architects and local government personnel as a whole, of the processes and constraints involved in the creation and development of a new museum before we began, then it would have been an easier journey. But we were breaking new ground for

local government in WA... and we could find no examples in WA that really addressed the criteria at the appropriate level. The City's project team learnt a lot along the way ...not easy during the process. As museum professionals we felt that we were fighting battles with a minimum of sector support.

The creation of a new physical environment is not an everyday occurrence for museum personnel but even the smallest museums have to make judgements about what their priorities are. If collection storage or work areas or any extra space is desired then it is better to have a standard to aim at. This standard would assist not only with the education of non-museum personnel involved in a project but also funding and grant bodies. People need to know that they are walking the right path on the way to creating a better museum facility.

Australia needs a set of guidelines, with case studies, suitable for use across the museum sector for the purpose of assisting in the appropriate development of new facilities.

Our great building has given us a regional Museum loved by the community with collaboration and convergence opportunities. Through the development of specific Australian guidelines I would like to see people in the future being able to avoid experiencing the battles we faced on our journey.

About the Author

Philippa Rogers is the Coordinator of Heritage, Museums and Arts at the City of Wanneroo. Apart from the new Wanneroo Regional Museum (with Community History) the portfolio includes the City's other two museums, the old school house, heritage trails, public art, art collection and general heritage advice. It is a diverse and interesting role that has grown with the City's increased commitment to recognizing its past and its culture. She has consulted in both museum and heritage fields including significance assessments and the development of treatment plans for large items.