Designing the Dreamtime: The place of exhibition design in shaping understanding of Indigenous history and culture.

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Abstract

The design of exhibitions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander material has changed since they first took place on Australian soil. This paper looks at how exhibition design has evolved to best suit these collections and if there is scope for a better match. Although 'The Dreamtime' is not a universally accepted term, it nevertheless hints at mystery and spirituality, two aspects that present unique challenges to the designer of exhibitions containing Indigenous cultural material.
This paper will explore how 'The Dreamtime' has been designed into exhibitions in the past and how it may be into the future.

Introduction

In 1938 Jack Patten, an Aboriginal activist stated:

*"We do not wish to be regarded with sentimental sympathy, or to be 'preserved'
like koala bears as exhibits…"*

It evidently took a while for Jack Patten's wish to be realized. A quarter of a century on from his statement, I stood in front of a showcase in the Melbourne Museum, which contained life sized models of an Aboriginal man, woman and child. Dioramas have their place, however, this display, beautifully executed as it was, did not feel a part of a Dreaming, a Dreaming that is never ending and of which we are all part. Rather, it seemed like an exhibit of people belonging to another time and another place. The skin on the models appeared cold, hard and lifeless and the figures were mute—there was no 'voice over' then.

The Indigenous voice is now more audible in exhibitions and young Australians have a growing appreciation of Indigenous culture and the way in which Indigenous and non Indigenous lives have intertwined since European settlement.

Exhibitions within Australia, nevertheless, remain heavily influenced by European and American models, leaving scope for modifications that better suit Australian needs. In the case of exhibitions of Australian Indigenous material, there is even greater potential for imported approaches to be found wanting.

This essay looks at ways in which future exhibitions might address such shortcomings.

Interviews

As part of my preparation for this paper, I spoke with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians about their views on exhibitions.

This was not a formal survey, but rather a casual questioning, with the responses pointing to many exhibition design challenges.

Indigenous interviewees reported that some do not go to museums because they feel that they have lost their culture, that their culture has been stolen and that museums are complicit in that theft.

Others were concerned that diversity of culture was inadequately explained, or presented as frozen in time.

There were comments also, that the land and the people needed to be present within the exhibition to help create a context. Further to this, Barbara Matters, of the Berndt Museum of Anthropology, pointed out that exhibits were sometimes shown as mere tools, ignoring the cultural information conveyed through the artwork they carried.
There was also regret expressed at the restricted opportunity to handle exhibits and the lack of connection that could result.

On the other hand, there were favourable comments on the spiritual presence of Bunjil in the heart of the Koori Heritage Trust and that the Bunjilaka, exhibition at the Melbourne Museum, possessed a spirit, which was generated by the objects.

Bunjilka was also commented on in positive terms for its entrance away from the main galleries, its facilities for visitors, the presence of Aboriginal staff and the customised nature of the architecture.

Other valuable observations, but one's more difficult to translate into design terms, included the complaint that an exhibition was "too spacey", preventing the viewer from getting the exhibit "into your mind" and that certain exhibitions lacked 'life'.

Non-Indigenous interviewees commented that some exhibitions still treat Indigenous material as from the 'other' and thereby allow subtle bigotry to carry through the exhibition.

Others spoke with enormous admiration of the Australian Aboriginal Cultures Gallery and commented on what a groundbreaking exhibition the Gallery of First Australians was.

If we are to find more appropriate ways of exhibiting Australian Indigenous Cultural material, it may be worthwhile exploring design and planning responses to some of the concerns expressed above. What follows is a gesture towards just such an exploration.

Designing to the—why, what, who for, who with and where, of an exhibition.

When designing any exhibition, the designer needs to know why, with what, for whom, with whom and where - the exhibition is being created.

Why?

Why create an exhibition built around Australian Indigenous Cultural material in the first place? The reasons are many and varied and may include:

To Advance Reconciliation.
To Challenge the Perception of an Homogenous Indigenous Culture.
To Illustrate the Living and Evolving Nature of Indigenous Culture.
To Create Bridges Between Large and Small Cultural Institutions. (for example 'The Canning Stock Route" and "Colliding Worlds" exhibitions. Such exhibitions give support for the smaller and more autonomous organizations and provide training opportunities as well).
To Provide a More Comprehensive View of Australian History.
Barbara Paulson, of the National Museum of Australia, pointed out that there is still a gaping hole between what Indigenous people see as their history and the history of Australia that is generally presented.
Whatever the motivation, the theme influences the exhibit choice.

What.

Because an exhibition design is 'built' around the exhibits, the quality of the exhibits is obviously important.

Whilst larger cultural institutions, have a wealth of material to choose from, the choice, nevertheless, is limited by a number of factors, including:

Exhibits in private or overseas collections rendering them more complex to borrow, or unavailable.
Exhibits lost or destroyed.
Exhibits too large or remote to include such as galleries of rock art. (*Fortunately, although some have been vandalised, none to my knowledge have been moved to another country, as were the Elgin marbles. The rock engravings on the Burrup Peninsula in Western Australia, however, remains under threat of being moved).*
Exhibits lacking information. *(Lack of provenance and other information may work against its incorporation into an exhbition).*
Exhibits for restricted viewing only.
Exhibits too fragile to display.
Exhibit possibilities overlooked.
Restrictions on the range of exhibit options, can weaken an exhibition's ability to comprehensively communicate a story or aspects of a culture.
Designing for tangible exhibits, even when choice is restricted, however, is not

too much out of the norm, but when there is talk of the exhibition needing to express 'life', 'culture' and 'spirit', the design task becomes even less straightforward, for these are not mainstream 'exhibits'.
When you factor in the inclusion of 'country' and stories that are only recorded as oral, painted (such as Queenie McKenzie's 1996 painting *'Massacre and Rover Thomas Story – Texas Downs Country'* in the Gantner Myer Collection), or danced history, the mix of exhibit and story considerations, may equate to design challenges that are peculiar to exhibitions of this nature.
Brambuk Living Cultural Centre 1991. Exhibition Design: Rosemary Simons

Who for?

Despite the growing sophistication of audience profiling, I don't recall ever having been told, during my long career as a designer, that Indigenous Australians are the main target audience
of any exhibition, yet, in the words of the artist Lin Onus (*Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, 1994, page ix*)*:

"For Aboriginal people living outside the so-called traditional areas,
the rediscovery of one's origins, country, language and customs
has become a quest of absolute importance."

In Bruce Pascoe's words, (*Convincing Ground*, 2007, page ix,) non-Indigenous Australians may have missed out as well:

"It seemed unfair that most Australians' knowledge of their homeland
was blighted by a cruelly inadequate history."

If you accept these views, it follows that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians will benefit from exhibitions that offer them more, but does this mean two types of exhibitions?
Indigenous focused enterprises already exist such as 'Buka-Larrngay Mulka', which creates short films from Northeast Arnhem Land that are "by Yolngu for Yolngu", but available to all.
If non-Indigenous people could visit an exhibition tailored exclusively for an Indigenous audience, what challenges would they face? These might include the absence of information that was 'common knowledge' amongst the Indigenous community, language that was unfamiliar and possibly different ways of displaying exhibits and presenting information. In other words, it may require the non-Indigenous visitor to work that bit harder.

Such an Indigenous focused exhibition or enterprise, might fit with the view of an Aboriginal woman on the radio some years ago who protested:

"Why do we always have to do the teaching? Why can't non Aboriginal people
find out for themselves?"

However, such an exhibition might fit less well with those Indigenous people who work tirelessly to share their culture, with a dedication, energy and sense of urgency, uncommon amongst mainstream educators.

Perhaps both approaches could do with more support?

Who with?

For an external contractor, identifying who the real decision makers are, on any design project, can be difficult. Although the client(s) may be nominated, it sometimes happens that there are individuals or groups behind the scenes 'pulling strings'. For instance, I have been required to travel thousands of kilometers to re - present an exhibition design, because there was 'rebellion in the ranks' over who should make the decisions. (Incidentally, I am not talking here about Indigenous participants).

In terms of projects with Indigenous communities, those pulling the strings can be the funding bodies. I have heard of instances where the community was told that they were the decisions makers, but when a decision went against what the funding bodies deemed appropriate, the decision was reversed. In other words, the decision-making authority was delegated in name, but not in action.

When a designer is familiar with a client, it is easier to create a concept that fits with the client's wishes and to communicate that design in a manner that the client understands.

When you are dealing with a committee, that process becomes more complex. When you are working across cultures, the likelihood of misunderstandings is further amplified.

The quality of the client/designer relationship is often reflected in the quality of the end result and clarity over who is in charge of the 'signing off' of the design, is important.

Ultimately, however, if the whole approach to creating Indigenous exhibitions is reviewed, the designer, as such, may not be required!

Where?

The type of venue and its location, also impacts on the exhibition design.

Nomadic.
Perhaps the exhibition may be nomadic, travelling on a seasonal path to communities around the country, even overseas.

Masterpieces of European Art, are transported around the world, why not Masterpieces of Australian Indigenous Cultural material, around the country?

Conservation management techniques and supporting technology, after all, have developed to a point, where a select group of artifacts can be safely transported along a carefully chosen route.

Maybe such a touring exhibition could somehow link to the creation of contemporary song lines?

Alternatively, the exhibition path may mimic the network of ancient trade routes.

Dispersed.
The exhibition could also be spread over a number of locations. There are already Cultural Centres and Keeping Places in existence that could, erhaps with modification, host such a group of exhibitions.

With more support and additional centres, a cultural journey could be created. In this way the diversity of cultural material may be better illustrated and the exhibits more closely connected to their country and people.

If the exhibitions were for an Indigenous audience, this arrangement brings exhibits and employment to communities.

If the exhibitions were for the wider community as well, they would certainly give international tourists and the 'grey nomads' something to think about!

Centralised.
This material could also be exhibited in one venue, but it would have to be a big one, the size of The Hermitage in St Petersburg perhaps? Such a large size becomes necessary if it is to illustrate the strength, diversity and ongoing evolution of the artistic and cultural achievements of Indigenous Australia.

Such a large venue could contain a magnificent watercraft gallery, a hall full of fibre work and a room with cases and cases of stone, glass and steel implements. (How many stone glass and steel implements would there be in Australian collections – millions? What would a massed display of them say about time, technology, diversity, aesthetics and inventiveness?)

Imagine also room after room of a 'blockbuster' exhibition of the most magnificent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art.

Such a venue could include experimental venues, which are critical for the development of new exhibition approaches.

City Based.
If major collections remain concentrated in our capital cities, perhaps the exhibitions areas could expand?

This has occurred with the opening of the new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Galleries at the National Gallery of Australia and will be advanced when the proposed galleries in Brisbane and Melbourne open.

Perhaps the larger museums could increase their Indigenous exhibition space as well? Currently, I am told, most have only a 10% allocation, the Australian Museum 20% and the National Museum of Australia 33%. Representing such a culture over time and in all its diversity requires a large footprint!

How?

With the full briefing in place, the designer, then, has something substantial to work with. The answers to the questions of what, where, who for and who with, will be different for each exhibition and may bear no relationship to the responses listed below, which are merely included as possibilities. Barbara Paulson notes that:

"You don't want people to feel closed in when they are in the exhibition, you want them to open their minds and their heart. You are asking people to think differently."

So the audience needs to be in a setting that helps them to open up.

Given the right setting, exhibits can bring substance to a story. There is also the matter displaying them in a manner that is 'right', which Vicki Couzens defines as, respectful, valued and in a manner that is 'proper' and not isolated from context.

Further to the above, Barbara Matters presents the following challenge:

"*All aboriginal objects are supposed to breathe life. How do we display Life?"*

How to achieve a sense of 'rightness', and a space that allows us to 'open our minds and hearts' requires design solutions too varied and complicated to detail here. There are, however, a few ways in which the setting can communicate 'life'.

One way is through the judicious use of space, form, materials, colour, lighting and special effects. It can also be approached through providing contact with people and with 'country', options that are explored below.

People.
Though their physical presence, people can add life to exhibitions. They may be present as a guide, a workshop participant, an artist in residence, or be 'present' through use of their language, the inclusion of exhibits that they have created, via photographs or though Audio Visual displays.

Obviously, people are drawn to exhibitions that they feel are hospitable to them. Elder's and private viewing rooms are two of the facilities that can help achieve this.

Another option is a contemplation space. (Such a space existed at the Eureka Centre, where people could reflect on those who lost their lives during the Eureka mining rebellion and another is part of the Holocaust Museum in Washington).

A number of cultural institutions have community meeting centres and performance spaces,these too can make people feel welcome. Te Papa, in Wellington, for instance, has allocated a large area to the Marae, a meeting, ceremonial and performance venue. In fact the Marae was central to the museum's design.

A performance space may be formal, such as a theatre, or informal such as a forecourt where people can busk. For example, the forecourt of the Pompidou Centre in Paris can throb with life due to the presence of buskers and their audience.

As noted by Will Stubbs, busking can be a source of income for all sorts of artists and be a welcoming place for the 'untidy people', who may otherwise not feel at home in or near a museum.

Further to the above, in some cases the performance can be part of the exhibition, as occurred at the last Garma festival. The audience walked through the bush to where artwork was fixed to trees. Songs were sung, and stories told which related to the artwork. In this case the exhibition drew life from both the people and the land.

Country.

Country is automatically present when the exhibition venue sits within a landscape, such as is the case with Brambuk in Victoria, Warradjan in Kakadu, Uluru/Kata Juta in Central Australia, Camp Coorong in South Australia the Yorta Yorta Dharnya Visitors Centre, Victoria and others.

Even a venue within a landscape may still incorporate the natural environment into the exhibition, as is the case at the Warradjan Cultural Centre in Kakadu where a scaled down version of the landscape helps tells the story of the human interaction with the land.

But what do you do in an urban setting to bring a connection to country into the exhibition? There may be a garden nearby, such as at Bunjilaka, or a bed of Indigenous plants as is found in front of the South Australian Museum, or it could be through the presence of the large tree trunk, as found in the Koorie Heritage Trust. Even windows provide some connection to 'country'. The Art Gallery of NSW has views over Woolloomooloo wharf.

If no other contact is possible, photos and footage of the natural environment can help show the place that is associated with a story, a person, or an exhibit.

Fire is an essential element of the Australian Landscape and part of many campsites. Such campfires had particular significance for the poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal (*My People*, 1970) who stated that:

"...a thousand thousand campfires in the forest are in my blood."

Perhaps, given the close relationship of Indigenous Australians to fire, an exhibition could incorporate a live flame, a flame of life?

Protocols

In addition to people, country and the design elements mentioned above, protocols and rituals can add to an exhibition experience. The 'Canning Stock Route' and the 'Gallery of First Australians', for instance, contain welcoming spaces.

Perhaps this entry ritual could be extended to include exhibitions that are viewed by invitation only? Not all exhibitions are easy to get into. The Johnston Collection in Melbourne requires prior booking, with visitors bused in. You can queue for hours to view a pavilion at the Expo in Shanghai and the Garma Festival limits their audience.

Maybe the invitation comes after the visitor qualifies? Perhaps visitors must demonstrate that they hold a certain level of knowledge before they can visit? This may seem elitist and probably is, but perhaps there are times where access to a collection is a privilege that must be earnt? If you want to research in some major libraries, after all, you must apply first.

It is also the case that some exhibitions are so costly, you need to belong to a certain socio economic group to be able to afford them, isn't this a type of qualification?

As an alternative to a formal test, perhaps audiences could be asked to bring something to their visit. It might be just curiosity, prior research, an entry fee, or some other contribution — bit of a trade, something to help make things 'level'.

Conclusion

With a design response which is bold and imaginative, coupled with a detailed examination of the motives for the exhibition, what the limited choice of exhibits can successfully represent, who the audience is, who approves the exhibition content and design and where the exhibition is to be located, exhibitions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collections,may evolve into a form that is virtually unrecognizable compared to those of today.

Perhaps, if some elusive qualities relevant to Indigenous exhibitions have been absent in the past, this will not always be so. Perhaps future exhibitions will be less a case of designing 'The Dreaming' and more a case of 'The Dreaming' designing the exhibitions.

References

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