Cities and Museums: Introduction

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In September 2004, the Museum of Brisbane,¹ Museums Australia² and the Centre for Public Culture and Ideas at Griffith University³ hosted a symposium, 'Cities and Museums', at the university's Southbank campus. This event initiated a conversation among museum professionals and academics from across Australia. Nick Winterbotham, from Leeds City Museum, and Morag Macpherson, from Glasgow's Open Museum, and were keynote speakers. Their papers provided perspectives on museum policy and practice in the United Kingdom and Europe, and demonstrated how museums can contribute to urban and cultural regeneration. Those papers are available on the Museum of Brisbane website (www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/MoB). The Cities and Museums section in this issue of *Queensland Review* brings together papers that explore the relationship of cities and museums across global, national and local Brisbane contexts, and from diverse disciplinary perspectives. The disciplines represented in this selection of papers from the symposium include social history, urban studies, literary fiction, and heritage and cultural policy.

Nick Winterbotham's opening presentation at the symposium took us on a tour of city museums as he unravelled the planning process for the Leeds City Museum. As director of the museum, Winterbotham orchestrated the process and managed the emergent institution's relationships with its various constituencies. From his account, the museum might be thought of as a kind of threshold, a space of mediation where various dimensions of city life come into contact (or are kept apart). The city is classically an organisation designed to manage these domains: the polis, the market, and the private worlds of religious confession and the family. In his wide-ranging survey, Winterbotham showed how museums work across these domains in both their physical and virtual spaces.

While the Leeds Museum is a work in progress (a 'draft' museum, to borrow Mary-Rose MacColl's description of the Museum of Brisbane), Winterbotham's 10 years at Carlisle's City Museum, Tullie House, is evidence of how museum development can stimulate cultural regeneration. This presentation highlighted the importance of the visitor experience. City leaders are increasingly using museums as a focal point for 'selling' their cities, and they are now the basis for tourist itineraries, but most importantly they represent local history and engage local communities. Urban revitalisation is a key indicator of their sustainable impact but,

more immediately and directly, a successful exhibit sparks a 'learning conversation'. Insisting that a museum should not patronise its visitors, Winterbotham looked instead to the way exhibits encourage family interaction and intergenerational sharing of knowledge and pleasure.

William Logan situates the emergence of the city museum in a context of international debate and policy development about the preservation of cultural heritage. Forces of globalisation exert particular pressures on 'local' cultures and identities. On the one hand, globalisation threatens the disappearance of cultural heritage; on the other, the trend to cultural tourism provides incentives for the preservation of that heritage. Logan's paper, presented in this issue of *Queensland Review*, draws on local and international examples to show how heritage values have been interpreted in the conservation and repurposing of buildings, streetscapes and significant places. The expansion of 'heritage' to embrace the 'intangible' — such as dance, artisan practices, and everyday rituals like tea drinking — has produced new challenges for museum professionals. His examples from Macau and Hanoi illustrate both successes and failures.

However, Logan's paper is less concerned with the realm of museum practice than it is with the policy domain. As he puts it, 'the city is missing' in debates about the impacts of globalisation on national economic and social development, yet local development strategies are critical to the expansion of productive capacity. Museums and culture have a role to play in the development of urban policies and programs 'supporting the integration of various groups into more cohesive, just and harmonious urban societies'. Like Brendan Gleeson, whose paper is also reproduced here, Logan laments a failure of government to recognise and capitalise on that role.

Cultural policy has been a significant driver of European integration. Glasgow was designated a 'European City of Culture' in 1990, an award which 'helped it emerge from its post-industrial shadow to think of itself differently'. Since then, culture has been at the heart of the regeneration agenda in this, the poorest city in the United Kingdom. Indeed, Glasgow is one of the poorest cities in Europe, with some 41 per cent of households living in poverty, affected by unemployment, ill-health, alcoholism and social deprivation. The city has a rich cultural heritage, with 12 museums — most in the inner city. Those museums house impressive collections. The challenge for the Open Museum was to create a museum *for* the city. To meet this challenge, the museum adopted a model of sustainable partnerships rather than service provision. As Morag Macpherson described it in her paper, this approach imagines the museum as part of the public sphere:

The key power that museums have is that they can give voice to the excluded — they are in effect a form of media. They may have less market penetration than TV or newspapers, but their messages can have a greater authority — particularly at a local level — due to the authentic and unique nature of the experience.

The Heritage Lottery Fund supported the 'Greater Pollok Kist', a project to develop 'a mini museum which would give a local community control of a display

space, but where the costs were supported centrally'. The Open Museum's program of training local people and groups to devise and deliver exhibitions in community venues — in libraries, hospitals and prisons — was designed to overcome exclusion in a sustainable way. In time, community involvement became community ownership, as participants came to express and to realise their own expectations about how the service could work for them.

Griffith University urban researcher Brendan Gleeson, like Macpherson, sees the museum's potential to expand the public sphere (see his paper in this issue of *Queensland Review*). In Australia, however, public investment in museums and other cultural and social institutions is heavily skewed to inner cities. For those who live in the suburban heartland, provision of health, education and other public goods has increasingly been privatised, and efforts to decentralise public services are coming undone. Added to this, the geographic and psychic distance between suburbs and the inner city is growing. Gleeson argues that increasing suburban containment should be countered by renewal of the public sphere.

Implicit in this argument is a distinction between the 'local' and the 'public' museum — a distinction that proved controversial at the symposium. In Gleeson's view, the public museum tells a larger story, embraces diversity and promotes tolerance. The suburb itself is an artefact that should figure in this story, but it is also potentially a site of tension. 'The soothing voice of social history' emanating from the public museum exerts a calming influence, and works against 'the forces of suburban fear'.

In his paper, reproduced here, Mark Peel describes both his own life beyond the city limits, growing up in Elizabeth, South Australia and now in Berwick, Victoria, and the experience of the people whose experience of poverty and marginalisation he has documented as an historian. Peel's account of history-making chimes with Gleeson's heartfelt demand that suburban life should be expanded, not diminished, through city histories and public museums. Peel makes a sharp observation about the way values of inclusiveness and diversity have been realised:

I'm struck ... by the fact that Australian history-making, while finally embracing issues of race, culture and gender, has steadily turned away from other kinds of differences and distance, especially those associated with class and economic privilege. In twenty-first century Australia, and in all kinds of public arenas, celebrations of diversity and inclusion are based almost entirely on cultural heritage rather than social location.

If museums are to play a part in expanding the public sphere, they need to find a way to allow communities to tell, hear and share marginal histories. The voices Peel heard in Broadmeadows, Mount Druitt and Inala, like the voices in Pollok and Springburn, did not register only despair and disappointment. As he says, 'the most powerful story ... was about capacity and achievement'. The Brisbane suburb of Inala provides 'profound examples' of tolerance and justice to set against media panics about ethnic and racial conflict. We need museums to represent these histories as part of the present in creative ways, offering narratives of hope that acknowledge but are not constrained by the past.

What is the modern museum without a visitor? Almost unthinkable, but of course museums in the past existed for the pleasure of collectors, whether they were private, wealthy citizens, or scientists and historians. Brisbane-based writer Mary-Rose MacColl begins this issue of *Queensland Review* by providing a visitor's perspective on three different museums, and reflects on the similarities in the way museum workers and writers approach their work.

Novelists, by her account, are not so constrained by ethical and social responsibilities as museum workers are. Their business is to create 'plausible whoppers', while museums are 'in the business of recreating the real, presenting us with stuffed science, live history or dead birds in flight'. Yet, even here — indeed, perhaps especially here — creativity and imagination are critical to producing those moments when the visitor is engaged, amused, transported and transformed. MacColl's vignettes of museum visits highlight the emotional and ethical affects of the objects on view. In the museum, but not in the novel, we come expecting to see something 'real', but both succeed by connecting the real and the imaginary. Looking at an object, there is a moment of recognition or realignment between the understandings we bring with us and the experience that has been created. This significance cannot be imposed, but is evoked: a painting of Oodgeroo by one of the Cilentos in the Museum of Brisbane brings home a reality that previously is known only in the abstract.

The symposium sparked many 'learning conversations' across the disciplines, and among practitioners and academics. The Buddha from the Burrell Collection which found its way into the Pollok Kist in Glasgow has extended its aura to Queensland: the 'Brisbane Buddhas' exhibition has been a stunning success. The conversation has gone on, inspiring new collaborations, with a further forum to be held in July 2005 at the 'Sites of Cosmopolitanism' conference in the same Southbank venue and another planned for Museums Australia's annual conference in Brisbane in 2007.

Notes

- ¹ The Museum of Brisbane celebrates Brisbane's contemporary culture, heritage and people, and aims to acknowledge our present and help us to imagine our future. Located in Brisbane's iconic City Hall, its displays combine social history, visual arts, craft and design.
- ² Museums Australia is the national professional association advocating on behalf of museums and galleries, and supporting the people who work in them. One of its major roles is the investigation of emerging trends and issues of significance to the sector. Its other major functions are advocacy to government and support for high standards of professional practice.
- ³ The Centre for Public Culture and Ideas is one of Griffith University's leading research centres. The Centre promotes integrated and cross-disciplinary research, building on research excellence within the university in the fields of culture, media, humanities, and the visual and performing arts. Various collaborative projects with museums and galleries in Brisbane and nationally are in progress. For more information, see www.griffith.edu.au/centre/cpci.