

THE FUTURE FOR THE SPECIALIST MUSEUM

Geoff Speirs

Museums Extension Officer, South Australian Museum

'When you wake up to the promise of your dream world coming true
 With one less friend to call on, was it someone that I knew -
 Away you will go sailing in a race among the ruins,
 If you plan to face tomorrow, do it soon.'

Gordon Lightfoot

In this paper I'll largely be discussing a sample range of specialist museums I've visited in South Australia, in the expectation that their future prospects will be paralleled elsewhere. Information concerning these museums is tabulated below:

TYPES OF MUSEUMS	No.	ADMINISTRATION
Telecommunications	1	Government department
Pioneer village	2	1 private; 1 local
Nautical	3	Voluntary
Transport	1	Voluntary
Agricultural machinery	2	1 private; 1 voluntary
Police station and Courthouse	2	Voluntary
Vintage vehicles	1	Government Statutory Commission
Paddle steamers	2	1 voluntary; 1 government
Miner's cottage	1	Voluntary
Settler's hut	1	Voluntary
Whaling	1	Private
Gemstones	1	Private
Dolls	1	Private
Shells	1	Private

It is debatable whether pioneer villages can be defined as specialist museums, but there are some comments I'd like to make about them in the course of the discussion which are pertinent to the general argument.

Some descriptive assessments of these museums:-

A. <u>Display</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>% of Total</u>
Adequate protection from theft	9	20	45
Suitable lighting	9	20	45
Exhibits grouped logically	12	20	60
Related to central theme	12	20	60
Sufficient number, variety of items	15	20	75
Adequate educationally	11	20	55

B.	<u>Documentation</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>% of Total</u>
	Bound, waterproof Register, stored in a safe place on the premises	1	20	5
	Complete, up to date record	1	20	5
	Satisfactory cataloguing system	1	20	5
C.	<u>Storage</u>			
	Workshop and storage facilities, with storage space exceeding half total display space	3	20	15
D.	<u>Conservation</u>			
	Most items adequately protected against dust, weather, handling	10	20	50
E.	<u>Restoration</u>			
	Items carefully restored, in sympathy with origins	8	11	73
F.	<u>Admissions</u>			
	Open 0-10 hours per week	7	20	35
	Open 10-35 hours per week	9	20	45
	Open 35 hours per week or more	4	20	20
	Charge 50¢ or less per adult	14	20	70
	Charge 50¢ or more per adult	6	20	30
G.	<u>Income (excluding Government subsidies and supplementary earnings)</u>			
	Under \$1,000	11	20	55
	\$1,000-\$5,000	2	20	10
	\$5,000-\$15,000	6	20	30
	Over \$15,000	1	20	5
H.	<u>Museums which have received substantial Government grants (\$5,000 or more)</u>			
		10	20	50
I.	<u>Administration</u>			
	Private family enterprise	6	20	30
	Voluntary association or trust	10	20	50
	Local Government	2	20	10
	State or Commonwealth Government	2	20	10

A few general comments concerning the data presented in these tables:-

(i) Documentation is the most glaring deficiency. For whatever reason, museums have not approached this area systematically. The South Australian Museum is acting promptly to remedy this situation. At the moment, it is having a number of Registers produced, and when these are ready, they will be distributed free of charge to all museums in the State, together with a guide to using them. Hopefully, this will encourage systematic documentation of items already held, and provide a uniform code of procedures for future accessions.

(ii) Another deficiency can be found in the lack of adequate provision for safe storage. There seems to be an almost irresistible impulse to put the entire collection on display, making for less variety, a shorter life span for some items, and less space for administrative and research work.

(iii) Minimal standards have been set for the assessments of conservation and educational presentation. Items have been deemed to be adequately conserved if they are under shelter, behind glass, or protected from handling. It is interesting to note that only half the museums studied meet even this requirement. There is a lot of important historical material rotting in the sun.

(iv) With regard to educational standards, eleven museums have taken some trouble to use their exhibits as educational tools by displaying them in meaningful order, or by taking steps of some kind to engage the interest of their visitors: printed labels and signs, special displays, blow-ups, dioramas, transparencies, tapes, and guides who conduct visitors through, to name a few. Some of the museums are excellent in this regard. One thinks, for example, of the International Gallery of Dolls at Victor Harbor. On the other hand, some of the twenty museums have not given much attention to the problem: objects are left to speak for themselves, or to support dusty, hand-written placards bearing such information as: "Teapot. Donated by Mrs. V. Smithers." (Incidentally, this information makes the job a lot easier for second-hand dealers). Clearly, a number of specialist museums are still a fair remove from the philosophical and educational imponderables currently bedeviling preparators and curators in the major State museums.

(v) Finally, a word about administration. There are three principal types:-

(a) Private museums. These are all small family concerns. In four of the six museums involved, museum activities are the main income earner. As for the other two, one is run as a sideline hobby to a restaurant business, at a loss, while the other is integrated into an all-round programme of farming activities. In all instances, income from the museums is marginal only - especially when the amount of work put into them is considered.

(b) Voluntary associations or trusts. There are ten of these. Six are branches of the South Australian National Trust; two are formally constituted incorporated associations; and two are run by local historical societies. The distinguishing characteristics of these museums are that they are voluntary, run by committees, non-profit organizations. Their operations are generally not on a large scale.

(c) Government -backed. Of the remaining four museums, two are administered by local government, one through a State Government, and one through a Commonwealth Government agency. Two have permanent staff, although their salaries are met from admission fees. The Commonwealth agency - part of a large government department - has the benefits of a free building for display purposes, provision of storage facilities, and unofficial part-time work from staff enthusiasts.

The Future of Specialist Museums

The past performance of these museums gives some guide as to their futures. Also, these museums will be receiving varying degrees of Government help, and this may have some effect on their futures. I shall discuss these two variables within the context of the aims of the different types of museums.

1. Private Museums

The motives people have in setting up private museums vary. For some, it is a means of fully indulging in a long-term hobby; for others, a way to maintain independence, meet people, or to keep the family together. From general observation it is evident that the proprietors take great pride in their collections. They work hard, for long hours - some only close on Christmas Day - cleaning and restoring items, improving their displays, communicating with visitors. There can be no mistaking their zeal in wishing to educate their customers - they will take school groups through at reduced prices, and nothing pleases or stimulates them more than discussing their exhibits. Indeed, some make a practice of personally guiding all their visitors through, and never seem to tire of going through the same patter, time and time again - a habit irritating to some.

The aims of private museums proprietors might be summarised as:-

- (i) to keep on with what they are doing at present, hopefully with a reduction in the time they spend at it. They are all overworked, and look as if they could do with a bit of a break!
- (ii) to expand their collections and displays.
- (iii) to bring about improvements in their museums.
- (iv) to increase their income, preferably by boosting numbers of visitors.

One of the museums is shortly to scale down its operations greatly, because it has been unable to attract sufficient visitors to make the proprietors' efforts worthwhile. This seems to present a psychological problem, not an economic one. The managers are quite well off, and retired five or six years ago to Victor Harbor to set up a museum. They feel they have failed, because not enough people have come along to visit their gallery, which is an excellent one. I think the other five museums will keep going, pretty well in their present form, as long as their present proprietors stay alive.

During this period, the South Australian Museum's extension service will be available to these museums. The State Government might also be able to offer some financial assistance, with certain stipulations as a *quid proquo*. For example:-

- (i) that a proper Register of all items currently held be compiled, supplied to the South Australian Museum for record purposes, and stored in a safe place on the premises when returned.
- (ii) that money be spent for consolidation, rather than expansion. There is an abundance of material for display in all of these museums.

The assistance could take the form of:-

- (i) expenditure for short-term labour assistance, e.g. through unemployment relief schemes. This would allow proprietors to undertake more research and documentation, which have been neglected to date.
- (ii) expenditure for capital works, particularly storage facilities.
- (iii) funds to be used for promotion purposes.
- (iv) It is unlikely that money would be spent for permanent staff because of State probate requirements. In fact, the long term future of these private museums is under a cloud, because of these requirements. As things now stand, if the museum is to be inherited within the family, probate must be paid, based on the market value of the collection. The only alternative is to bequeath the property to a State public gallery, such as the Art Gallery or the Museum. It would then be up to this body to determine the fit and proper disposal of such a collection.

I am yet to be convinced that there is anything disastrously wrong with this policy. What it means in theory (I don't know about the practice) is that one of the public galleries would be in a position to decide whether or not the collection should pass on to the family. But it also means that no private collection in this State can be regarded as being permanently secure.

2. Voluntary Museums

What are the aims of the voluntary specialist museum enthusiasts? There is generally less evidence of the hobbyist than is the case with private museums. In part, this can be attributed to a bias in the sample: six of the ten museums in the survey are branches of the S.A. National Trust. The Trust suggested themes to local branches which had inherited sites or buildings suitable for museum purposes. Hence the Police station and Courthouse museums, the paddle steamer, miner's cottage and two of the nautical museums. In any event, I have generally found a concern to relate the chosen theme to wider historical developments in the voluntary museums.

The primary motivation seems to have been to conserve some tangible relics from the past - often because they were under threat. This appears to have remained as the sole endeavour for some. It is in the voluntary museums that some of the most relaxed thinking on matters of museology

can be found. For example, of the ten voluntary museums in this survey, only five have managed to confine their displays largely to their chosen topic. This indicates some woolly thinking on collecting and acquisitions policy, and indeed, policy is normally to accept whatever is offered, on the terms most suited to the donor/lender. The same general criticism can be made of the educational content of the displays.

In conversation Dr. David Ride, from the Western Australian Museum, told me he believed the essential ingredient in making for a good local museum is the dynamic personality. He is regarded as a crank; he rubs people up the wrong way; he storms out of committee meetings; but he gets things done. Without him, these museums muddle aimlessly along. Applying the same criterion to the specialist voluntary museums in the survey, I have looked for this person, and found him in four of them. The trouble is, two of them belong to the "she'll be right mate" school of thought when it comes to displays, and so two of the displays are something of a disaster. The other two museums have very good displays, which stick to their chosen topic, and I think they will develop into museums of some importance. Certainly it would be true to say that the other six museums, which lack such a personality, appear to be content to muddle along somehow, and I agree it would take a dynamic personality indeed to lift them out of their rut.

What sort of help could the Government offer these museums?

Firstly, professional advice and information would be available through the South Australian Museum's extension service: workshops, seminars, discussion papers and the like on the various facets of museology they will be confronting in their day to day experience.

I think the Government could also adopt a regional approach, with voluntary museums in mind. The experience of the Western Australian Museum is worth considering in this context. Briefly, what it has done is to institute a structure whereby regional museums have been upgraded, and have become either branches of the Western Australian Museum or 'recognised' local museums. It selected regions throughout the State which would benefit most from having strong regional museums: some six or seven regions in all. It then established a set of criteria by which it would 'recognise' museums within each of these regions, waited for applications, and then selected one in each region to develop to professional standard. Preparators went to the museums to set up displays; curators advised on collection, acquisition, research, storage etc. The honorary curator from each of these museums came to the Western Australian Museum for a short, intensive training session. To date, about eight or ten museums have been recognised and they have been financed jointly from Treasury and local government funds.

The Western Australian Museum has found this programme to be very successful, and is now receiving a large number of applications from other museums for 'recognition'. The overall effect of this has been to force a re-appraisal among all local museums in their approach, and given them a model to emulate, or compete with, in each region. Some museums will, of course, fall by the wayside, while others will develop into permanent institutions which will, in time, be able to offer assistance to

other local museums. While this programme has applied to local government museums only to date, there is no reason why it could not incorporate voluntary organizations as well, and indeed, amendments along these lines are shortly to be made to the relevant Museum Act in Western Australia.

The effects of such a policy, adapted to South Australian conditions, would probably be much the same as in Western Australia. If such an approach were adopted, I would imagine that the two museums with dynamic personalities (and good displays) are the sort which the Government would be looking to for development as regional museums.

3. Government or Local Government Museums

(a) Local Government

The aims of the two local government museums differ so widely that I will discuss each in turn.

One is a pioneer village. It attempts to reproduce the atmosphere of a village along the Murray during the period 1890-1920. Originally a branch of the National Trust, it broke away three or four years ago. It appointed a managing committee under the authority of the council, and is now run as a Council venture. The committee's aims coincide largely with those of the Council, i.e. to make the museum a viable economic proposition.

Its future is fairly well assured. Through the participation of the Council, it is felt to be a community project, and the council is at present considering the possibilities of making additional land available to it. The admission charge is \$1 - fairly high, although cheaper than most other pioneer villages in Australia. Standards of display in the museum are good, but protection of exhibits overall is not. Storage is inadequate. However, these problems will be overcome in time, being largely a matter of professional advice. The managing committee has a great deal of drive and enthusiasm. It has already approached the South Australian Museum for the loan of some dental exhibits, and the items are now on display.

The other local government venture is a paddle steamer on the Murray. The boat was restored from funds supplied by the State Government, on condition that continuing maintenance of the vessel be met by the local government authority. There the matter seems to rest. The boat is open to the public for about twenty hours a week. For 40¢ you can look over the boat, and a collection of photographs on the wall of one of the cabins. A debate is currently raging as to whether or not the boat should be converted to a 'living museum', which would take tourists for trips along the Murray. However, this would involve installing a new boiler, and employing a captain and crew. In short, your guess as to its future is as good as mine.

(b) State and Commonwealth Governments

Again, I will discuss each of these in turn.

(i) State Government

This museum, formerly a private company, was recently taken over by the State Government Industrial Commission. It is a museum specialising in vintage vehicles, with a considerable interest in other technological artifacts.

The State Government spent a large sum of money - in excess of \$300,000 - to take over this museum, which was going bankrupt. It now wants to avoid paying further large sums. A professional manager has been appointed, the present staff retained, and a Museum Board is being formed. Dr. Inglis, Director of the Department for the Environment and formerly Director of the South Australian Museum, is on this Board. A very large aspect of the manager's job will be concerned with keeping the museum afloat financially.

In brief, I believe the Government will not allow this museum to collapse. Perhaps, in the long term, it will relax its attitude on making the museum pay its way.

(ii) Commonwealth Government

This museum deals with telecommunications, and has a small display in a building in the city. The display is well set out, attractive and interesting, and is open to the public from 11a.m. to 4p.m. during the week.

With the unofficial benefits the museum is receiving - to which I referred earlier - it should have no difficulty in continuing to survive. It is possible, of course, that a Director hostile to the concept could greatly scale down its activities, but I am told that the museum is well received throughout the Department, and that Directors' Reports stress its value and importance.

Conclusion

To repeat my general conclusions on the future of the three types of specialist museums:-

- (i) the future of private museums is clouded because of probate requirements.
- (ii) the future of voluntary museums, and also local government museums, is linked to the personalities responsible for them.
- (iii) the future of State and Commonwealth-backed museums seems reasonably secure, even if this is largely due to the vested interest Government has in them.

References

Burcaw, G.E. - Introduction to Museum Work, The American Association for State and Local History, Nashville, U.S.A., 1976.

Economic Research Unit, - A Study of Man-made Tourist Attractions, Department of Industry and Commerce, Middle Park, Vic. 1976.

Piggott, P.H. *et al.* - Museums in Australia 1975. Report of the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections, Canberra, 1975.

The Western Australian Museum - Annual Report, 1966-67, Perth, 1967.

Kalori, May 1976.