



Experiencing the new museum

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Adult Learning Commentary Number 14, 13 June 2001

The largest provider of adult learning in Australia after the television and mass media is not TAFE, University or ACE providers, but cultural institutions. Millions upon millions of adults visit Australian museums and galleries each year, and many return time and again.

So how well are galleries and museums servicing the learning needs of adults? You will have to make your own evaluation of the cultural institutions nearest you. Here, I consider the new National Museum of Australia.

The new museum building is a striking collection of the strangely familiar and the alarmingly obscure. It is a jumble of contemporary architectural references, colour panels and Braille dots. In the centre of the circular building, the 'Garden of dreams' is glimpsed initially through holes in barriers akin to those found around a building site. The garden features a concrete mound decorated with a street map, and a shimmering pool of water with concrete islands and a large dead tree.

The building has caused controversy and upset many, but the 'new' and the 'challenging' is the catalyst for active learning. Exploring the exterior of the building, its nooks and crannies, evocations and eccentricities, is a challenging and satisfying experience and, as we all know, experience is the best learning one can have.

The next great experience is Circa, a plasma-screen update on the old mid-20th century multi-screen slide show, complete with a rotating auditorium circa 1939 New York World's Fair. The 12-minute presentation is a slick evocation of the Australian landscape, a refreshing take on typical Australian notions of identity, and a survey of cultural aspirations. It is both an affirmation of Australia as a nation and, with its clever juxtapositions of images, sounds and quotes from 'average' Australians, an effective invitation to consider

our own relationship with the country and what we think it all means.

The labyrinthine exhibition spaces are broadly thematic, beginning with the land, continuing with Australian identity over the past 100 years, and ending with a substantial Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander section. Unlike traditional museums, which place great emphasis on unique objects and spend much time telling you just how unique their unique objects are, this museum is more interested in telling stories.

The stories that are told are familiar ones – land degradation, bush fires, immigration, 1950s suburbia, the stolen generation and so on – and in telling the stories familiar and often unremarkable objects are enrolled as props. Many of the stories told will be familiar to most Australian adults over 20, and the most common response I imagine the exhibits elicit is not "gosh, will you have a look at that" but "I remember that" or "I heard something about that" or (to paraphrase Monty Python), "we've already got one of those".

And it is here that the learning experience begins to unravel. Some of the stories are too familiar – they are the same ones, with the same characters, same plots and same morals, that we have heard before.

Reverence for untouchable objects has been replaced by a series of untouchable stories. While these stories are comforting, there is no invitation to question the narratives or their significance. The narratives are presented as an unquestioned whole and, for the most part, behind ropes and glass.

Like any old museum, for adults at least, a visit to the new National Museum is very much a hands-in-pockets experience, consisting mostly of standing, reading, listening and peering. Sure, there are a few buttons for

the grown ups to push, but these are simply ways of selecting different reading, listening and peering experiences.

For children it is a different story. At the new museum, in addition to some wonderfully innovative programmes run by the education unit, there is 'kspace', a virtual reality experience that encourages children to imagine the city of the future and then invites them to travel through their city using 3D computer technology.

In most cultural institutions, the learning experiences offered to adults are very different from those offered to children. But why? I understand why the content may be different but why should the range of delivery methods be so severely restricted for adults? Primary school children get to participate in free-ranging discussions, role-playing, arts and crafts activities, and sensory experiences. The further from primary school we travel, however, the less learning through experience we get to enjoy. When we hit adulthood, we are expected to learn solely by reading and listening and, above all, by being very, very still. And when we visit a gallery the adults are expected to step aside and let the children press all the buttons.

But why must the children have all the fun? Why aren't adults asked to create a city of the future? Why aren't adults invited to offer their interpretation of what they see? Why is it that in the context of museum administrative structures, 'education' means programs for children? Why does it seem that most museums think of adults only in terms of statistics and sales?

The new National Museum is a very good museum, but its provision of learning for adults must extend further than rotating seats, plasma screens and endless glass cases, loudspeakers and labels. The intrigues of the architecture are a step in the right direction, but the new museum must provide a few games for the grownups to play inside as well.