Crossing the Moat: Art Museums and life-wide learning

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In the community and public arts sectors, market forces, and market driven programming, is often viewed as a bad thing.

And it *is* a bad thing if by the term 'market driven' we mean chasing profits. The brief of the community and public arts sectors is not to chase profits.

But if 'market driven' is taken to mean listening to, and then responding to, the needs and desires of the end-users in an effort to serve more people better, then the market driven philosophy cannot be such a bad thing.

Our public art museums have a mass-market brief. That is, their target market is a broad one. If they do have to think about making money to cover costs then it is in their brief to do this, like McDonalds or Woolworth's, by increasing their consumer-base, rather than restricting it to a wealthy market segment.

The mission of the National Gallery of Victoria is to "bring people and art together". The Vision of the Queensland Art Gallery is to help increase "quality of life for all Queenslanders". The Art Gallery of Western Australia talks about "cultural enrichment of the people" The purpose of the National Gallery of Australia is to "serve the public".

Nowhere in these statements of intent is a limitation on the type of audiences these institutions exist to serve. Rather, there is an implicit or explicit intent to serve *all* the people, not just the people with money, high levels of formal education, or from certain age groups. And not just the people with an interest in art history or who are contemporary artists.

In recent years, most public art museums in Australia have made efforts to make physical access to the collections easier. This has included increased efforts to provide services to people with disabilities, to offer tours in different languages, to put more material on-line, and to reduce or remove entry fees to the general collection. These efforts are to be applauded, but they are not enough.

Letting down the drawbridge - removing the physical impediments to access - is the easy part. Getting people to want to cross the moat is the hard part.

The fact that art museum non-attendance is so clearly delineated by lower income, lower education levels, advanced age and non-anglo ethnicity, must be of great concern for us all. We must be concerned that the poorest people in our society apparently prefer to pay money to visit a zoo rather than visit a public art museum for free. We must be concerned that older people whose mobility may be limited, appear to prefer to spend time in a botanic garden than in a public art museum, where the ground is easy to walk on and there are plenty of seats.(These observations are based upon data in the ABS report *Attendance at Selected Cultural Venues and Events* 4114.0, 2002)

Why are significant sections of our society staying away from art museums in droves?

I think there are two answers. The first is that art museum culture is closed and intimidating. Despite the rhetoric about reaching out to the masses, art museums have not been able to shake off the trappings of wealth, class, and breeding. The art museum comes across as a place of right and wrong answers; of jargon; of esoteric discussions; of being inside – or outside – the club. In short, the Australian art museum is imbued with all the characteristics that, in an adult learning context, are fundamental no-nos.

The second reason why I believe substantial audiences are not interested in crossing the moat is the issue of usefulness. In their marketing and in the programs they deliver, art museums, on the whole, have failed to demonstrate to the public how what the art museum is offering is relevant to the everyday world. In short, there is a failure on the part of the art museum to assist people in a profound or useful way.

Don't get me wrong; art museums *are* trying to be useful. It's just that the services they provide are of value to only a small proportion of society notably those sitting comfortably at the top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

According to ACNielsen survey work, the issues that are troubling most Australians include concerns about the worsening of the economy, employment, health, terrorism, and crime. *(*ACNielsen *Asia Pacific Consumer Confidence Survey, 1st Half 2003).* Try as I might, I could not find anywhere on the list of things keeping Australians awake at night concerns about the origins of Modernism.

The Business Council of Australia conducted a survey of people aged 30 and under asking them about their concerns. The things of greatest concern for this cohort included housing affordability, financial security and the prospect of being unemployed. *(Business Council of Australia: http://www.bca.com.au/content.asp?newsID=94480).* Again, I was unable to find any evidence to suggest that a lack of knowledge of art history was an issue for Australia's youth.

In Australia, it is estimated that around 45% of the adult population do not have sufficient levels of literacy to cope with the everyday demands of life and work on our complex advanced society. Approximately 20% - or one in five - Australian adults do not have what may be termed 'basic' literacy, that is, the ability to read medicine bottles, consult timetables, and work out the change they might expect from a transaction. (Source: IALS & ABS data*)*

While people with low levels of literacy may potentially find visual art collections tremendously rewarding, the language of the art museum, the jargon of art history, indeed the focus on art history, is a definite turn off.

Around 800,000 Australian adults live with depression each year. On average one in five Australians will experience depression at some point in their lives. Depression is currently the leading cause of non-fatal disability in Australia and in the year 2025 it will be second only to heart disease as the leading cause of death and disability. Depression costs the Australian community millions dollars of each year. (source *Beyond Blue)*

Again, while visual art collections may present enormous possibilities for sufferers of depression, programs that obsessively focus on questions of taste classification, and

technique are, at best, irrelevant and, at worse, a smorgasbord of opportunities for people to feel inadequate and stupid.

What is keeping Australia awake at night? Health, jobs, crime, the environment. What is stopping Australia reaching its potential? Poor literacy skills and depression, to name but two. What contributions are Australia's public art museums making to help address these issues?

One might argue that the art museum's greatest contribution is in providing an escape, a sanctuary, where people can hide from the anxiety of the everyday world. However, calm is a rare commodity in the modern art museum; amongst the public program activities, the zealous volunteer guides, the boisterous school group and the clatter of cash registers, calm does not appear to be a primary focus.

Most art museums are focused on stimulating and supporting discussions around art history. This *is* a useful function because there are few other spaces within our society where one might engage in such discussions. However, this function is a somewhat rarefied one, not one that intersects with most of our lives in any meaningful way.

To become a valuable resource for the lifelong and lifewide needs of all types of Australians, our public art museums must change.

What I am suggesting is simple. Rather than trying to assimilate various audiences to art museum culture, the art museum must make efforts to accommodate and respond to the needs of potential audiences. (Jane Thompson*, Bread & Roses: Arts, Culture and Lifelong Learning,* Leicester: NIACE, 2002, p.7*).* The programming and promotion of the art museum must be fundamentally and explicitly relevant to the contemporary needs and concerns of the wider public.

In such a formulation depression, health, crime, war, and the environment serves as the starting point for the art museum's public interface work. In this formulation, art is used to help deal with contemporary issues; the issues that keep us awake at night. Through art, the community can learn how others, who have gone before, or from elsewhere, have experienced or dealt with challenges similar to those that concern us.Individual objects in the collection and curated exhibitions are used to give insight to concerns and experiences for which there are no words.

While in this formulation there is no reason to abandon the promotion of art history – if art history can be shown to be useful then it can stay - a shift in recruitment strategies is required to ensure that the public interface staff represent through their interests and outlook, the diversity of the wider community, not just those with an interest in art history.

In short, in a formulation of usefulness, the art museum promotes itself as a visual library of human experience; a resource bank of insights; a rich catalyst for creativity and innovation. A place of substance, not style.

Interestingly this conception of usefulness isn't too far from the current Department of Communication, Information Technology and the Arts statement about why the Australian Government spends public money to support public collections. It says:

"Cultural and heritage material held in public collections throughout Australia provide insight into our past, shape our sense of identity, stimulate innovation and creativity, and provide the knowledge to make informed choices on our future directions."

But how might this work in practice? How might, for example, an art museum help Australians face their concerns?

Art museums might use the experience of depression, alcoholism or racism as the catalyst for an exhibition or public program. Such a program or exhibition would provide an environment in which a form of art therapy might take place; using existing art as a catalyst for self-expression, problem solving and initiating stimulating conversation among people who may or may not have first-hand experience of the issue at hand.

How might the art museum help people gain and maintain employment?

Competency-based training is good at helping people develop manual skills, but it is floundering in the area of helping people develop the generic skills that are so often the key to employment and progression in work. The skills that employers are impressed by include interpersonal skills, creativity, innovation, flexibility, and the ability to cope with change and challenge. The art museum is filled with resources that can assist people develop and hone these skills.In fact, few other spaces in contemporary society offer such a wealth of opportunities to help people develop innovative thinking or practice communicating difficult ideas.

Innovations such as these are within easy reach of the art museum. In fact many are already happening – thematic exhibitions are nothing new. However too often such activities are submerged under the babble of art history. And too often the art museum marketing machine obliterates any sense of usefulness with a focus on creating an aura of the dazzling spectacle.

However a shift is going to occur, due in no small part to our ageing population. As more public funds are poured into health, aged care and pensions – not to mention the development of alternative energy sources, the securing of freshwater, and the Orwellian fight against terrorism – the survival of Australia's public art museums is going to rely upon their demonstrated value to the whole of society.

It is time now to do the groundwork for this future. It is time now to listen to the massive number of Australian adults for whom the art museum appears to have no relevance. As David Anderson, from the Victorian and Albert Museum argued recently, the key too is to invest as many resources in the study of audiences as is invested in researching the objects in the collection. (David Anderson, 'Reluctant Learners: Art Museum in the Twenty First Century', paper presented at the National Museum of Art, Helsinki, February 2004). The key here is for the art museum to listen – not promote – but to listen.

Where might one go to meet these audiences?

Neighbourhood Houses would be a good place to start. Neighbourhood houses are at the coalface of the disengaged – people with poor literacy, people from cultural minorities,

people living in isolation, people with no money - will often find their way to a neighbourhood house. The people at neighbourhood houses are not interested in art history, but they are interested in learning the skills – such as literacy and communication – that will help them get ahead. Art collections potentially provide fertile resources for stimulating and honing these life skills.

Human Resource departments might be another place to go. Here you will find people desperately trying to foster flexibility, innovation, creativity and good communication amongst their employees. Again our art collections and our art museums might offer a valuable resource to assist meeting these needs.

Counselling services, such as those conducted by Anglicare, would be a good place to go to hear about the needs of people recovering from depression, addiction or social exclusion.

Conferences – other people's conferences - offer a valuable window into other people's worlds; their issues, needs and concerns. Over the past year I have attended conferences about adult and community education, families, vocational education, the future of work, professional education, and community welfare. Rarely, if ever, do I meet anyone from an art museum at these conferences.

People are easy to find. Listing to them and responding to their needs, on their terms, that's the hard bit. But that is the bit public art museums must do if they want more people crossing the moat and if they want to continue to claim public funds.