With reference to several Australian case studies, analyse the significance of the changes in the roles of museums in Australian society

Claire Bailey
Oxley College

Synopsis:
From the beginning of this project I encountered pleasant dilemmas - my interest in history extends beyond the classroom and so a wealth, or rather a flood, of information was interesting and appealing to me. I initially started the research process by not constructing a question or an argument, but rather researching as many historical events and issues as I could. I preferred the excitement of investigation and discovery. My eventual topic, Museums and their role in history, was a logical progression for my focus, as it allowed me to study the nature of history-making itself, and also incorporated the hands-on investigative element that I find so interesting - my work was going to be fresh and new.

This did, however, present some problems as any interpretation would be a new interpretation. This project therefore had to be an amalgamation of case studies and informed historiographical perception over time, so that I could relate past interpretations to a solid context, and assess my own argument in light of it. Thus, my initial approach was in the form of a series of questions that dealt with the reliability, conflicts, values and issues surrounding the construction of ‘the museum’ and history. I refined my argument by answering those questions through a series of interviews and case studies (which would serve as my only primary sources) and related my findings in the final essay. However, in order to fully engage with the question, the museums I have included have been limited to the National Museum of Australia, Canberra. The Australian Museum, Sydney and the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, although other museums have been used as early examples, models or precursors. This was essential because of the general definition of the word “museum” in our modern society. I found that as more and more information came to me, my focus had to be continually flexible to incorporate broad ideas, and focus them on case studies. This project therefore concentrates on social history museums, so that the issues of historical memory, memorials and national identity can be more easily addressed.

Overall, I aimed, through my own historical investigation, to address the values behind this focus, and compare the various methodologies of history-making to the museums’ methodologies and, ultimately, to my own.

Essay:
In 1977, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) created ‘Museum Day’ to be held on the 18th May annually. In 2002, ICOM partnered with UNESCO to promote the theme of the day: “Museums: agents of social change and development.” The day aimed to “preserve cultural heritage... [and] promote mutual understanding, peace and development through the neutral setting of museums.” The press release firstly makes the assumption that museums are ‘neutral settings’ in which to explore cultural and societal issues. Secondly, it makes no mention of any ‘history’ in the museum, owing perhaps to the problematic nature of the word, replacing it with ‘heritage.’ In fact, ICOM does not define ‘museum’ using the term ‘history’ at all. Rather, a museum “...exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.” The term ‘history’ does not have the personal and responsible connotations of the word ‘heritage.’ Instead, it is a point of contention in the historiographical debate as historians wonder whether ‘the past’ is an ineffective definition of history, as history clearly has an impact in the present, ‘the past’ being an intangible abstraction. ICOM may define a museum in terms of heritage, but suggesting the museum is a ‘neutral setting’ is
contradictory considering the fact that the definition of 'museum' itself changed as the historical debates did. Museums are, therefore, no longer purveyors of antiquated history. Through the objects displayed and the language used, museums instead reflect on present interpretations of events in the past, rather than aiming to display the past itself which, could be argued today, is impossible. Inga Clendinnen suggests that

“The cocoon of physical security in which we live might be our greatest barrier to understanding how it was for other people in other times... That massive change in circumstances alone renders the hope of ‘empathy’ a fiction.”

If museums today insist on involving their audience with the past through interactive exhibits, surely such 'empathy' would undermine the value of museums as historically relevant sources. On the other hand, museums and their objects could be said to be the last remaining tangible aspect of 'the past' as it actually was. All museums requiring emotional and physical interaction with the past, through the objects they display and the stories they tell, are therefore original, primary sources constructed into a secondary source by the exhibit. They are the primary means of communication. However, if the experiences of people in the past are intangible, it is left to those of the present to create the stories those objects represent. Such problems associated with museums are parallel to those asked of history itself. Like museums and monuments, which are physical constructs of past events and the present values placed upon them, the writing of history could be said to be inhibited by 'purpose;' that history-writing is tempered by the value judgements that people of the present put on the past.

The public museum, as it is defined today, originated from both private collections and the original Ptolemaic concept of a 'house of knowledge,' such as the Mouseion at Alexandria. Such places were originally established to collect items of intrinsic value for the purpose of posterity, reflecting the commitment of Classical historians such as Herodotus to record astonishing achievements so that they would not be forgotten. As the world shrank, and the achievements of humanity were duly celebrated through displays during the Renaissance, the colonial powers then wished to exhibit their wealth and influence in colonised cultures. These private collections were utilised into a public space, now not only for study and preservation, but for the display of objects that were deemed interesting and relevant.

Peter Vergo suggests that "the very act of collecting has a political or ideological or aesthetic dimension that cannot be overlooked." Museum collectors, historians and curators may therefore have had subjective criteria on which to base their collections from the beginning (the display of humanist or colonial pride for example.) The collection was then displayed for a target audience who would be interested in such a display, which was based on the present context. It could then be argued that the compilation of objects in a museum is constructing history based on the expectations that the present culture has of their society.

Accordingly, the rise of the public museum also coincides with the rise of a museum archetype. This saw the museum become an accepted institution of modern society. As museums were opened to the broader public and their development coincided with the expansion of colonial powers around the world, they were seen as the storehouses of knowledge, and their reliability was assured by the objective nature of tangible objects. Museum curators could classify and order these objects into taxonomies in what appeared to be an objective manner. These classifications and taxonomies were themselves supported by a historical framework that used the exhibition space of the museum to popularize a narrative of Western society as the pinnacle of civilization. Architecture, layout and linear displays all served to reinforce a museum 'code' to the new audience. This 'code' was distinctly Modernist in outlook. Such practices, which developed into academic professionalism which Vergo calls the "Old Museology," can, for example, be seen in terms of a Foucaulian carceral institution, where historical knowledge was collected and interpreted by a select group "for the benefit... of members of the public." Post-colonial historian, Gyan Prakash, describes the museum as "a structural condition of Western humanism": knowledge of the world grouped together in a repeating structure to reflect a "common humanity." In both examples, the museum is elevated to be a specific reliable institution in society and culture; an honest retainer of human understanding and a source of societal power. That is, museums had control over public knowledge, and collective and popular memory.

Eileen Hooper-Greenhill suggests, however, that this myth or 'ideal' of 'the museum' bears very little relationship to the range and scope of museums which exist today. Particularly since the 1960's and the rise of postmodernism, museums have undergone a
process of democratisation, appealing to more and more groups of people and attempting to encompass collective memory rather than dictate it. The National Museum of Australia, Canberra, was designed and constructed in 2003 to cater specifically to the needs of a diverse demographic. This is achieved, the museum asserts, through the representation of many stories, from multiple points of view. This approach, however, undermines the traditional ‘museum archetype’ as the repository of elite knowledge and historical prestige. In the National Museum, society itself is explored, relying on present interpretations instead.

The idea persists however that objects can, and should, be placed in a context that shows a superior order, removed from physical (and presumably cognitive) decay. “Museums are assumed to operate outside the zone in which artefacts change in ownership and epistemological meaning”15. Objects are often seen as immortal relics of past societies, providing verifiable, reliable historical facts, due to the palpability of the object itself. This is in contrast to historical theory, which is evidently the interpretation of an historian. However, visitors must engage with the exhibits within the present context in some way, and museums such as the National Museum incorporate their exhibits and focus with new interactive technologies. Often, museum curators expand this further, constructing their exhibits to comment on a present issue. Surviving Australia, an exhibit in the Australian Museum, utilises a touch-activated projection on a large table to engage the viewer with several dangerous Australian animals. The viewer may touch the moving tracks to reveal a picture of the animal, information about it, and a moveable model. When other areas of the table are touched or moved over, the animal responds. The use of such technology is highly contextual and not only locates the object itself, but also within the history-making process of an historian. The interaction is itself a break from the traditional presentation and limited interpretation of objects and facts.

Interactive displays are aimed specifically at those wishing to experience history and then learn its implications. Empathy, awe and imagination are no longer directed inwards by exhibits, causing reflection, but outwards through physical sensation and the novelty of the situation. This change has undoubtedly resulted in success for the museum, and opens up history to a wider demographic (especially children). However, this newfound relevancy and respect is not in terms of an appreciation of history. Andrea Witcomb suggests that “interactives’ avoid the role of cultural and historical explanation... They... fail to communicate the value of [the exhibit] to society as well as its limitations.”21 Rather, this is an appreciation of current technologies and interpretations on the objects to make them more relevant to the present viewer. Whether this subverts the historiographical accuracy of the exhibit is contentious.

The move towards interactive exhibits also reflects the development of different learning styles employed by educators to cater to specific learning needs and age groups. Viewers are recognised as naturally curious, and therefore exhibits may be constructed so as to be ‘self-liberating.’ Hooper-Greenhill suggests that “to understand the world it is necessary to act on it. The democratic philosophy of access to knowledge and ideas led to the development of ways to achieve this...,” reflecting Andrew Simpson’s view that museology has undergone a democratisation in the postmodern context.24 Most exhibits are now structured based on either a one-way or two-way communication model, where the viewer may both learn from the exhibit and contribute something to it, so that the exhibit “communicates information but also [regulates] behaviour and psychological states.”25 Simpson cites the Powerhouse Museum’s recent exhibit, “Ecological,” as an example: viewers are invited to explore a sustainable house and to distinguish between environmentally sustainable products and unviable ones of the past. Such an exhibit relies on the fact that the audience is familiar with issues surrounding consumerism and is willing to communicate this with the exhibit in order to engage with it. Most exhibits, Simpson suggests, have embraced the postmodern notion of subjective truth in order to comment on social issues.26 The development of such exhibits clearly shows how museums are impacted upon by present circumstances.

The fact that museums rely on and now encourage interaction with exhibits suggests that museums are unreliable historical sources, limited to what an average museum-goer will understand and be entertained by, and not necessarily based on objective truths. However, it is uncertain whether museums are historical sources in the first place. Increasingly, museums are seen as places of entertainment and leisure- having to support themselves through private enterprise and attract ‘customers’ like other entertainment industries.

“Fifty years ago no museum was considered to be a business in the commercial sense... the rise
of social expectations... disposable income... professionalism among those who work in museums... [and] independent museums... has influenced the atmosphere of the museum world.”

No longer collected for posterity, the wealth of information collected must be narrowed down by curators who display objects in specific themes. The objects themselves may be primary sources, but they are transformed into secondary sources in the ways they are displayed. If museums are influenced by the ‘outside’, this means that certain values are communicated depending on the target audience. This can be easily identified in the National Museum of Australia. The newest exhibit, Eternity, equates Australian colonial, modern and Indigenous objects to human emotions: thrill, separation, joy, passion, loneliness, hope, fear, chance, mystery or devotion. Clearly, these emotions must recur in the narrative of Australia, just like their objects. They must, as the entrance panel of the exhibit dictates, reflect “Stories from the emotional heart of Australia.” Like the objects in the Powerhouse Ecologic exhibit, these ‘national’ objects are imbued with a deeper emotional meaning. This is not to say that Eternity is not effective or relevant: it clearly allows viewers to understand that people from the past presumably experienced shared human emotions. The museum curators have nonetheless taken care to be inclusive. “Personal stories make an important contribution to our history. Eternity opens a window onto some of them and encourages each of us to consider the significance of our own lives and stories” introduces the exhibit. The website is careful to cite the exhibit as “personal,” yet important, opening a window on ‘some’ stories, and encourages the ‘consideration’ of our own stories, denoting the significance of every ‘person.’ In a national museum, however, any value-based judgements can easily stand for the nation and its people as a whole. This inevitably incites political and social controversy when the limitations of the museum are considered.

The National Museum actually wishes to be known as one which is “sometimes controversial and never dull.” It is clear that they certainly achieve this through the museum’s approach to its display of history. The museum strives to unfold fresh insights into social, cultural and environmental history through the portrayal of many different viewpoints. The museum director from 2001 to 2003, Dawn Casey, asserted that “the museum itself will rarely express an opinion... instead, it should indicate the range of existing opinions... in order to inform the viewer.” Such a postmodern approach, while enterprising, merely served to expose the museum to criticism. It was limited by space, cost and, some argued, political bias. The museum itself was not only inevitably embroiled in the political debate called the History Wars, but its reliance on a multiplicity of viewpoints, and presentation of exhibits with those viewpoints in mind, naturally stimulated debate. For example, Miranda Devine highlights the absence of significant Australians such as Howard Florey, and that the exhibits did not express pride, but ridicule of non-Indigenous culture. Other historians who feature prominently in the History Wars, such as Keith Windshuttle, suggest the museum has taken a ‘black armband’ view of history, prejudiced against ‘dead white males’ in favour of an apologetic stance towards Indigenous Australians. This widespread debate serves to highlight both the important role society gives museums in constructing national identity, and also the pitfalls of practical postmodernism. It may be impossible for the museum, as a public institution, to fully and accurately represent the story of Australia if told from as many different viewpoints as possible. To a certain extent, this reflects the need for a structured, unambiguous national truth and cultural identity in the minds of the Australian public. While audiences appreciate both the democratisation and increased interactivity of the museum, as a national museum, imbued with the ‘museum archetype’ aura, they assume that truth and concrete values will be presented to celebrate Australian society, even if they themselves are in disagreement with those values presented.

Public memorials also try to establish concrete values through physical objects. In fact, according to ICOM’s broad definition, memorials could be seen as museums as they too “[now have] a specific brief to create an emotional response... using the [museum-based] narrative.” That is, both museums and memorials both strive to elicit a response in the viewer. This response is subject to how the objects, or representations, are laid out and portrayed. Kirr Savage goes so far as to label public memorials as “representational battlegrounds,” with the sheer number in Australia indicative of the desire to represent certain core values through creative innovation. Memorials are therefore subject to the same controversies that surround museums, constructing a sense of community, even as they are constructed by them.
For example, while the Australian War Memorial may have also expanded its exhibits to include interactive displays like *G for George*, the structure of the museum lends itself to illicit an empathetic response— all viewers start at the WWI dioramas, move through the various conflicts, experience *G for George* and the *Midget Subs* and move through to the *Hall of Remembrance*. Although some may assert that the museum and the memorial are separate entities, this linear exhibition model the Memorial employs, encourages the viewer to see the exhibits in terms of remembrance. Moreover, in the heart of the ‘museum,’ overlooking the *G for George* exhibit, a war medal display has words like “Loyalty,” “Comradeship” and “Compassion” etched on the glass. At the same time, the *Unknown Soldier* in the actual memorial is the perfect reciprocal of these Australian values, having an unknown identity—a blank canvas. Similarly, he is a perfect way to memorialise the Australian identity because, possessing no identity himself, changing values can easily be applied to him. The tragedy of being ‘unknown’ is lessened slightly by the inclusive Australian values he now stands for. It is an effective display of national remembrance, but also an attempt to embody an ‘object’ with present-day values. The link between the memorial and the museum suggests the exhibited objects may do the same.

Early museums were places where objects of value were housed and studied by an elite group of society. Now, museums are places where society itself is explored, with more a focus on the present. Both museums and memorials, in attempting to explore something that is clearly the present, and where a huge amount of interpretation goes into the history making process, cannot help but attach certain values to their exhibits. No longer are exhibits created necessarily for posterity’s sake. Museums increasingly have a role in the education of the public, to communicate with society about society, to give the basic notions of history, to the public about the past, and enhance collective memory. Considering the controversy surrounding the objective truths in history, this role of museums may not be considered appropriate, influenced as they are by historical and political debate. The assumption here that museums are an integral part of the history-making process reflects the paradox of the past: its pervasive persistence in the present. This can be seen in the innumerable museums and monuments, which are as much there to monumentalise history as they are there to memorialise present society.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

**Interviews:**
Simpson, Andrew; Macquarie University, 29/4/09
Rentoul, Chris; Australian War Memorial, 24/4/09
Stanley, Peter; National Museum of Australia, 24/4/09

**Museums:**
National Museum of Australia, Lawson Crescent Acton Peninsula CANBERRA ACT 2600, visited 24/4/09
Australian War Memorial, Treloar Crescent Campbell CANBERRA ACT 2612, visited 24/4/09
Australian Museum, 6 College St Sydney NSW 2000, visited 29/4/09

**Books:**


**Journals:**

**Websites:**
The history of the British Museum, British Museum Website http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/history_and_the_building/general_history.aspx

Article 3: Definition of terms by ICOM http://icom.museum/definition.html retrieved 31/2/09


Digital books:


Resource Bodders

ENNOTES:
1. UNESCO Portal “Museum Day”
2. Article 3: Definition of terms by ICOM: Museum. A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.
5. Hudson, K. “Memory, Monuments and Museums” pp 96-7
6. Vergo, P. The New Museology p. 1
8. The New Museology By Peter Vergo p. 2
9. Susan A. Crane p. 319 of Memory, Monuments and Museums
10. Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum Andrea Witcomb pg 102
11. Vergo, P. ibid
12. The Exhibitionary Complex The Birth of the Museum Tony Bennett pp 59-69
13. The Museum Refuses to Stand Still Kenneth Hudson p 86
14. Gyan Prakash p 209 of Memory, Monuments and Museums
16. Andrew Simpson 29/4/09
17. Reflections of a National Museum Director Casey, D p 110 in Memory, Monuments and Museums
18. Peter Vergo p 9
19. for example, many younger viewers were shocked by the lunge of a salt water crocodile at their fingers.
21. The Australian Museum on Friday 24th April (during school holidays) was patronised by a large number of children, who were predominately attracted to the ‘Dinosaurs’ exhibit, which included a sound and lights show and short film every ten minutes. Other exhibits such as the Aboriginal artwork gallery and older geological exhibit were less frequented and more quickly run through by young families, over the course of the day.
22. The Educational Role of the Museum Eileen Hooper-Greenhill p 139
23. ibid
24. Ibid Andrew Simpson, 29/4/09
25. ibid
26. Ibid Andrew Simpson, 29/4/09
27. Kenneth Hudson p 86-7
28. Andrew Simpson 29/4/09
29. Stories from the Emotional Heart of Australia: NMA Website:
30. Graeme Davison p 93 in Memory, Monuments and Museums
31. Culture Wars: museums, politics and controversy, Dawn Casey, pg 6
32. Ibid pg 16
33. A Nation Trivialised White Australia ‘a bad joke’ Miranda Devine
34. Culture Wars ibid pg 8
35. Andrew Simpson, Macquarie University 29/4/09
36. Lake, M. p2
37. ibid
38. Chris Rentoul 24/4/09 “the memorial is separate from the museum, they are two separate entities... they are separate – that’s the way we tend to try and look at it.”
40. Lake, Memory, Monuments and Museums p. 11

The appendices have not been included.