

Remembering Dr. George F MacDonald (1938-2020)

Dr. Amareswar Galla (Amar), the then Chairperson of Asia Pacific Executive Board of International Council of Museums interviewed Dr George F MacDonald, the Chief Executive Officer of Museum Victoria, Australia's largest public museums organisation, on 2 November 2000. The following are abridged reflections of Dr. MacDonald at the opening of the Melbourne Museum, the flagship of Museum Victoria. Transcribed text was approved by Dr MacDonald. Two decades on the museological wisdom in these reflections remains just as valid.¹



Dr MacDonald, Dr Joanne MacDonald and Prof Galla at the UBC Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, 2014.

Amar. What does the opening of the Museum Victoria mean to museum development and re-development in Australia and within the museum world in general? What does it mean to George MacDonald CEO who oversaw the foundation of a major national museum in the world, i.e. the Canadian Museum of Civilisation², Ottawa, and now another major museum development on the other side of the world?

George. The thing that did strike me is that dates and events are very important, and they galvanise thinking and create thresholds and so on. I think the opening of Victoria Museum of this magnitude at this point in time as we enter a new millennium certainly struck me as being an opportunity to make a statement - To try and balance things a little differently than had been

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² Now Canadian Museum of History

previously done. The more I thought about it the more I realised that what I was doing in Ottawa was to respond to a generation of visitors, which covered 80 percent of the people who were coming to the museum, raised in the television age from their very earliest memory. That generation were looking at the world through a television screen which is very different than looking at the world as you move around a village or a town or within your own experience frame of reference. Suddenly you were in this bionic electronic world that was being shown to you through a window that was global, and people accelerated their sophistication very rapidly. Now it has been about 50 years that television has been current in North America and in that 50 years people have become very sophisticated in a whole series of things such as how things work and the long sequences of history consistently recapitulated in television series. I thought that's it, we are doing a project for a whole new generation of people and we won't re-do it for some time.

But I was wrong, within one decade of doing that, museums were suddenly in a whole new world and that was the world of the Internet. We haven't gone very far into that, but it really is a different world. People want a different kind of inter-activity and want to influence the outcome; they want to be part of the process. They're not just passive observers and can manipulate their own world and have a certain power that comes from that. That is what I suddenly realised that here was an opportunity to skip another generation of the museum model, or the way in which museums address their audience and that's what I think we are playing with in Museum Victoria. We are trying to address that generation by empowering them more than ever before by reflecting their voice more than ever has been done in a museum.

When I took Directorship of Museum Victoria, I saw the plans for the Aboriginal gallery and was quite astounded by the fact that they had put Spencer, the anthropologist, in a showcase as a mannequin. At first, I thought this is a kind of memorialisation and a kind of hero feature of putting an anthropologist in a showcase. But the more I realised what they had done was to in a way reflect where we have gone in Museum culture from the 'expert' that has now become a museum object in their own right so came the idea of Spencer being in a showcase. I recall visiting the previous museums where they had dioramas and Aboriginal people in villages and in the forest of Queensland and yet here there were no mannequins of Aboriginal people at all. There were lots of their artworks, products, images, worldviews, commentaries and their voice but the only mannequin in the showcase was the anthropologist. I thought that here we are going into a postmodern world in which multiple perspectives are now being shown. It is not the single voice of a so-called authority on a culture or a process or a period, but they have now become the museum object and I thought that was very appropriate. It since caused a lot of attention as people go through the museum into the Aboriginal area and ask what this moustached white anthropologist was doing in this showcase as the only figurative representation, but I think it is reflective of where we have gone.

In the natural history section, there is another little vignette I think is equally reflective. What they have done is to take one of the old showcases of stuffed birds from the previous museum. The birds are all on perches and lovely mounts and so on, but one door of the case is open, and the birds are escaping. There is a sulphur-crested cockatoo climbing over the top of the door and another bird flying out. Again, it is reflective of the kind of release and access of information in a different mode than it was under the lock and key of the curator. It is now accessible electronically and you can go right to the databases. There is nobody standing in the way, there is no gatekeeper. School kids all over the state and the wider area worldwide are accessing this information and I know that from our staff that are working on the servers and in the electronic area. They really love going in to work in the morning and watching the climb on the visitor counter and load dial showing that at 9.10 every morning school kids from all over the states are coming in. We had to add several new servers just to address this situation. That is such a graphic example of accessed information that in

the old days you had to count the number of letters of enquiries that came in every week or month. Now there are thousands coming in the first ten minutes as classrooms are accessing those servers and it just shows what an amazing difference to go from a situation even a decade or two ago.

Once accessing museum information was a laborious process and hopefully that the access doors are wide open. People are now going in and it really gives museums a totally new role that is again part of that time warp we have gone through. It always struck me that everything you did in a museum had a four-year time frame. If you wanted to start a new exhibition you gave it four years to get the funding together the concept defined etc. Now we really must be aware of what the public wants to know about and that is what's in the media today. And so, we've always been part of the media but today I firmly believe museums are part of the media stream but in one extreme end of the media stream. The messaging is extremely slow on the other hand, it tends to last a long time it's out there forever it goes beyond the life time of the individual curators because their exhibits are there long after they are gone (and some end up as mannequins).

Amar. Could you say something about museums and multiculturalism and share your Canadian and Australian experiences?

George. Victoria has one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world – Melbourne, but it is also a state that is totally committed to multiculturalism. The Immigration Museum deals with immigrant cultures but overall Museum Victoria including the science works addresses the needs of the multicultural community. For example, access to science for non-English speaking background people and recognising that science is not just a Western knowledge system but that the recognition of Islamic science and so on brings a whole range of perspectives.

I think in many ways we are dealing with a new form of culture that has not been given full recognition, which I call the 'distributed metropolis'. It is just not the global village, that village model does not fit. We are in a metropolitan society that has a manifestation around the globe and that's the part of society that is growing most rapidly. These cities are made up of elements from every part of the globe every population is represented. I think of Toronto and Melbourne as being the same city only positioned in different parts of the globe but have the same overall population profile. Toronto has more Italians; Melbourne has more Greeks, but they all have the whole world represented in their population and therefore their institutions tend to be going in the same direction.

People are always asking why museums are being built at the rate they are and why are the public investing hundreds of millions and sometimes billions of dollars in these new museums. In that sense I think they represent culturally neutral spaces in an environment where the renegotiation of identity is an ongoing process. We look at social models such as the American 'melting pot' and all those processes are still at play. The whole requirement for every individual to identify who they are in the world and what group they belong and what is the positioning of that group in the social, economic world and political world.

So, museums of social history or historical museums even natural history museums come into play and in this they are there as a forum, as a marketplace of ideas. But as a place of renegotiation of individual and group identities they form an appropriate kind of place for that to happen. So, by putting on the kind of activities, celebrations, festivals and calendar events bring people together. This always did happen in traditional societies for calendar round rituals and religious rituals.

In a society that is losing the focus on marked cultural space or marked religious space that is being highly structured on historical model suddenly we are providing a new kind of cultural negotiation space and that is the most important function certainly of historical museums. I think that is the reason that these multicultural societies, these cultural groupings around the world known as multicultural cities are rather blindly groping towards a resolution to that requirement for renegotiation of cultural identity. By building the kind of space where that can happen and to me that is where museums fit and that is where they can do the best job by allowing voice to be heard no matter what groups it is coming from.

Amar. Australia is continually trying to position or re-position itself within the Asia Pacific region. Victoria has a significant migrant population from the region. How do you see the Museum of Victoria interacting with the region?

George. I think again that social history museums are taking different routes than we see for example in art museums. Where art museums are still primarily addressing Western art aesthetic and art history tradition, they are paying lip service increasingly to Asian art and to the art of the rest of the world. It's very clear that their staff are not trained in the aesthetic systems of those other parts of the world. In that way I think art museums, unless they alter rapidly, are in a kind of extinction mode. They will be losing their clientele and their visitation. Whereas social history museums are gaining and it's because they have a broader view of the cultural systems of the world.

From my point of view, it's the teaching of what I call 'cultural grammars' which is the bundle of systems that make up all the vocabularies of art, cuisine, ritual and clothing and everything else that becomes a culture system. I think museums are addressing the cultural vocabularies and grammars of the world. Whereas a lot of other institutions are still very focused on the continuation of the colonialist model of Western cultural domination of the world. I don't know if I would make an absolute distinction between one kind of historical institution and another. I just have that feeling that there are a set of institutions that are suddenly aware that we have a richness. We must tune to the public or help them appreciate the fact that there are multiple cultural systems and they can enjoy them if they learn the codes and grammars of those cultures. So, I think that's what the kind of institution Museum Victoria represents. What it can do best is to unlock for everyone the codes and formula in a sense of each one of those culture systems and it becomes then a kind of open forum. I think we can do that in a way as we have never had the opportunity to do before with internet. The ability to be talking to someone in China or Southern India or wherever it might be for someone who chooses to enter dialogue with the museum. So, the new technologies are helping every one of us who have resources to work with and become a global institution. I don't think the staff at museums are quite ready for that but are preparing themselves and moving rapidly but they have never had that challenge of being a global institution. Even if they are just three employees in a small-town museum and have a computer and an internet server, they are a global institution, they are part of the global dialogue and that is very exciting.

Amar. Museums are content rich, and the media is content hungry. As a Director on the Board of SBS Radio and TV, I am working with my colleagues for bringing the 'rich' and the 'hungry' together to promote cultural understanding, peace and racial reconciliation. What are your thoughts.?

George. I do think the idea that we somehow are part of the learning process we are going to survive in the new millennium. The threats are entirely the survival mechanism we relied on through human history. It has been the protection of a group with whom you identify in

competition with every other group in the world. So, every culture has erected barriers around itself for protection and that has probably been a survival mechanism in the past that has worked sometimes to the benefit of one group more than another. But now I think we really must take down those fences and barriers but it's a learning process that is not easy. All our conditioning is maintaining group identities and group boundaries. Part of the process has been language and the idea that if you don't know what the other group is talking about you become suspicious and you imply that various things are going on.

But now language is not a barrier nor are all those other features of culture, which spin out from that. Very soon we will be able to convert any language and simply machine decode the languages so that we can have a global conversation where everybody is involved. I think that it is just symbolic of the fact that we are also learning all those other patterns and grammars of other cultures. To me that's where museums can play a very big role by taking down the fences between cultural groups mainly showing the view over the fence inviting people through a doorway through that fence into another culture. Particularly the way in which museums de-construct and reconstruct in an exhibit or in a program in a simple way. A very complex mechanism known as a culture but it's something that someone from the other side of the fence can come in and appreciate. They will leave with a whole new understanding of what that culture has achieved and who its heroes are and the kind of the dialogue that goes on within the culture on the other side of the fence. It is a matter of taking down the barriers more than anything else. The best way to do that is by giving people a doorway first of all that they feel safe in going through and at the same time helping them decode what they see in the way of cultural manifestations on the other side of the fence.

Talking about what museums must contribute in the way of content, I look at the statistics from collections at Museum Victoria, which has 16 million objects. What really strikes me is every one of those objects has a story to tell and each one has been selected out of the universe of things out there because they are representative, typical, unique. If you start to read the documentation it goes on for hundreds of pages. For example, we have a finch that was collected by Charles Darwin on board the Beagle as one object of those 16 million. That story is about a specimen unique in the world associated with a great historical tradition. But every one of those 16 million objects have a story to tell.

The media in general is becoming aware of the content crisis they have. They cannot just keep repeating everything repeatedly. They constantly need fresh material and here are reservoirs of material. In the nineteenth century people collected objects and often didn't even identify who made them, where they came from. They were just beautiful or interesting exotic objects. The documentation was often a one liner in a handwritten catalogue whereas now museums are very different than that. They have fields of information in their computers and very often the information alone goes over two hundred fields that are asked of every object in the collection. By the time you fill those in you've got volumes on every one of these pieces.

So, it's the challenge of museums now first to digitise the catalogue records and have digital images of them. But that is just the starting point. Then they must develop navigational aids to find the things, tag them so that they can be recovered. The searches are usually based on a thematic approach. People are interested in certain themes so they will pull out the tags about that theme. For example, human adornment might be a category, so you've got to ensure that every one of the objects in the collection that relate to that category. They must have the appropriate tag so that they can be found. We are working entirely with search engines based on verbal tags but are also developing search engines that will work on image, form recognition and visual tags which are whole other way of searching out the information. So, if you want to know how many cross or

cruciform images there are in Western European art in 10 or 20 years you will be able to do a search. It will tell you that there are six and a half billion objects produced by European cultures that have a cruciform involved in.

This allows all kinds of new research to take place and whether we now consider very rare objects in museum collections can be grouped together into virtual collections and whole new levels of research can go on. I can see the relevance of museum collections go for very basic elementary research but also for population and presentation to the public in electronic media. Our incredibly rich sources represent the achievements of all our ancestors, the achievement of every life form that has gone on earth or the development of those over billions of years. So, they are really repositories of all our collective histories. In the past we have shovelled them into great heaps in collection storage vaults and now it's a matter of untangling and going over them again and teasing out the multiple stories that every one of them tells and representing it in some form of media to new generations of people.

Amar. In the museum scenario presented by you how do people come in as personnel. What are the new professional development challenges in museums?

Our recruitment process over the last number of years in bringing people to run this large new museum is forming part of the interview questions, for example, how would you undertake certain kinds of research. If the candidates don't say almost immediately that they go to the internet and that they use the web as part of their search mechanism, we would consider that they are not really taking the approach that we would like to see. It is also true with all the research and communication tools this is what we look for in our recruiting process. It isn't the school record or the kind of career history so much as how they approach topics and what is their time frame in dealing with it. Because the traditional time frame of the museum is a museum piece now. Everything has become far more current.

But I think people still look to museums as having the authoritative voice, the reflective voice. I am not saying that we try to match the instantaneous time frames of electronic media. But we must become more relevant to the kind of questions that are in people's minds now and those questions are to a larger extent driven by the media. I do think the reactive time has to be different, we have used the tools of research in a different way than we have before. I think we need to train the staff to be able to respond quicker because in every way the world is accelerating in the kind of dialogue that is always going on in the public. I think the other thing is that we are going into a massive period of re-positioning and re-distribution of museum collections between the urban centres where they had tended to be piled up in the past decade into much more regional centre and rural settings and also back to traditional owners.

I think that is a worldwide phenomenon. It is almost like the time has pulled all the objects into little clusters that are scattered through the big urban metropolises. Now there is going to be a re-positioning through all kinds of reconciliation and repatriation processes and that the people in all those communities are also going to need training. I think that's the big challenge to museums is to train people in all those fine aspects. We have developed selecting items that are worth preserving having the techniques to ensure that they are there forever in our current time frame and that they are accessible and that they are interpreted in some way or that they are constantly re-positioned as the questions about them change. So I think that's the massive challenge is to not just have specialist in the odd large institution but to make everyone more conscious and I must say I've always liked the 'ecomuseum model', what the French elaborated is a very reasonable

approach. Where the whole sense of curatorship and responsibility for the past is in everyone's minds and is not an urban phenomenon, which museums very much are at this point.

(For more information about Museum Victoria: <https://museumsvictoria.com.au/>)