Introduction: Museums and engagement in Queensland: Critical contributions to the field

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Introduction

Public and community engagement is a key aim for museum practitioners. Alex Marsden, National Director of Museums Galleries Australia, stated in the *Museums Galleries Australia 2017 Annual Report* that 'museums and galleries are hugely trusted sources of information, learning and *engagement* for people of all ages' (our emphasis) and that cultural institutions should act as 'civic forums for exploring what is known about the natural world, art and human history, as well as sharing our social experience, values and identity'.[1] A broad statement, Marsden's suggestion of the trust placed in the role of museums and galleries is supported by 'extensive Australia Council' research.[2] So what does this really mean for museums, galleries and, by extension, heritage sites? Even more importantly, what does this question mean within the context of the unique Queensland heritage landscape?

Historian Raymond Evans has described Queensland's history as one of 'extremes', incorporating a particular type of colonial enterprise, while the state's marginality, regionalism and tropical characteristics add further distinctive features.[3] The implications of how Queensland's museums and heritage sites function within this context are important to consider. To date, seven Queensland sites are inscribed on the World Heritage List, thirty-one Queensland locations are included in the Commonwealth Heritage list, twelve Queensland locations are on Australia's National Heritage List, the Queensland Heritage Register includes 1747 places of 'cultural heritage significance to the people of Queensland' and the Heritage Explorer identifies '479 places and 30 trails in Queensland'.[4] These figures denote the importance of various heritage sites and locations in Queensland, although these lists are not exhaustive, and there are other heritage sites and locations that do not fall into these 'official' categories.

In order to critically assess the museum engagement process in Queensland, it is crucial to acknowledge diversity across the state's heritage sites. The various bodies that represent and advocate for museums and heritage sites in Queensland immediately reflect this diversity through the breadth of organisations that currently exist, such as Museums & Galleries Queensland (M&G Queensland), the Community Museums National Network, the Performing Arts Heritage Network, the Historic Houses Association of Australia and Brisbane's Living Heritage Network.[5] Even more importantly, various heritage sites exist in Queensland that do not

readily fit into such categories. This special issue discusses the resonance various Queensland sites represent for visitors, staff, volunteers, and local communities, and explores their legacies.

Museum engagement is a participatory learning and community-building project. Graham Black argues that museums are now expected to be audience centred rather than product led, and that the central challenge for public history practitioners is to 'understand the nature, motivations, expectations and needs of existing audiences, and to build an enduring relationship with them', as well as develop and retain new audiences.[6] The unique nature of Queensland's museums and heritage sites, and the narratives they represent, pose numerous potential questions: How best can engagement be utilised in this particular environment? What is the role and resonance of heritage sites and histories for visitors and communities? And what are the practical implications of engagement within these spaces in Queensland?

This special issue draws together a range of academics, and practitioners, along with those who simultaneously identify as both. The contributions reveal the importance that both roles play for museums and heritage sites in Queensland. They discuss traditional museums, historic house museums, heritage commemoration in the absence of a physical museum, heritage sites and new forms of museums. This issue thus covers a range of different sites, each of which represents its own unique engagement challenges and opportunities, and reveals the implications of the Queensland context for museums and heritage sites.

Carly Smith discusses commemorative efforts around Cherbourg's Ration Shed Museum, which provides visitors with the 'terrible gift' of encountering and engaging with traumatic narrative pasts. Cherbourg, established as an Aboriginal mission in 1899 and then taken over by the Queensland Government as a settlement in 1904, was a site of white superintendents and Aboriginal people referred to as 'inmates'; the Ration Shed Museum now sits proudly in the heart of a small Aboriginal community. Smith reveals how the Ration Shed Museum engages its community and visitors in a dual process of both understanding and reframing trauma to enact a 'pedagogy of hope'. She thus critically engages with the non-traditional museum space that is the historical precinct at Cherbourg, and the engagement with 'both the past and the present' that occurs within this space.

Public memory is also crucial to Barcaldine, home to the 'Tree of Knowledge', which was at the centre of the Great Shearers' Strike of 1891 and created the context for the election of the first 'labourist' government in the world. Barcaldine's central heritage precinct incorporates both the 'Tree of Knowledge' and the Australian Workers Heritage Centre, established in 1991 as a 'National Monument' to working men and women. Through a series of oral history interviews and interaction with the labour heritage spaces in Barcaldine, Robert Mason and Rebecca Damjanovic discuss the concerted efforts that have been made to formulate a clear heritage discourse in Barcaldine as a response to rapidly growing tourism to the town. They reveal the way in which the contested heritage discourses in the area have influenced the local community's engagement with its heritage.

Janis Hanley's article examines the Buderim–Palmwoods Heritage Tramway Walking Track, which provides a 'walk-through history' via the restoration and conservation of original aspects and features of the tramway (railway) that ran between Buderim and Palmwoods. Hanley's article reveals the many challenges that

can be faced when embarking on the development of a project such as the Walking Track, and reveals the depth of feeling in the local community associated with the project. Using Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's assemblage concept to explore the 'becoming' of the walking track, Hanley's article goes to the heart of the early stages of engagement, prior to the establishment of an officially recognised heritage site, when community members begin work on a commemorative site.

Jayne Persian's article addresses another particular aspect of the Queensland heritage landscape. Despite the many displaced persons who were resettled in Queensland following World War II, little commemoration exists of this resettlement in Queensland. Indeed, few physical remnants of migrant camps in Queensland remain, which can make commemoration efforts complex. Persian's article seeks to redress this lack, focusing on recent commemorative attempts surrounding the Stuart migrant camp in order to argue that family and community memories have driven the commemorative process.

This special issue's journey into Queensland's unique museum collections and heritage sites continues with Jan Wegner and Jana Kahabka's article, which critically assesses the heritage machinery collection in Croydon, in north-western Queensland. This collection, initiated in response to growing tourism, is held across a number of sites. Wegner and Kahabka negotiate the traditional, accepted understandings of the 'museum' and the role of collections in museums to reveal the implications of these concepts for small Queensland towns, many of which have insufficient funding to dedicate to heritage machinery collections. The authors discuss the potential of such collections to interpret the histories of towns and of early gold mining, how these collections represent community aspirations and identities, and how they engage both visitors and locals.

Marion Stell, Geraldine Mate and Celmara Pocock address an equally intriguing heritage space: The *Queensland Historical Atlas*. An online resource, the Atlas uniquely interprets the Queensland landscapes as 'lived, embodied and practised', a concept that brought a new approach to the atlas form. Embracing 'new affective interpretation frameworks', the Atlas emphasises the material culture of people and diverse landscapes, including historical maps, and the authors further emphasise access and engagement, as new technologies allow communities to engage with collections.

The two final articles turn to the historic house museum, a unique type of museum that has, until recently, not received recognition of its particular structure and needs. Katie McConnel, Curator of Old Government House, provides a behind-the-scenes case study of the 'The Voice in the Walls' Theatre Project, designed to engage nine- to twelve-year-old visitors to the historic house. The lack of furnishings at Old Government House, typically crucial to the Historic House Museum form, posed a unique opportunity for McConnel and the team that developed the project. Without these traditionally expected furnishings, a different approach was required. McConnel critically analyses how the decision was reached to pursue this project, how the project was developed and the role it played in establishing successful engagement with young visitors to the site. In particular, the article reveals the ways in which active participatory engagement was directly weaved throughout the project to negotiate the challenges often faced during museum engagement.

Jessica Stroja's article discusses Historic Ormiston House, the birthplace of Australia's commercial sugar industry. Stroja developed an oral history project at

Historic Ormiston House, which was designed to function as part of the overall engagement plan at this location. Five years on from the original project, Stroja critically assesses the way in which the project itself acted as part of the historic house's engagement process. In an area where the outcomes of such research projects are considered to be of greater benefit to engagement than the actual project processes, Stroja reveals that the research and interview process can be just as valuable an aspect of engagement practices as research project planning and outcomes. She therefore goes to the core of engagement processes in the historic house, questioning how visitors can become engaged with an historic site in an ongoing, participatory manner, with the potential for ongoing benefits for both the heritage site and the community.

This special issue is intended to reveal and elucidate the complexity of engagement initiatives within the Queensland public history space.

Notes

1 Alex Marsden, 'National director's introduction', in Museums Australia Incorporated (ed.), *Museums Galleries Australia: Annual report 2017* (Melbourne: Museums Australia, 2017), 6.

2 ibid.

3 Raymond Evans, *A History of Queensland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 268–9.

4 Department of the Environment and Energy, 'Australia's World Heritage list', Australian Government, http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/places/world-heritage-list; Department of the Environment and Energy, 'Australian heritage database: Search results', Australian Government, 1 http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/ahdb/search.pl?mode=search_results; state=QLD;list_code=CHL;legal_status=35, accessed 1 June 2018; Department of the Environment and Energy, 'Australia's national heritage list', Australian Government, http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/places/national-heritage-list; Queensland Heritage Register, 'Heritage register search results', Queensland Government, https://environment.ehp.qld.gov.au/heritage-register/results, accessed 20 January 2016; Heritage Explorer, 'Heritage explorer results', Queensland Government, 2018, https://environment.ehp.qld.gov.au/heritage-register/explorer/results, accessed 4 June 2018.

5 Some of these organisations are national bodies that represent all states and territories in Australia, including Queensland, while others are solely Queensland based. See Museums & Galleries Queensland, 'About us', http://www.magsq.com.au/cms/page.asp?ID=5001, accessed 5 June 2018; Museums Australia, 'Community museums', https://www.museumsaustralia.org.au/community-museums; The Performing Arts Heritage Network, 'Home', https://www.pahn.org.au, accessed 5 June 2018; Historic Houses Association of Australia Limited, 'Who we are', http://www.hha.net.au/home, accessed 5 June 2018; Brisbane's Living Heritage Network, 'About us', https://blhn.org/about-us, accessed 5 June 2018.

6 Graham Black, *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement* (London: Routledge, 2005), 7.