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# Post-Modernising the Museum: The Ration Shed

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**ABSTRACT:** The application of postmodern critical theory to the essentially modernist construct of the museum has significantly impacted the role of the contemporary museum within society. This article briefly describes the movement toward a 'new museology' and the subsequent emergence of the 'post-museum'. It then presents a case study of the Ration Shed Museum in the historical precinct of Cherbourg, Queensland, as an example of this new 'post-museum'. Through its application of postmodern critical theory, the Ration Shed Museum has détourned the construct of the modernist museum and applied its cultural logics in order to meet the specific needs of its local community. This museum presents a history previously overlooked by western grand narratives and offers insight into a contemporary local indigenous community on its own terms. It presents a public pedagogy where the agency of both the viewer and the museum itself is embraced, and promotes active engagement – a form of dialogue – between the viewer, the community and the museum's curators.

**KEYWORDS:** Postmodernism; Modernism; Museums; Indigenous Communities

*In this way we will build our story for ourselves, for our children and for the world.*

(Ration Shed Museum [RSM], 2013b, "Participate: Hey, is that my Nana?" para. 3)

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## Introduction

The institution of the museum has undergone some significant changes over the last twenty-five years. While theorists identify a number of complex reasons behind these changes, one powerful catalyst has been developments in critical postmodern cultural theory. Museum theorists such as Hooper-Greenhill (2000), Macdonald (2008) and Marstine (2008) assert that the application of critical postmodern theory to the museum world has forced museums to theoretically interrogate their roles within today's society – and in some cases reinvent themselves – and has enabled the construct of the museum to remain socially relevant.

This paper draws upon Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's (2000) model of the post-museum in order to explore the Ration Shed Museum, Queensland, as a case study of a small but vibrant contemporary museum. It explores the ways in which the Ration Shed Museum has applied critical postmodern theory in order to create a museum that is reflexive, dialogic, and inextricably intertwined with the community in which it sits. Marstine (2008) describes the post-museum as the "most hopeful" (p. 19) conception of the contemporary museum, and this paper will explore the ways in which the Ration Shed Museum does indeed work toward a positive vision for the future of its community.

## Reframing the Museum: New Museology and the Post-Museum

### *New museology*

In the late twentieth century, British museums underwent something of an identity crisis. Theorists from a range of disciplines including sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy and gender studies had begun to critically examine the construct of the museum and question its role in the social constructions of knowledges, histories and identities (Duclos, 1994; Marstine 2008). Postmodern theorists such as Lyotard (1979) questioned the cultural logics that underpinned the modernist museum, including the nature of knowledge construction and the notion of the 'grand narrative' (McRobbie 1994; Readings, 1991). Other postmodern theorists such as Baudrillard (1968, 1984) levelled more direct attacks against the institution of the museum specifically, launching scathing criticisms of both the socio-cultural functions of the museum and of the self-referential 'science' behind ethnography and collecting. In addition to these academic criticisms, Britain's Museums and Galleries Commission (as cited in Vergo, 1989) released a special report in 1988 that painted a very bleak picture for the future of Britain's museums and sparked widespread theoretical debate among museum professionals.

In 1989, the year following the Commission's report, Peter Vergo published *The New Museology* in response to what he perceived to be the museum's "present sorry plight" (Vergo, 1989, p. 3). Vergo (1989) claimed that "unless a radical re-examination of the roles of museums within society … takes place, museums in this country, and possibly everywhere, may find themselves dubbed 'living fossils'" (pp. 3-4). *The New Museology* attempted to address theoretical issues that were "often passed over in silence" (Vergo, 1989, p. 5) in favour of the more procedural discussions taking place in museal discourse at the time. Vergo's (1989) anthology of critically reflexive essays by a range of museal scholars marked a significant shift in the ways that museums viewed their roles in society, and continues to influence museal scholarship and practice today as exemplified by theorists such as Hooper-Greenhill (2000), Marstine (2008) and Macdonald (2008).

Vergo (1989) advocates for the application of critical theory to the museum context in order for museums to remain socially relevant and to fulfil what he regards as their theoretical

and humanistic functions. He draws distinctions between the 'old museology' focus on method and the 'new museology' focus on purpose. Vergo (1989) highlights the political and ideological dimensions of museal practices, and declares that museology is "a matter of concern to almost everybody" (p. 1) because of the role that the museum plays in the social construction of knowledge. New museology proposes a critique of representation that is not simply limited to museum displays, but is expanded to include reflexive critique of knowledge production with specific regard to the essentially modernist construct of the museum and its relationships with its audiences and society. Macdonald (2008) describes this as "a move toward regarding knowledge, and its pursuit, realization, and deployment, as inherently political" (p. 3).

Notions of power, context and subjectivity are paramount in this new museology. New museologists such as Smith (1989) challenge conventional museal practices of decontextualing objects and endowing them with inherent meanings, and call for an understanding of museum objects as contextual and situated. This theoretical approach reflects broader postmodern theories about subjectivity and the constructions of what Hooper-Greenhill (2000) refers to as the "harmonious, unified and complete" (p. 151) narratives of the western modernist museum. Similarly, an understanding of the audience is crucial to the new museology (Reeve & Woollard, 2006). Museal theorists such as Marstine (2008), Macdonald (2008) and Lord (2006) acknowledge the significance of Foucault's work here on knowledge, power and social interaction in understanding the subjectivity and agency of both the audience and of the museum itself.

Debord's (1967/1977) concept of the 'spectacle' has also been influential in the new museology. Some contemporary theorists such as Wallis (1986, as cited in Ames, 1992) argue that contemporary museums utilise mass spectacle to attract audiences in a consumer culture. However, what the new museology aims to deliver is a more humanistic connection in the wake of this spectacle by offering something more than just imagery. Spectacle in the new museology is utilised more as a medium of communication than as an authoritative message in itself as Smith (1989) suggests tended to be the case previously. As Enfield (2000) explains, basic human communication and interaction must be mediated, and the development of a shared cultural logic takes place through this mediation. The spectacle provides this mediation; it delivers a means of 'performing' scientific knowledge and connecting this knowledge with human experience, thereby creating "an interface that connects the life of the non-expert with the life of the expert and clears a way for 'dialogue'" (Watermeyer, 2012, p. 3). It is this act of embracing the spectacle-as-mediation that engages subjectivities and allows the postmodern museum to fulfil its humanistic and educative functions as envisioned by Vergo (1989).

### *The post-museum*

Many contemporary museal theorists are therefore turning to postmodern theory in order to critically analyse the modernist construct of the public museum and move toward an era of the postmodern museum (Marstine, 2008). Museum curators have similarly shifted their agendas toward creating museums that are more sympathetic to their postmodern audiences in order to reinvigorate the museum and ensure its survival in the twenty-first century (Macdonald, 2008; Marstine, 2008).

Museums are currently in the process of evolving far beyond their modernist inceptions. Hooper-Greenhill (2000) proposes that museums are, in fact, evolving into something entirely new: the 'post-museum'. Marstine (2008) describes this post-museum in detail:

> The post-museum clearly articulates its agendas, strategies and decision-making processes and continually re-evaluates them in a way that acknowledges the politics of representation; the work of the museum staff is never naturalized but seen as contributing to these agendas. The post-museum actively seeks to share power with the communities it serves, including source communities. It recognizes that visitors are not passive consumers and gets to know its constituencies. Instead of transmitting knowledge to an essentialized mass audience, the post-museum listens and responds sensitively as it encourages diverse groups to become active participants in museum discourse. Nonetheless, in the post-museum, the curator is not a mere facilitator but takes responsibility for representation as she or he engages in critical inquiry. The post-museum does not shy away from difficult issues but exposes conflict and contradiction. It asserts that the institution must show ambiguity and acknowledge multiple, ever-shifting identities. Most importantly, the post-museum is a site from which to redress social inequalities. (p. 19)

This post-museum is critical, dialogic, contradictory, and acutely aware of both its own subjectivity and that of the audience. It conceptualises meaning-making as an active process rather than as a unidirectional transmission of knowledge. The post-museum holds itself accountable for its contributions to the politics of the everyday. It asks and listens in turn, and invites participation. It celebrates heterogeneity rather than homogeneity. There is an active and forward-looking feel to the post-museum; the museum no longer represents the death of the real (Baudrillard, 1968, 1984) but instead offers visitors and communities a new form of engagement with the real.

There are a number of critiques of Hooper-Greenhill's (2000) model of the post-museum, most of which centre around its practical applicability. Alivizatou (2009) points to several gaps in the model, and suggests that the concept of the post-museum is poorly defined and under-analysed in terms of actual museal practices. Similarly, Keene (2009) argues that the model takes an idealised view of museal activities, and elsewhere suggests that it may be too heavily focussed on programs and events with too little concern for collections (n. d., as cited in Alivizatou, 2009). Theorists such as Ames (1992) are doubtful whether museums may ever really be able to transform institutionalised practices because of operational constraints. Despite these criticisms, however, I would like to propose The Ration Shed Museum as a case study of an effectively functioning post-museum that captures the intent behind Hooper-Greenhill's (2000) model.

## Reclaiming the Museum: The Ration Shed

### *Background and context*

The Ration Shed Museum is one example of a flourishing post-museum. This museum is located in the historical precinct at Cherbourg, a small Aboriginal township in Queensland's South Burnett region. Cherbourg was originally settled as a Salvation Army Aboriginal mission known as Barambah in the early 1900s, and was taken over by the Queensland government in 1904 and later renamed Cherbourg (Cherbourg Aboriginal Shire Council [CASC], 2013, "Community history", para. 1; Ration Shed Museum [RSM], 2013a, "About Cherbourg", para. 1). Indigenous Australians were forcibly removed from across Queensland and New South Wales and relocated to Cherbourg under the Aboriginal Protection Act of 1897 (CASC, 2013, "Community history", para. 1). Conditions on the settlement were harsh, and the superintendent maintained strict control over its residents. Meagre quantities of food were administered from a small timber ration shed (RSM, 2013a, "About Cherbourg", para. 3). Today Cherbourg is a thriving indigenous community with a population of approximately 2000, locally governed by the Cherbourg Aboriginal Shire Council (CASC, 2013, "Community history").

The Ration Shed Museum was first conceived in 2004, when Cherbourg sisters Sandra Morgan and Lesley Williams found the old ration shed near the present-day football field and recognised its historical and social significance (RSM, 2013a, "Cherbourg Historical Precinct", para. 1). The old shed was soon shifted to its present site in the heart of the Cherbourg community as a first step toward creating a museum to preserve Cherbourg's history as a colonial Aboriginal settlement.

### *Physical architecture and layout*

Since its inception, the physical architecture of the Ration Shed Museum has expanded to encompass three additional historical buildings and their surrounds: the superintendent's office, boys' dormitory and newly restored old Country Women's Association shed. Collectively, this is now known as the Cherbourg Historical Precinct (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** The Cherbourg Historical Precinct: ration shed, superintendent's office, boys' dormitory and old CWA shed

The layout of the historical precinct is open and informal, and includes a number of areas for social gathering (see Figure 2). There is no clear structural 'flow' imposed on the museum's architecture, and visitors are free to meander in and around the buildings at will, pausing here and there for a rest or a yarn.

**Figure 2:** The museum and precinct feature a number of places for informal social gathering

Foucault's writings from the early 1970s on episteme have been influential in developing theories about the physical layout of contemporary museums such as the Ration Shed (Marstine, 2008). Giebelhausen (2008), for example, uses the framework of episteme in her exploration of the ways in which the museum establishes physical environments that are conducive to particular epistemologies, and suggests that altering its architecture can alter the very nature of the museum. The physical layout and architecture of the Ration Shed Museum similarly provides a framework for both its epistemology and pedagogy: the atmosphere here is relaxed and conversational, and the visitor is made to feel included within this space.

Classen and Howes (2006, p. 219) describe physical environments like the Cherbourg Historical Precinct as an "alternative to the [modernist] 'museum of sight'" that allows visitors "more possibilities for dynamic interaction with, and a contextual understanding of, the collection, without making a pretense of total sensory immersion". The decision to create this particular historical precinct and museum therefore promotes an active audience engagement without attempting to generate a potentially hyperreal, circus-like immersive experience as feared by Baudrillard (1984).

### *Purpose and functionality*

A clear statement of ideological purpose is a central aspect of the post-museum (Marstine, 2008). The Ration Shed Museum explicitly identifies its political goals and educative agendas, and in so doing acknowledges the subjectivity of the museum's curators and the role that this museum seeks to perform in the social construction of knowledge. The museum articulates its role within the community, and within a broader Australian historical discourse:

> We set out to give our community a strong clear sense of their history, a renewal of pride, to engage and to educate the people of Queensland and Australia about what we lived through and to offer a possible vision of the future (RSM, 2013a, "Information: Help and sponsor", para. 1).

The museum is simultaneously retrospective and forward-looking. It serves to both reflect on Cherbourg's history through the eyes of its peoples and to celebrate contemporary Aboriginal culture and present-day life in the Cherbourg community. This is reflected in curatorial display selections, where artefacts from Cherbourg's colonial past are documented and preserved (see Figure 3) while other exhibits commemorate more recent community events and achievements (see Figure 4).

**Figure 3:** Colonial artefacts are documented and preserved

**Figure 4:** More recent community events and achievements are commemorated

The Ration Shed Museum has evolved to meet a range of needs of the Cherbourg community and has become an active participant in everyday community life. This focus on community events and programs is an integral function of the post-museum (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). The site provides spaces that are regularly used for community workshops, performances, celebrations and meetings (see Figure 5). Education programs are an important part of the museum's operations, and cater to both the wider Australian public and the local indigenous community. Visiting school and tour groups can arrange for guided tours and hands-on workshops (RSM, 2013a, "Education: Activities"). The museum works collaboratively with local schools on projects such as the development of curriculum-related learning materials, the publication of books written by and for local indigenous children, and the production of short films and documentaries (Budburra Books, 2012, "About us"; RSM, 2013a, "Education"). The ways in which the Ration Shed participates in the Cherbourg community further highlights the subjective agency of the museum's curators as they intentionally operate the museum in a manner that shares power with the local community (Marstine, 2008).

**Figure 5:** Spaces are provided for a range of activities

Control over the purpose and functionality of the Ration Shed Museum lies within the Cherbourg community. Sandra Morgan chairs the management committee and the majority of the group's members live within the community (R. Hofmeyr, personal communication, August 21, 2013). The museum does apply for government and other grants to run various projects, but is not funded; the museum generates its finances through activities such as tourism and education (R. Hofmeyr, personal communication, August 21, 2013). Budburra Books, for example, is a small publishing house that operates from the Precinct and produces a range of materials including educational books and short films (Budburra Books, 2012, "About us"; R. Hofmeyr, personal communication, August 21, 2013). The museum's financial autonomy allows it to also maintain autonomy in its management, and therefore also in its purpose. This demonstrates a significant and empowering step for the Cherbourg community because, as Ames (1992) points out, autonomy such as this allows indigenous communities to "[reclaim] their own histories from anthropologists and others so that they may exert more control over how their cultures are presented to themselves and to others" (p. 79). The Cherbourg community represents itself for both itself and others through this museum.

### *Détourning the modernist museum*

What the Ration Shed Museum has achieved is a détournement (Debord, 1967/1977) of the modernist construct of the museum; it appropriates aspects of the form and function of the traditional museum in order to meet the current needs of the local community, while at the same time exposing the ideological foundations of this quintessentially western modernist institution. Duclos (1994) describes this as a paradox inherent to the post-museum, whereby the museum seeks to challenge dominant institutional discourse from within the parameters of that discourse. The result is that the museum itself becomes a self-reflexive artefact (Duclos, 1994).

There are certainly some similarities between the traditional modernist museum and this post-museum. The Ration Shed Museum seeks to construct a narrative, as did the modernist museum. Many display practices reflect those of the modernist museum, including selective use of the ubiquitous glass case (see Figures 3, 4, 10), some labelling conventions (see Figures 6, 7, 15) and even the title of 'museum'. Much of the museum's information is organised chronologically, and a large timeline dominates the ration shed building (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6:** A timeline is used to chronologically organise images and information

However, the overall intent of the Ration Shed Museum is fundamentally different to that of the western modernist museum. Most notably, the Ration Shed Museum seeks to construct a very different narrative – in fact, something of a counter-narrative – to the grand narratives typical of the western modernist museum. The Ration Shed Museum expresses a history that had been silenced by dominant colonial practices, and enables this history to be told by the very people who were previously objectified. This is certainly not a museum that ignores the plundering, destruction and sheer brutality necessary for cultural domination, and the exhibits allow little denial of the role of the colonial state in the establishment and subsequent living conditions at Cherbourg. By exposing conflict and addressing difficult issues in this way, the Ration Shed Museum performs an important function of the post-museum: that of redressing social injustice (Marstine, 2008).

The Ration Shed Museum's détournement of the western modern museum can also be seen in curatorial choices about both what is displayed and how this is presented. The exhibits often demonstrate a sense of irony as they uncover and challenge the power dynamics of Cherbourg's colonial origins. The former superintendent's office, for example, has been détourned to house displays that testify to an oppressive colonial rule, including archival copies of government Acts and on-site paperwork, and images and products of the settlement's trade houses (see Figure 7). The former superintendent's office – once a symbol of absolute control over the Aboriginal people of Cherbourg – now exposes the day-to-day bureaucracy of colonial oppression and helps to tell the stories of those it once ruled.

**Figure 7**: The former superintendent's office exposes oppressive colonial rule

### *Representing a community*

It is important to note that the Ration Shed Museum does not actually seek to display artefacts from Cherbourg's colonial history in order to somehow relive past brutalities or prove injustices. For the museum committee, this "is about understanding what happened in the past and understanding how the past has shaped the present" (RSM, 2013a, "About Cherbourg: Cherbourg Today", para. 2). For today's residents of Cherbourg, this museum serves not to simply display the past so much as to seek a deeper collective understanding of the past in order to move forward. This museum is about reclaiming voices and identities (Ames, 1992), and provides a medium through which the Cherbourg community lays claim to both its history and its future.

In conjunction with this understanding of the past, the museum performs an equally important role in representing everyday life in Cherbourg today and aims to present a more positive view of this community (RSM, 2013a, "Information: Help and sponsor", para. 1). It recognises the shifting, complex and ambiguous identities of the Cherbourg community both in the past and the present. The historical timeline in the ration shed, for example, leads the viewer to 'Many Tribes, One Mob', a photographic celebration of the people of Cherbourg today that illustrates the ways in which historical influences have affected social, familial and cultural identities (see Figure 8). Similarly, aspects of both personal and collective identities are symbolically depicted in artworks displayed on museum walls and throughout the physical environs of the precinct (see Figure 9).

***Figure 8:*** *'Many Tribes, One Mob'*

***Figure 9:*** *Contemporary works by local artists depict identities and histories*

In many cases, community members themselves have constructed these contemporary representations. One current art exhibition titled 'Strong Women Shadow Boxes', for example, was created by a number of local women wishing to represent a portrait of the resilience, confidence and hope of the women of Cherbourg (see Figure 10). Practices such as this are notably dialogic, and contribute to the on-going conversation between the museum and its community.

***Figure 10:*** *Strong Women Shadow Boxes art exhibition*

### *Visitor engagement and positioning*

Characteristics of the post-museum have also been expressed through curatorial choices that guide the ways in which visitors engage with the museum and its exhibits. In addition to the physical layout of the historical precinct and museum, the curators have incorporated a range of sensory experiences in order to mediate this engagement.

The modernist public museum has traditionally placed higher value on the more 'noble' sense of sight, presenting displays in glass cabinets and preventing physical contact with exhibits (Classen & Howes, 2006). In contrast to this, the Ration Shed Museum uses senses in addition to sight to actively invite audience participation. As Classen and Howes (2006) explain, this has the effect of decentring the western emphasis on the gaze and moving the audience's engagement beyond passive observation. Visitors to the Ration Shed Museum are positioned as active and situated beings, and the museum invites visitors into museal discourse through sensory interaction. Some displays are made available for visitors to physically touch (see Figure 11), and recorded oral histories are available for listening. Artefacts such as colonial furniture and sculptural artworks are incorporated into the

functionality of the museum and routinely used by visitors (see Figure 12). Even tea and coffee is sometimes 'rationed out' for large groups from the original shed window, promoting a bodily engagement in the process of ration-giving (see Figure 13).

**Figure 11:** Visitors are invited to handle some displays

**Figure 12:** Colonial furniture and sculptural artworks are used by visitors

**Figure 13:** The original ration shed window is sometimes used to 'ration out' refreshments for large groups.

The multi-sensory modes of audience engagement at the Ration Shed Museum give the impression that these displays – and the stories that they tell – are still very much connected to the present. The viewer is positioned within this particular time and place rather than as a tourist of a foreign past, and as such is invited to participate and respond. A display about the work of ethnographer Caroline Tennant-Kelly, for example, includes blackboard areas where modern-day visitors may record responses or additions to the display (see Figure 14). This adds depth and dialogue to otherwise static information, and suggests that this particular ethnographic work is still open for discussion.

**Figure 14:** Visitors can record responses to some displays

At times the exhibits reveal a wry humour that demonstrates the resilience of the Cherbourg community. Simultaneously, however, these serve to disrupt historical power relationships and to position visitors – particularly non-indigenous visitors – *as* visitors. As a non-indigenous visitor myself, this experience is not always comfortable as my inherited sense of entitlement is gently challenged and I am held accountable for my relationship with this community. This disruption first occurs at the front gate to the precinct, and again as I enter the former superintendent's office (see Figure 17). I must announce myself, and seek permission to engage; upon entering the site, I have become highly aware of my Self. Exhibits that position the viewer in this manner serve to establish boundaries, remind visitors of both their own and the museum's subjectivity, invert the gaze of the Other and further assert the agency of the museum.

### *The museum as a situated subject*

At the same time as it positions its visitors, the museum positions *itself* as a socially and culturally situated subject through the pedagogies it employs when engaging with its viewers. The museum draws upon traditional indigenous methods of sharing knowledge as described by Simpson (2008) in order to represent the Aboriginal community and peoples of Cherbourg. Indigenous epistemes and practices have been utilised in some of the museum's choices of visual representations, integration of oral narrative and personal reflection, and the manner in which some information has been categorised.

Various methods of visual representation are incorporated into formal exhibits, many of which are more popularly associated with expressions of indigenous knowledges than with western museal pedagogies. The museum's deliberate use of these methods implicitly challenges modernist western understandings of the 'official' presentation of information, not

only because conventional museal expressions of knowledge have been decentred but because the boundaries of scientific discourse have been blurred. In the ration shed itself, the first formal exhibit – and a preface to the timeline – is a painted map of Queensland representing the removal of various clan groups to the Cherbourg settlement (see Figure 15). In the former boys' dormitory a ceremonial shield sits alongside western-style plaques in commemoration of former dormitory residents (see Figure 15).

**Figure 15:** Different forms of visual representation are utilised

Most exhibits throughout the museum are conventionally labelled, but oral narrative is also utilised to add a more humanistic insight and depth to the displays. As with many indigenous museums described by Simpson (2008), the physical exhibits at the Ration Shed Museum are simply a starting point, and the yarns with museum staff are considered integral to the museum experience. This quite literally gives the museum a 'voice', an identity, and a means of interacting more intimately with its visitors. The physical exhibits mediate this communication by enabling the development of a shared cultural logic and providing dialogic focal points for conversations between visitors and museum staff (Enfield, 2000; Watermeyer, 2012). Furthermore, the use of oral narrative in this manner challenges modernist museal pedagogies by privileging personal reflection alongside 'facts'. This again embraces the subjectivity and situatedness of the museum, and privileges human experiences, subjective narratives and relationships alongside the conventional western museal presentation of 'scientific' knowledge (Simpson, 2008).

The contents of the museum as a whole are often organised into categories and sequences that highlight relationships and express an indigenous epistemology as described by Simpson (2008). Some displays, for example, are based partly around original clan groups and familial relationships, and colonial photographs often sit alongside contemporary artefacts. Contextually-specific social changes over time are also emphasised through display choices. For example, the main hall of the former boys' dormitory is adorned with artworks by today's children of the community (see Figure 16), serving to remind visitors of the original use of the building while contrasting Cherbourg's problematic past with its hopes for the future.

**Figure 16:** The former boys' dormitory now displays artworks by children of the community

### *Use of technology*

In recent years, the Ration Shed Museum has utilised technology to expand its administrative, educative, research and archival functions. On an operational level, the construction of the museum's website (rationshed.com.au) allows for more efficient administrative functions such as notification of opening hours, booking arrangements and public donations. On a social level, it opens the door for a more global engagement in indigenous and museal discourse, and the capacity for wider information gathering and dissemination of educative materials. The museum also maintains a Facebook page, enabling visitors and community members to keep in touch with the museum's activities and further strengthening its educative and social agendas.

The museum's research and archival functions are now conducted largely through the operation of the Cherbourg Memory project website (cherbourgmemory.org). This is a separate website operated by the Ration Shed Museum, and utilises technology in order to both represent Cherbourg's history and to gather additional information about the settlement. The Cherbourg Memory describes itself as "a website, an archive, an educational resource, a recording project, a research data-base, a store of the people's stories and an interactive space for comments and engagement" (RSM, 2013b, "Home: Join the memory", para. 2). Community members, their families, fellow indigenous Australians and others associated with Cherbourg's history are encouraged to digitally record their own experiences in this "living archive" (RSM, 2013b, "Home: Join the memory", para. 2). This actively facilitates a proliferation of 'little narratives', and enables a truly participatory construction of history and identity. The archival structure of the website is modelled on the existing timeline in the ration shed, with information arranged in decade blocks that capture a narrative overview of Cherbourg's history. In addition to this, the website presents information in 'themes' that capture important aspects of life in Cherbourg. This digitally highlights the importance of relationships within this community, and again enables viewers to more deeply understand how Cherbourg's history has shaped its present. Computers are set up in the former superintendent's office for public access to the Cherbourg Memory.

## Conclusion

Hooper-Greenhill's (2000) model of the post-museum has been regarded by theorists as critical, dialogic and hopeful (Macdonald, 2008; Marstine, 2008) but also criticised as under-analysed (Alivizatou, 2009) and idealised (Keene, 2009). However, the Ration Shed Museum demonstrates that the theoretical intent behind the post-museum may indeed be realised in a small, independent museum that is deeply embedded within its local community.

The Ration Shed Museum clearly demonstrates the critical, reflexive and dialogic nature of the post-museum. It challenges the ideologies and conventions of the modern museum in order to actively partake in an historical discourse on its own terms and set a more positive precedent for the future of this community. Simpson (2008) theorises the "intrinsic conflict [that] exists between traditional Aboriginal methods of controlling and communicating knowledge and the ideology and functions of the western museum" (p. 153). However, the ideologies that underpin the post-museum are fundamentally different to those of the modern public museum, and the strength of the post-museum lies partly in the recognition and exploration of such conflicts and contradictions (Duclos, 1994; Marstine, 2008). Knowledge is understood in the post-museum as constructed and multi-dimensional, and representation as inherently political. The Ration Shed Museum shows us that historical narratives are subjective constructions, and that viewers can – and should – be consciously and deliberately implicated in the crafting of these narratives. It employs its own public pedagogies to negotiate an on-going process of reciprocation between its community and its visitors, and draws upon a shared cultural logic to provide a point of mediation for discursive engagement (Enfield, 2000; Watermeyer, 2012); the emerging result is one of "real cross-cultural exchange" (Marstine, 2008, p. 5).

Perhaps the most inspiring message delivered by the Ration Shed Museum to the broader museal community is that Hooper-Greenhill's (2000) future-oriented vision of the post-museum is indeed possible. The Ration Shed Museum draws upon critical postmodern theory in order to challenge modern western ideals and institutional pedagogies and practices, and to make meaningful connections to its community and its visitors. It affirms the validity of 'little narratives' in the constructions of both histories and futures and invites a dialogue with the Other that was not possible in the traditional museum. There is little argument that the modernist museum is dead, itself finally succumbing to a process of musealisation (Baudrillard, 1984). But in the small country town of Cherbourg, the post-museum is alive and well and ready for a chat.

**Figure 17:** Notices

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With a background in secondary school education, Carly Smith is currently teaching at the University of Southern Queensland in the area of pre-service teacher identity, and working into the areas of curriculum, pedagogy and philosophy of education. She has recently commenced PhD research into the ways that issues of race and ethnicity are expressed through the public pedagogies of museums in south-east Queensland. She welcomes correspondence over her work.

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