

ICOM -INTERCOM PRESENTATION AT VIENNA UNIVERSITY

20 AUGUST 2007

STEVE GOWER, DIRECTOR, AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

My presentation is about the creative renewal of the Australian War Memorial, located in Australia's Capital, Canberra. To put my remarks in context, I should start by saying a few things about the AWM of which I have been the director for almost 12 years.

The AWM is one of Australia's major cultural institutions. It was established to commemorate Australia's dead in the First World War, a war to which we contributed in excess of 350,000 and suffered 40,000 killed-in-action. In those days, if you died overseas, you were buried overseas. This policy was only to change during the Vietnam War of the 60s.

Since it was believed a trip to the battlefield cemeteries was out of the question to all but the rich, it was decided that a place should be developed in the nation's capital to enable the rituals of grief and remembrance to take place. This place was envisaged to have three parts. There would be a shrine, a museum to assist in commemoration through understanding, and an archive holding the records of war.

After the Second World War, the memorial's role was expanded to take in all conflicts in which Australia has taken part. Its collection was thus expanded and now comprises some 4 million items valued at a\$1 billion. There are some 30,000 works of art (oils, water colours, sketches etc), over 1 million photographs, well over a

million feet of cine and video footage, hundreds of shelf metres of archival material much of which we are now digitising, and relics ranging from a 4-engined bomber, single-engined fighters, tanks, vehicles, guns, uniforms, medals, heraldic items, right down to buttons and bows.

To support and safeguard the collection are the expected range of specialist curators and conservators.

I became director at a time when the governing council wanted to embark on a major program of gallery renewal.

The existing galleries – which covered colonial commitments, both world wars, peacekeeping and other commitments - had become very tired and fusty, not having been changed for some time. A lack of funding was the principal cause of this.

The institution still had a strong brand, but was running the risk of losing its relevance to younger Australians. Accordingly the council agreed upon a strategic objective of producing an outstanding new set of galleries to stimulate increased visitation. The senior management group (the three assistant directors and myself) therefore had a golden opportunity to be creative.

Firstly, we wanted to take head on the challenge of continuing relevance. The approach we decided upon was to emphasise that the AWM was the place where a visitor could learn about the Australian identity as shaped by war –things like mateship, courage, looking after and not letting down one's friends, endurance and

high spirits: stories about ordinary, decent Australian people. The AWM should be a place not only for veterans and their families and friends –these remained key stakeholders, of course – but the broad community.

We wanted to develop the place as somewhere visitors would get something worthwhile, be engaged and uplifted, and want to return.

We had \$20 million to start the revitalisation.

However, none of us had any contemporary experience at developing new galleries.

At the extremes, it seemed to me you could outsource much of it, or do it yourself.

We did not have any staff knowledgeable and experienced in all the associated technical processes such as tendering, letting large contracts, etc but senior management had to remain accountable for all that was produced.

So we took a middle course and decided to engage the services of a project management consultant with good experience in the museum sector. His role was to advise us on the content of briefs for architects and designers and other contractors, the detail associated with contracts, in cost estimating, in tender assessments, in scheduling and in general site supervising duties. This person would answer to an in-house project manager we decided to appoint, who had total responsibility to senior management for all aspects, but especially the development of exhibition concepts, and design briefs, the engagement of a designer and the development of design concepts, the identification of relics for possible display, their conservation, installation, and so on. We formed a multi-disciplinary team to take charge of this

process: to provide the intellectual horse-power, the people in this group needed to be top-class.

In reality, the development of galleries is a compromise of available space, the relics you have in the collection to tell your stories and the funds you can apply to the project. But where you can make a difference is in the creative risks you are prepared to take, and the engagement you have with key stakeholders.

Our first set of galleries, those dealing with WW2, were in some respects conventional, but of high quality. However, we tried to maximise the use of multimedia in all its various forms to appeal to younger visitors and we developed several special experiences. As examples: we developed a number of interactives where a visitor could seek additional levels of information on a subject, be that a particular battle or in getting more details of an aircraft type. We also developed an “aircraft simulator” as a visitor experience. It took the form of visitors entering into a darkened space suggestive of the interior of a World War two aircraft. A screen then showed authentic footage of crews being briefed, going out to their aircraft, and visitors see the propellers starting to rotate. As this happens, the floor starts to vibrate and in due course the “plane” is seen to take off. The floor later electronically opens to show other images, and there are supporting audio visual effects suggestive of searchlights and gunfire. The intention is to give the visitor an insight into what it might have been like to take part in a mission.

The visitor gets another experience when watching footage of naval operations. As the show starts, the steel floor commences to vibrate underfoot, and there is the

general rumble of marine machinery. This has been achieved by using woofers under a suspended steel plate.

All these features were well-received when the galleries opened, and visitation lifted. Encouraged, we became more ambitious for the next gallery we developed, our special aircraft hall. We decided to use a “black box” approach which concentrates gallery lighting on the aircraft and text panels only. All other features in the gallery – air conditioning ducts, power trays, beams, columns and the like faded into the background – or that was the idea! We also tried more to tell particular stories by interpreting the major relics with set-piece displays, photography and art. We suspended aircraft, put some on pedestals, one was displayed as if it were being built, and another was presented as if on the deck of an aircraft carrier. A very large screen carried continuous footage of aircraft, almost as if it were wall-paper. But you could capture, so to speak, individual aircraft images from that footage and view it more closely with other footage and related data on interactive screens located on an overlooking mezzanine. The mezzanine also enabled viewing of the aircraft from different perspectives. I’m a great supporter of mezzanine floors in galleries.

In parallel to this we had successfully acquired additional funds from government for a *Centenary of Federation* project, a 3,000m² “black box” exhibition hall. It would be connected to our main building by a single glass and steel bridge. We were rather confident by now, so we novated our selected outline architectural design into the construction contract. This minimised our risk. We started physical work on the site in March 2000, and our Prime Minister opened the completed building and its

displays in June 2001. This was a rather fast-track development, but was achievable by good risk management.

The displays had some interesting new and creative features. We didn't want to produce a large technology relic hall, with aircraft, guns and the like lined up side-by-side. What we decided to develop was a series of *object theatre* displays which would be viewed from a mezzanine overlooking the entire floor space.

We describe *object theatre* as the presentation of a story of a selected major relic using dramatic sound, light and images. In deciding to try the technique, we were quite aware it was a big risk. We hadn't seen it used before, although as we were developing the technique we heard there was something a little similar called "image totale" in France. I still haven't seen anything comparable. What we ended up developing were three eight minute shows in the space which run sequentially each hour. We had ideas of having specially commissioned music as part of the overall experience, but ended up not pursuing that.

The first show features our Lancaster bomber *G-for-George*, which somehow survived 90 operations over Europe in WW2. *George* is an extraordinary relic in itself. The show featuring it is called *Striking by Night*. The emphasis is on the human dimension, that is, what must it have been like night-after-night to fly operations lasting up to 8 hours in all sorts of weather, with perhaps 1000 other aircraft in the darkened skies, to find the designated target and then return safely using very basic navigation aids. There is a surround screen, six cinema-grade projectors and other objects that come into play at various times, such as German aircraft and

guns, both of which fire. As for *George*, the propellers appear to turn, it takes off, clouds pass by down the fuselage, it finds its objective, and returns in the darkness to a flare-lit airstrip in England.

Another *object theatre* presentation is *Sydney Under Attack*. It's about the night in 1942 when Japanese submarines entered into Sydney Harbour. The show highlights the confusion of the evening, the bravery of the Japanese and the aftermath.

Finally there's a show about a naval engagement between German and Australian ships in the Indian Ocean in 1914.

I would stress these displays are not Disney-Land shows to enjoy. Rather they are using the latest multimedia, digital presentations to produce engaging, commemorative programs that communicate and make the viewer think – and hopefully then feel the need for food and sustenance from the Hyatt facility at the end of the mezzanine.

Our current plans for new galleries – which deal with post 1945 commitments and especially Peacekeeping - envisage developing these *object theatre* techniques further to recreate a number of scenarios: what it would have been like on the bridge of a destroyer in the First Gulf War making use of a complete bridge with LCD screens on the windows to generate a visual seascape, with a soundscape from the speakers on the bridge coming alive to an authentic script; and a display featuring a Huey helicopter of the Vietnam War era recreating both a heliborne assault and a casualty

evacuation. Again, I would stress these shows are about remembering the individual experience, and not about glorifying war.

But first we had to get more Government funding for a building to accommodate the staff and collection items displaced from the main building so as to free up gallery space. We were successful in this: a contributor probably was the fact we were paying for the new galleries ourselves.

The new displays open at the end of this year. The intended multi-media applications are expensive and require an on-going maintenance program, but evaluations have shown them to be very effective in engaging visitors. Veterans (a key stakeholder group) also have supported their use. Consultation with them is vital at all times.

I have concentrated on the major creative developments, but additionally, we have sought to reinvigorate traditional methods:

- Introducing a sound and light component to a Diorama (which traditionally have been a “snap-shot” of a major event developed by painters and sculptors) to enhance the drama and understanding;
- Giving a sense of location in different galleries by wall treatments, and by sound and light projections;
- Integrating better different categories of collection items (art, photographs, written records and relics) in aesthetically pleasing, informative and engaging displays;
- Developing of a new discovery room space for children and families, called the *Discovery Zone*, which includes hands-on activities in an

actual helicopter, inside a “submarine” with genuine components, and an area in which practical peacekeeping problems are posed for the visitor to solve, etc.

To wrap things up, I should emphasise a few points:

- Firstly, you need excellent consultants to work with if you are planning to “push the envelope” and develop state-of-the-art multimedia applications. But consultants work to your design briefs. At the end of the day, management holds the end responsibility, and it needs to remember that always.
- It is imperative to have on your staff imaginative and knowledgeable people who can be part of a multi-disciplinary team. Additional imaginative ideas can come from interactions with the consultants. There is no room for prima-donnas, nor those seeking individual praise for joint endeavours.
- Above all, you need to function in an open, collegiate environment that encourages creativity.

Of course, once a renewal starts, it never really ends. For success, active and close involvement by senior management is mandatory, along with the involvement of outstanding consultants and contractors, as I previously mentioned. It must be continually emphasised that the creative renewal of galleries involves all staff at some stage, and their active involvement is essential for success.

I should mention in conclusion how our efforts have been received:

- Evaluations indicate strong visitor support and approval
- We have been Australia's Major National Tourist Attraction for three years in a row; and
- We now reach out with our visitors on the website and our exhibitions, activities and events to well over 5 million people.