

Powerful places: convergence in debate

The trend towards convergence and co-location of cultural facilities is currently generating substantial debate in the library, museum and gallery industry. The Museums & Galleries NSW seminar 'Powerful Places' gave professionals working across the cultural sector the opportunity to discuss the obstacles and opportunities presented by convergence.

While combined museums, galleries and libraries are not a new phenomenon, a recent trend towards merging of facilities – convergence - has attracted both positive and negative attention. For some institutions, a converged facility offers access to new funding and collaboration opportunities. For others however, merged institutions herald an end of specialised skills and cultural fields. The 'Powerful Places' seminar, held at Tamworth Regional Gallery on the 29th of July this year, presented a range of local and international convergence models.

Keynote speaker Bill Macnaught provided insight into managing the ground-breaking Puke Ariki, in New Plymouth, New Zealand. The Puke Ariki knowledge centre combines library, museum and visitor information in one building. Rather than subscribe to traditional divisions of information and objects into archives, library, museum and gallery, the centre focuses upon unifying information to 'tell the stories of Taranaki'. The idea of grouping institutions according to purpose, for example 'telling stories' or 'memory institutions', was a theme that was raised several times during the day. Noelle Nelson from the State Library of NSW quoted Michael Fox of the Minnesota Historical Society: "We divide the world.

Books, paper, stuff. But users want to bring it together: they want answers and we give them a road map". Certainly in Puke Ariki the community has responded well to this fusion of institutions: high visitor numbers continue five years after Puke Ariki's inception.

Carina Clement offered a local perspective on convergence that in many ways echoed Bill Macnaught's experience. Albury's LibraryMuseum, which opened in 2006, also features a library and museum, as well as providing exhibition space. Like Puke Ariki, Albury's LibraryMuseum has been responded to with enthusiasm with increased visitation from the local community.

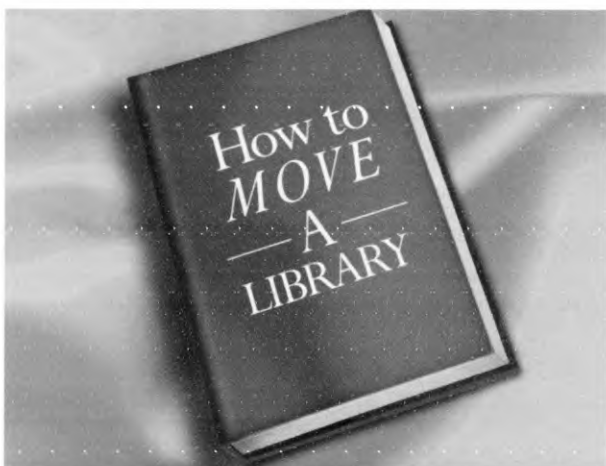
A significant advantage of a combined facility, according to both Bill and Carina, is the possibility of pitching the institution as something new and unique. This marketability has been crucial to sustaining Puke Ariki, where both public and private sponsors have responded to Puke Ariki's 'individuality'. Carina acknowledged that a converged facility opened a range of funding possibilities that a library or a gallery alone may not have access to. This theme was reiterated during the day by speakers and delegates alike: for some of the delegates, convergence had been the only means of obtaining funding.

Albury's LibraryMuseum and Puke Ariki have both experienced teething problems in terms of staffing structures at their respective organisations. Bill identified staffing restructures and a severe lack of librarians on the 'front line' as some of the hurdles facing Puke Ariki. Carina described how Albury Art Gallery and local visual artists had felt marginalised as a result of convergence.

The threat of marginalisation was a topic that the audience discussed and debated in the afternoon panel session. Noelle Nelson, who facilitated the panel session, offered a theoretical background to the discussion, including the role that digitisation plays in the organisation of information and objects. Maisey Stapleton, CEO, Museums & Galleries NSW, joined the panel and offered insight into audience development and community response to fused cultural facilities. The panel session encouraged lively debate, and gave rise to a host of issues including: increased work-loads under converged facilities; whether conservation guidelines are being adhered to in merged institutions; the difference between co-location, cultural precincts and convergence; and the concern that disciplines would be marginalised or absorbed into fused facilities.

The seminar did not aim to 'sell convergence'. While the speakers presented successful models of convergence, they stressed that institutions ought to be converged only when supported by the community and local cultural professionals. Rather than solving the issues surrounding convergence, the seminar examined perspectives from across the sector. As well as debating convergence, developing new friendships and networks was another real positive result for the day. Indeed, in an era of decreased funding, the importance of friendship, understanding and collaboration between libraries, museums and galleries cannot be underestimated.

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