

From campus to city: university museums in Australia

Sue-Anne Wallace

Two worlds are now essential to the security and growth of university museums in Australia: the campus and the city. Sue-Anne Wallace explains how this relationship took shape and what it might augur for the future. She was recently course director of the Museum Leadership Programme at the Melbourne Business School, University of Melbourne, and until July 1999 director of Museum Education and Curatorial Programmes at the Museum of Contemporary Art, and acting director of the museum since late 1998. She has been president of Museums Australia since 1996, and sits on a number of boards and committees associated with universities and the cultural sector, including the Australian Indigenous Cultural Network and the Constitutional Centenary Foundation, in which role she has been working to have cultural issues considered in the Australian debate on the constitution and the republic.

When the first report of the Australian University Museums Review Committee was published in 1996, under the title *Cinderella Collections: University Museums and Collections in Australia*, forty-four art, fine art and sculpture collections were identified among the 256 museums and collections. Some of these collections survived with no full-time staff allocated to their management, while the largest at the time, the Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne, had nearly fourteen staff and 10,000 objects. Yet this extensive study undertaken for the Vice Chancellor's Committee of Australian Universities did not include one of Australia's most public university collections, that of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Sydney, with more than forty full-time staff, a collection numbering 8,000 objects and three floors of exhibition galleries (approximately 2,500 m²). This lacuna was addressed in the second review, *Transforming Cinderella Collections: The Management and Conservation of Australian University Museums, Collections and Herbaria* (1998). Yet, the omission appears

to identify the conundrum facing university museums and collections that seek to widen their audiences, and even to take the bold step off campus, exposing both museum and collection to the challenge of anchoring them intellectually and financially to the university campus, while simultaneously allowing the museum to exploit its city interface and corporate potential.

Established in 1989 as a non-profit company by the University of Sydney, with the support of the New South Wales (NSW) Government, by 1996 the MCA was markedly different from other university museums, its antecedents in a teaching department of the university seemingly obscured by its prominent harbourside site in the heart of the city. Its founding lay in a bequest to the University of Sydney by an expatriate Australian graduate, John Wardell Power. His bequest, described in his will of 1939 and made known to the university some twenty-two years later upon the death of his widow, stated:

William, Josephine and others, oil by the Australian artist William Robinson, 1984, at the Queensland University of Technology Art Museum.



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I give and bequeath the remainder of my [shares] ... to the University of Sydney New South Wales to be used by them for the foundation of a Faculty of Fine Arts in such University or the further endowment of such Faculty if existing ... to make available to the people of Australia the latest ideas and theories in the plastic arts by means of lectures and teaching and by the purchase of the most recent contemporary art of the world and by the creation of schools, lecture halls museums and other places for the purpose of such lectures and teaching and of suitably housing the works purchased so as to bring the people of Australia in more direct touch with the latest art developments in other countries.

A graduate in medicine of the University of Sydney in 1904 but an artist throughout his life, Power died in the Channel Islands in 1943. The Second World War had not reached its end and his generous benefaction to his Alma Mater remained unknown until the year following the death of Mrs Edith Power. From 1962 until 1965, the terms of the will and its value were the subject of many legal debates. However, in 1965, there was sufficient agreement on the intent of John Wardell Power, for the Power Institute of Contemporary Art to be established and, in 1967, for the appointment of its first professor, the Australian art historian Bernard Smith. As to the museum, however, while the first acquisitions for its collection began in 1967, it remained a temporary gallery in the university grounds until 1988, able to show only part of the collection at any time.

The consolidation of the collections and their exhibition became a priority for

Professor Virginia Spate, appointed as the director of the Power Institute in 1979. In 1983, co-curators Leon Paroissien and Bernice Murphy were appointed to the museum, known as the Power Gallery, on the understanding that they would give priority to finding a more public space for it, as implied in Power's will. However, without the commitment of a far-sighted government in the state of New South Wales, it would not have proved possible to establish the museum on such a prominent site.

In 1984, the NSW Government (a Labour government under Neville Wran) publicly declared its intent to provide a building at Sydney's Circular Quay for an art gallery of the Power Institute. Five more years were to pass before the government, then a Liberal one under Nick Greiner, formally assigned in 1989 the building formerly occupied by the Maritime Services Board headquarters to the University of Sydney. With such a site in hand, renovations proceeded apace to convert the office building to one capable of exhibiting major large works of contemporary art and able to provide spaces for the sort of pedagogical activities prescribed in Power's will.

On 11 November 1991, the Museum of Contemporary Art opened to the public. An occasion fêted by government, university and the museum fraternity alike, the opening was seen as the successful culmination of nearly thirty years of effort and lobbying on the part of the university and the arts profession. Yet, Power's bequest, in spite of its magnanimity, was from the start pulled in two directions that have over time become antagonistic rather than symbiotic.

The Power Bequest was the impetus to found both the Power Institute of Con-

temporary Art and the Power Gallery, now known as the Power Institute: Centre for Art and Visual Culture and the Museum of Contemporary Art respectively. While the former remains housed on the campus of the University of Sydney, the Museum of Contemporary Art is located some ten km south at Circular Quay. The site that made it possible for the MCA to develop a high public profile also distanced the museum from the university. Such distance became financial, as well as physical, as the Power Bequest funds gradually drained away from the museum. This placed increasing dependence upon the museum's capacity to raise 90 per cent of its operating expenses per annum. Again the museum prospered due to its site, which enabled the museum to connect with the corporate sector of the city and attract substantial sponsorship. This included the support of Southcorp Wines, one of the most significant corporate sponsorships of any Australian art museum, resulting in a three-year programme, the Seppelts Contemporary Art Awards. However, it was a challenging financial environment and at times professionally fraught.

Coherence and international focus

The collections of the Museum of Contemporary Art reflect the environment of its foundation: the Power Collection of works acquired before the company was formed in 1989, and the MCA Collection, acquired after 18 May 1989. By 1998, there were approximately 8,000 objects in the collections of the MCA, 3,500 assigned to the Power Collection, and 4,500 to the MCA Collection.

The Power Collection includes the bequest in 1961 of more than 1,100 works by John Wardell Power, whose life

focused on the arts rather than the field of medicine in which he trained. Among these are 329 paintings, representing the achievements of his *oeuvre*, one that awaits scholarly pursuit and publication. A collection of 217 works from Ramingining in Northern Arnhem Land (Northern Territory) was purchased for the collection in 1984/85. These are principally bark paintings and woven objects. The remaining objects of the Power Collection, more than 2,000 pieces, are works purchased by the curators of the collection, Gordon Thomson (1967), Elwyn Lynn, both artist and curator (1968–83) and Leon Paroissien and Bernice Murphy (1984–89). Professor Bernard Smith undertook a limited role in acquiring works in 1968. The concentration of the responsibility for acquisitions in the hands of just five individuals over the period of more than twenty years has given a coherence to the Power Collection and an international focus, broken only following the appointment of Paroissien and Murphy, who began to purchase contemporary works by Australian artists and to actively seek indigenous art for the collection.

From May 1989 until 1998, the MCA Collection was built by Leon Paroissien (retired as director in 1997) and Bernice Murphy (chief curator to 1997, director 1997, resigned 1998), author of *Museum of Contemporary Art: Vision and Context*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1993. Acquisitions included two further collections of indigenous works, the Arnotts Collection (273 bark paintings, including a number by the renowned artist Yirawala, given to the museum by Arnotts' Biscuit Company Ltd) and the Maningrida Collection, consisting of 560 pieces including sculpture, woven objects and some bark paintings, held in trust for the people of Maningrida in Arnhem

Land. This joint responsibility for the collection, assumed by the artists and the museum, was a unique arrangement entered into by the MCA in 1990, ensuring that a cultural relationship was set up with the Maningrida people, and that both parties contributed to the relationship based on trust and mutually agreed and shared cultural interests. One of Australia's pre-eminent collections of contemporary art, the Smorgon Collection, the gift of Melbourne collectors and patrons Loti and Victor Smorgon, was acquired in 1995. This collection of 149 paintings by contemporary Australian artists fleshed out the collection of Australian works that Paroissien and Murphy were building. A second private collection with an international focus, the Kaldor Collection of 143 paintings, sculptures and works on paper, is on long-term loan to the museum. John Kaldor assumed the role of chairman of the company in 1998.

A unique aspect of the MCA Collection is the Contemporary Art Archive, an archive of some 2,000 pieces by Australian artists, acquired from 1990 by gift and purchase, relating to the intellectual and conceptual processes that artists engage with in the creation of their work. This collection is especially relevant for research and, therefore, a most appropriate initiative for a university art museum.

More than 1,000 other works, both Australian and international, make up the MCA Collection. Taken as a whole, the collections of the MCA have significant holdings of multiple art works, light works, and works by major artists including Australians Mike Parr, Juan Davila, Imants Tillers, Peter Tyndall, Yirawala; and numerous works by major international artists including Rebecca Horn, Colin McCahon, Robert Longo,



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Georg Baselitz, Jean Tinguely, Helen Frankenthanler and Gilbert and George.

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

Marketing difference

In positioning a cultural institution in the public mind and marketing to both broad and niche audiences, identifying the museum, its foundation, its collections and its history are key elements. One of the founding parents of the MCA, the University of Sydney, is Australia's oldest university, created in 1850, arguably a key benefit to a new institution endeavouring to secure its reputation and achieve recognition. Further, at the time of its opening, the MCA was the only public art museum to be associated with a university; equally, the University of Sydney was the only university to have established a museum in the public arena. This is not to say that other universities did not have links with museums; the

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The Queensland University of Technology Art Museum, the newest art museum in Australia.

difference with the MCA was the scale of its foundation and its location off the university campus. In its 1996 edition, *Cinderella Collections* listed forty-four art collections.

In Australian universities many of the collections are for internal rather than external benefit, being distributed in the buildings of their universities more for visual pleasure than academic pursuit. Among other university art museums that do attract public, more than academic, audiences, are two in Perth, Western

Australia (the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery at the University of Western Australia and the John Curtin Art Gallery at Curtin University); three in Melbourne, Victoria (the Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne; the Monash University Art Gallery and the RMIT Gallery at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology); one in Canberra, in the Australian Capital Territory (the Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University); and two in Adelaide, South Australia (the Art Museum of the University of South Australia and the Art Museum of Flinders University of South Australia). Of these, only one, the Art Museum of Flinders University, established a city venue in 1997 to complement its campus location. This small second site (90 m long) allows the Flinders University Art Museum to take travelling exhibitions, enhancing its audience potential, while also exploiting the opportunity to showcase its university collections twice annually. For all that, clearly the Museum of Contemporary Art remains a maverick institution among university art museums.

The second of the MCA's so-called parents, the Government of New South Wales, provided the MCA with a site steeped in the history of the European invasion and subsequent settlement of the indigenous lands of Australia. The harbour land identified by the coastal people of the region, the Eora, now occupied by the Museum of Contemporary Art, was the place where the Union Jack was raised on 26 January 1788, and where the British ownership of the Aboriginal lands now called Australia was proclaimed. While the MCA has built significant collections of indigenous art since the mid-1980s, at the time of its opening, though acknowledged in its exhibition programmes, indigenous visual culture did not figure highly in its marketing strategies.

The MCA positioned itself on Sydney's, and indeed Australia's, cultural stage as the national museum of contemporary art and focused on achieving a match between the latest in contemporary art and ideas and an adventurous art-going public. Audience surveys in 1996 showed that MCA visitors were 'younger, wealthy professionals living in affluent suburbs', who viewed the MCA as being 'sophisticated, outgoing, cool, cheeky, attractive and energetic'.

Dissociating, in name, the Museum of Contemporary Art from the Power Bequest had implications that struck at the core of the institution's foundation, perhaps allowing the university to believe it had lessening responsibilities to support the museum it founded, and indeed that in its city location the museum had the capacity to create its own funding base through patronage and sponsorship. Circumstances seem to suggest otherwise. When the MCA made public its financial statements for the year ending December 1998, it posted a deficit for the third consecutive year. In spite of an active year artistically, presenting thirteen international and Australian exhibitions, performances, lectures and events, the increased reliance on sponsorship, coupled with a tougher financial climate and more competitive environment in the cultural sector, placed intolerable strains

on the museum. A new director, Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, from Birmingham (United Kingdom), was appointed and took up her position in September 1999. Talks continue between the New South Wales Government and the University of Sydney as to the financial commitment each is prepared to make to secure the future of the MCA. The government has provided a A\$750,000 one-off bail-out to enable the museum to continue to trade in 1999. While the MCA's future may hang in the balance and public debate as to its role has hardly abated since the end of 1998, there is strong community support for a museum of contemporary art in Sydney. Whether it will remain linked to the University of Sydney is to be determined.

In 1988, one of Australia's newest university art museum buildings, the Ian Potter Museum of Art, opened at the University of Melbourne, housing the university's art collections that were acquired since its establishment in 1853. The newly created museum is known as the Potter, a name that links it irrevocably with the Ian Potter Foundation, a major founding patron of the museum and other university projects. It sits on the edge of the campus, fronting one of Melbourne's busiest streets, Swanston Street, anchoring the support of the two worlds essential to its security and growth, the campus and the city. ■