

**REMARKS BY THE HONOURABLE PETER UNDERWOOD AC,
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA TO OPEN THE 2014 MUSEUMS
AUSTRALIA NATIONAL CONFERENCE, LAUNCESTON,
SATURDAY, 17TH MAY 2014**

Thank you for that introduction. It is a real pleasure for me as the Governor of Tasmania to welcome so many distinguished guests and speakers from all parts of the country. I hope that while you are here you will have an opportunity to have a look around our State, for the island is always particularly beautiful during Autumn.

Thank you also for doing me the honour of inviting me to officially launch the conference, although it looks to me as if you have already successfully launched yourselves, having been hard at work since early yesterday morning. And what a busy conference this is. On my count, by the time you stagger home on Monday afternoon, you will have been through an amazing 148 sessions, both plenary and concurrent, which bespeaks of a very high degree of organisation, Mr Mulvaney; each day with its signature theme posing discrete but linked questions, the answers to which will direct the shape of museums for years to come.

A very busy programme like this one, with many concurrent themes, always puts me in mind of a conference that a colleague of mine attended a few years ago. He went to present as a speaker at one of the very many concurrent sessions. He said that he had put together a presentation and turned up at the conference on the appointed day. In good time, he found the room in which he was scheduled to speak and went in, but no one was there. Just a minute before he

was due to start speaking a man came in and sat down in the middle of the front row and waited. So, my friend thought, well, I know that there's only one person here, but I've prepared a paper and come all this way to deliver it, so I might as well start and so he did. The solitary listener seemed to appreciate the talk, for he laughed at the jokes and nodded agreement with the serious points and clapped loudly at the end. Of course, when he had finished my friend went down and thanked him and said that, although he was the only one in the audience, he really seemed to appreciate the presentation and was there anything that he could do to repay the man for being such a good listener. He replied, "Well, actually there is something. Would you mind staying for a bit, because I am the next speaker?"

As you all know, the principal theme of this conference is, "Connecting the Edge: within and beyond the Museum," but I have to confess that, no doubt due to my ignorance, its meaning was not immediately apparent to me. However, I applied my legal training to the theme and decided that I should start by going back to basics, because it seemed to me that before I could understand what is "the Edge that should be connected with and beyond the museum", I had to understand what is a museum.

Like all good lawyers, I reached for my Oxford English Dictionary – the second edition I would like you to know – but the primary definition was so long and inclusive, it seemed to cover a huge range of things. However, when researching this

issue of what is a museum I came across an excellent article by one Eugene W. Dillenburg who apparently is an Exhibit Developer, at the Science Museum of Minnesota and a Research Associate, at the Michigan State University Museum. From his writing he appears to be a man with a fine sense of humour. He wrote an article called "What, if anything is a Museum".¹ It was published in the 2011 Spring edition of the Exhibitionist Journal², an American publication of the National Association for Museum Exhibition³, with which some of you are no doubt familiar.

Mr Dillenburg and I were on the same quest. In the beginning he points out that he, and therefore both of us, are not the first people to seek "the unique diagnostic features which distinguish museums from all other institutions"⁴ and then sets out four definitions that have been proffered by well know organisations, including the International Council on Museums and the American Alliance of Museums, one of which was pretty wide you might think. It was "the common denominator [of museums] is making a unique contribution to the public by collecting, preserving and interpreting the things of the world."

Now, after setting out the four definitions Mr Dillenburg opined that they could all be boiled down to half a dozen themes:

¹http://nameaam.org/uploads/downloadables/EXH.spg_11/5%20EXH_spg11_What,%20if%20Anything,%20Is%20a%20Museum_Dillenburg.pdf accessed 8th May 2014.

² Exhibitionist Journal, Spring Edition 2011, page 8.

³ <http://name-aam.org/> accessed 8th May 2014.

⁴ Supra at page 8.

- (1) Non-profit
- (2) Permanent
- (3) Open to the public
- (4) Public Service (including aesthetics, enjoyment and most especially preservation and research.)
- (5) Collections (covering acquisitions, preservation and research) and
- (6) Exhibits (embracing communication and interpretation)

In light-hearted style, Mr Dillenburg then deconstructed each of those attributes which learned and distinguished organisations had identified as the essential attributes of a museum. Time does not permit me to go through each of his arguments in detail, but for example, Mr Dillenburg said that there is no reason why a museum had to be a non-profit organisation, and I am sure that is right, although I would not be surprised if now you all jumped up and shouted in unison, “tell me how to make a profit running a museum”!

Conceding that collections are, as he says, “wonderful things”⁵ Mr Dillenburg correctly points out that lots of people and lots of institutions have collections of things. He puts it this way, “Simply having stuff doesn’t make you a museum. It’s what you do with the stuff that

⁵ Ibid at page 10.

makes the difference.”⁶ However, Mr Dillenburg concedes that the primary way a museum serves the public is through education and research, but he then quickly points out that schools, colleges, universities and the like do that as well, so public service and education are not the defining attributes of a museum.

At the end of his deconstruction of the defining features of the museum proffered by relevant professional organisations and under the arresting heading, “*The Heart of the Matter*”, Mr Dillenburg says this:

“Exhibits are the defining feature of a museum. They are what make us different from every other type of public service organization. Exhibits are how we educate. Exhibits are what we do with our collections. Yes, we do other things as well, and those things—research, publication, outreach, programming—are very important. But those things are not unique to the museum. Only the museum uses exhibits as its primary means of fulfilling its public service mission. Thus, [he continued] a more robust definition of a museum might be: *an institution whose core function includes the presentation of public exhibits for the public good.*

⁶ Supra

[and concluded] A museum can do many things, but to merit that title it must do exhibits."⁷

Well, that definition puts my Oxford Dictionary to shame, but it provided me with an answer to my question – or I thought it did, but Mr Dillenburg was not finished with me yet, for his article then posed the question “but what is an exhibit?”

As an exhibit developer, Mr Dillenburg showed no hesitation here. He pointed out, in total agreement with my dictionary, that the word exhibit was both a noun and a verb, and that the latter means to show or display. Now comes the rub for those pondering some of the issues raised by this conference theme; he robustly asserted:

“Show and display what? Stuff. Not *pictures* of stuff or *descriptions* of stuff, but stuff. [emphasis added] And the use of real, physical stuff (whether accessioned collections or not) is what sets exhibits apart from books, TV, the Internet etc.”

Mr Dillenburg stresses that an exhibit is [quote] “physical environment” and “an experience,” and “a medium that one walks into.” He says the information is imbedded in a physical exhibit and its specific purpose is [quote] “to serve the public through education.”⁸

⁷ Supra at page 12

⁸ Supra at page 13

His conclusion is that the most critical museum function is to have exhibits and that an exhibit is a “physical environment designed for the experience of embedded knowledge.”

Well, I am not sure what I think about all that. I remain troubled about the basis for Mr Dillenburg’s assertion that the display of physical objects should be the central focal point of museums. These days why should museums not also make use of the internet and other electronic tools to communicate ideas and pictures? Why shouldn’t museums ‘move with the times’, as the saying goes?

Of course, you all know so much more about all of this than I do. But as an uninformed visitor to this conference it occurred to me that perhaps the fundamental issue is what is the core function of a museum and the secondary question is how to execute that core function. Looking at the titles of the many sessions to come I suspect that is just what you will be doing, so I wish you well as you work together over the rest of this conference.

I hope that each of you find it to be an interesting and stimulating meeting that sends you back home brimful of new ideas to make your museums even more interesting, informative and – er – full of stuff.

I declare the 2014 Museums Australia National Conference open.