

# Back to the FUTURE

## A new vision and mission for the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney

**Kevin Fewster** is Director of Sydney's award-winning Powerhouse Museum, formerly known as the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences. Here, he charts the evolution of the Museum from its Victorian origins through to the present day, and discusses the recent changes to long-term strategy, management structure and brand identity that are intended to guarantee many more successful years of operation.



The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, better known as the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, has Australia's most eclectic collections, with a history extending over 120 years to the time of Australia's first international exhibition in 1879. The unique nature of the Powerhouse collection, embracing science, technology, design, industry, social history and the decorative arts has its origins in the late Victorian fascination with the dazzling innovations derived from science and its industrial application in the nineteenth century, centred on Britain and its Empire. Australia, as an outpost of Empire, shared that fascination, while contributing its own unique experience in terms of exotic flora and fauna and, displacing

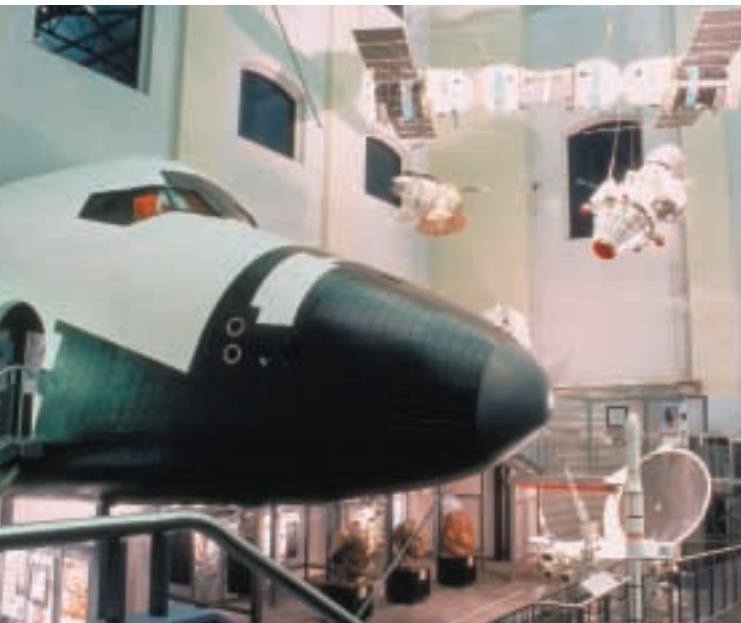
traditional culture, harnessing to its own purposes an environment hostile to the demands of European-style agriculture.

The convergence of design, science and technology married to mass production brought these forms of human endeavour into the everyday life of people, with a corresponding growth in public interest and investment in knowledge. The 1879 exhibition reflected these trends. It showcased design, invention and industry around the world, and was so popular that the government bought many of the key exhibits to establish the Technological, Industrial and Sanitary Museum, the grandparent of the Powerhouse Museum. It evolved over the next century into its present form, shedding its early

*Exterior of the Powerhouse Museum and Sydney city skyline*



Photograph by Andrew Frolows



*A replica of the forward section of a space shuttle, which features in the Powerhouse Museum's 'Space: Beyond this world' exhibition*

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preoccupation with research centred on exploiting Australian flora (and plumbing) to focus on its educational role and interpreting change in our material world in its social context.

Since 1988 it has occupied a recycled early twentieth-century power station, built to feed Sydney's new electric tram network. Around the same time, the historic Sydney Observatory was incorporated into its structure, as a museum of astronomy and public observatory. Its current remit extends to showing the best of human creativity from objects dating back to 5000 BC to contemporary design, from ancient European and Asian civilisations to 'make-do' furniture from Australia's pioneer days, from the abacus to the computer.

Its focus today is as much on the future as the past, and includes permanent exhibitions such as *Ecologic*, which canvasses the sustainability of industrial society. It has taken the lead in harnessing information technology to enhance the visitor experience and make the Museum more accessible, and is committed to a programme of evaluation and audience research, which has been fully integrated into strategic planning. The Powerhouse was accorded the international Dibner award in 2000 for excellence in communicating the history of technology. More recently the website, Australian Museums and Galleries Online (AMOL), which it manages, received two awards for excellence at the recent 'Museums and the Web' conference in Boston, United States.

## Strategic planning

Like museums throughout the developed world, the Powerhouse has had to respond to a rapidly changing environment that encompasses not only globalisation and new technologies, but community expectations, competing sources of education, information and entertainment, evolving professional standards, resource constraints and government policies that increasingly emphasise 'user pay' and sponsorship as sources of funding. Over the past few years, the Museum has taken steps to adapt its management structure and priorities in order to maintain its place among the world's major museums of science, technology and applied arts.

Since becoming Director in early 2000, I have sought to concentrate on specific goals as the focus for senior management's operations. Our new plan, for 2002-05, is built around five key strategic priorities:

- developing the Museum's collections, exhibitions and scholarship;
- developing our audiences;
- enhancing our information technology potential;
- developing our people and resources;
- developing our partnerships.

Produced over a 12-month period with the aid of an external facilitator, the plan draws on inputs from the Museum Trustees, senior management and many other staff, informed by best international practice. All along it was emphasised that the planning process was as important as the final document.

The plan articulates a common mission, vision and values:

- We wish to develop collections and present exhibitions and programs that explore science, design and history of the people for our State and beyond.
- We seek to further our reputation as a museum that celebrates human creativity and innovation in ways that engage, inform and inspire diverse audiences.
- We believe in engaging diverse audiences, promoting scholarship and presenting our collections and programs in ways that captivate the intellect and challenge the human spirit to excel.
- We place a high value on nurturing the abilities of staff and volunteers, and fostering community relationships.

The plan encourages the Museum to be outwardly focused, both in terms of site development and service delivery. It aims to develop new audiences locally and beyond, at the same time as encouraging the pursuit of the highest standards of scholarship and creative intellectual collaborations. The further development of excellence in information technology is a central feature of the overall plan, which, while focusing on initiatives for the future, ensures that they are securely based within the Museum's continuing commitment to improving its operations and programmes.

A key element within these strategies is the aim of building effective partnerships with external groups across the broad spectrum of the Museum's work, with the objective *inter alia* of diversifying its funding and support base.

The strategic plan articulates the priority areas for the Museum, the strategies it will use to address them and the results sought from each strategy. Management is tasked with developing annual business plans to implement the strategies.

## Management structure

I inherited a longstanding organisational structure, with 350 staff organised into two very large divisions, Collections and Museum Services and Business and Administrative Operations, responsible to Associate Directors and with six departments, reporting to the Director.

I reorganised the management structure early in 2001 so that as Director I now oversee three departments, and there are four discreet divisions. There is a Deputy Director, managing Collections and Exhibitions, and three Associate Directors managing Corporate Services, Knowledge and Information Management, and Programmes and Commercial Services.

Reducing the previous size of the divisions provides a more manageable and strategic spread of the Museum's 23 departments. The Associate Directors now have more direct contact with their department heads which improves the service delivery of each division and better aligns departments with the Museum's overall strategic direction.

The creation of the new Programmes and Commercial Services Division, which draws together a range of commercial functions previously dispersed across the Museum, was a central feature of

*Interior of the Museum with Australian Explorer, the helicopter flown in the first solo navigation of the world in 1982-83 and Locomotive No 1, which hauled the first passenger train in New South Wales in 1855*

Photograph by Jon Love





the reorganisation. Its establishment allowed the separation of financial management and other corporate services from commercial activities, leaving the Corporate Services Division to focus on strategic financial and resource management issues.

Also of significance was the consolidation of the Knowledge and Information Management function into a permanent Division. This reflected the central role that IT was assuming within the Museum in enhancing the experience of visitors, reaching out to wider audiences, and enhancing the efficiency of the Museum's operations. The Museum, in addition to its own site, [www.phm.gov.au](http://www.phm.gov.au), operates the award-winning AMOL site, [www.amol.org.au](http://www.amol.org.au), and the innovative [www.soundbyte.org](http://www.soundbyte.org) which allows visitors to discover electronic and computer music production through a range of tutorials.

## Funding and partnership

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Government provides some 80 per cent of the Museum's recurrent annual funding, with the balance earned from admissions, membership fees, sponsorship and donations, grants, sales, lease arrangements, consultancy fees and investment income. Recurrent funding from the Government has remained static in real terms over the past four years. At the same time self-generated income has increased by 57 per cent, reflecting the emphasis that governments around the world are currently placing on greater self-sufficiency in public institutions. Sponsorship is a key element in the drive for financial burden sharing.

As a museum with a focus on science, technology and design, the Powerhouse has a close and continuing relationship with industry. The Museum has enjoyed wide support for its exhibition programme, with the emphasis increasingly on partnerships. A particular example of this, which also illustrates the convergence between traditional museum functions and modern technology, was the collaboration with computer chip manufacturer Intel in the presentation of the exhibition timed to coincide with the 2000 Olympic Games, *1000 Years of the Olympic Games: Treasures of Ancient Greece*. The exhibition website received numerous national and international awards and was one of three finalists in the 2000 BAFTA Interactive Entertainment Awards.

The project involved close collaboration between the Museum's IT and exhibition experts, and those from Intel, to create a showcase experience on the internet. It allowed website users to visit the exhibition, view an image archive and obtain information about classical Greek civilisation. The content, published on CD-ROM and distributed free to all Australian high schools extended the reach of the exhibition further, fulfilling the Museum's traditional educational role by taking full advantage of new technologies.

## Outreach

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IT is only one strategy for extending the reach of the Museum, a central challenge to all cultural destinations throughout the world. There is a vigorous programme of temporary exhibitions on site - 35 over the past year - and regional programmes. In the Olympic year, 11 exhibitions travelled to 30 regional centres in the State, attracting

over 350,000 visitors. Other regional services assist individuals and organisations working with the State's cultural heritage through professional advice, site visits, workshops and regional seminars, staff exchanges training, object loans and research.

Nevertheless, the Powerhouse faces a number of challenges familiar to many museums in making its collection, and services, more widely available. Most of our collection - some 96 per cent - is held in store. We are developing new concepts in accessible storage, designed to achieve greater public access and make available more of our vast collection to Sydney's fast growing population centres, located 30 to 40 kilometres from the main Museum.

A further challenge is meeting the expectations of tourists, who account for 30 per cent of visits. Overseas visitors traditionally want to see Australian flora and fauna. Our marketing strategy includes creating awareness of and interest in the unique nature and richness of Australia's scientific, social and cultural history.

At the other end of the spectrum is the challenge of integrating the Museum more closely into the local community and its immediate environment. We are located in a former industrial area whose demographic is changing rapidly with the development of inner-city living. An opportunity exists for the Powerhouse to be a centre for this evolving local community.

The Powerhouse is also located on the edge of one of the country's prime tourist destinations, Darling Harbour, but with inadequate access and connection to it. So at the same time as becoming a focus for the local community, we need to make it easier for others to find us.

## Branding

The Museum undertook a major rebranding exercise in 2000. A new logo was developed aimed at a contemporary image for the new millennium, incorporating the acronym 'phm' used in the Museum's email and website address and the words 'science and design' to encapsulate the broad fields within which the Museum collects and offers programmes. The logo is used across a variety of applications including advertising and merchandising, as well as positioning on the internet.

Whilst our official name remains the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, we are universally known now as the Powerhouse Museum, reflecting our location since 1988. Powerhouse is an apt name for a dynamic museum, as it captures a commitment to energy, activity and regeneration. These, I believe, are vital qualities for maintaining the position and relevance of a museum such as ours in this challenging new century.

Our aim is to make the Powerhouse a name synonymous with innovation, energy and the best in contemporary museum practice. These are qualities that the community of Sydney and New South Wales associate with the Museum - our challenge is communicate this dynamism to visitors and to wider international communities wishing to discover something of Australia's fascinating material history.

All images courtesy of the Powerhouse Museum

