Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage

Sustainable Cities 2025

National Museum of Australia
30 October 2003

OVERVIEW

Museums and other cultural institutions, such as art galleries and libraries, have a key role in building sustainable urban communities. More broadly, this submission contends that human values and aspirations, as represented in cultural life and forms, are critical to achieving more sustainable living patterns and societies.

What is Sustainability?

There are many definitions of what defines a sustainable society. Most often cited is the Brundtland report definition:

> *Sustainable development seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future.*[1]

The Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy, published in 2003, uses the following definition:

> *Sustainability is meeting the needs of current and future generations through an integration of environmental protection, social advancement and economic prosperity.*[2] *This might be regarded as balancing human needs so we expend the Earth's 'income' rather than its 'capital', and so preserve resource capacity in environmental, economic and social terms for perpetuity.*

Two key themes emerge from both definitions.

Firstly, that the 'triple bottom line' of environmental, economic and social concerns should serve as measures of a society's advance and development. These three spheres should be balanced and integrated in holistic approaches to development and planning.

Secondly, that inter-generational equity is a fundamental principle of sustainability. Sustainability involves preserving and maintaining capacity in all three spheres for our children and our children's children, and so on.

Jon Hawkes, in *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability,* has argued that 'culture' needs to be included in any discussions about sustainability. This view of culture is not simply of what is sometimes called the arts and cultural sector, although it embraces that. He argues that culture includes 'our values and aspirations, traditions and shared memories, the ways we develop, receive and transmit these, and the ways of life these processes produce'. Further

> *Once we accept culture to mean the expression and manifestation of what it means to be a human, it becomes obvious why a cultural perspective is the essential basis of all public planning. That is, the first step in a planning process has to be the engagement   with the values and aspirations of those who will be affected by the plan…*[3]

This submission endorses the view that culture and its expressions should be considered in any discussion of sustainability. It considers 'culture' as part of the 'social' sphere or 'pillar' upon which the definitions listed earlier in part rest.

THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Committee is to inquire and report on issues and policies related to the development of sustainable cities to the year 2025, particularly:

1.   The environmental and social impacts of sprawling urban development;
2.   The major determinants of urban settlement patterns and desirable patterns of development for the growth of Australian cities;
3.   A 'blueprint' for ecologically sustainable patterns of settlement, with particular reference to eco-efficiency and equity in the provision of services and infrastructure;
4.   Measures to reduce the environmental, social and economic costs of continuing urban expansion; and
5.   Mechanisms for the Commonwealth to bring about urban development reform and promote ecologically sustainable patterns of settlement.

These terms of reference refer particularly, though not exclusively, to environmental concerns and planning interests that may secure more sustainable cities. The emphasis is on ecologies, planning and resource management, which are all necessary conditions in achieving sustainable urban communities.

This submission argues that the interests of the social sphere are also critical in enhancing and developing sustainability in urban contexts. This is particularly the case in considering the interdependencies of environmental, economic and social conditions in cities. Strong, variegated communities are necessary to build the capacities that can generate more sustainable futures, especially in cities that face complex problems related to their economic, social and environmental bases. All too often, social sustainability falls off the agenda or is considered subordinate to environmental and economic issues, despite the fact that it underwrites individual and collective creativity and innovation that can deal with challenges posed by increasing pressures from global, regional and local forces.

The 1995 Unesco Report, *Our Creative Diversity,* is explicit about the centrality of cultural concerns in making sustainable societies:

> *It is culture that defines how people relate to nature and their physical environment, to the earth and to the cosmos and through which we express our attitudes to and beliefs in other forms of life both plant and animal…It is meaningless to talk about the relation between culture and development as if they are two separate concepts.*[4]

Without a strong emphasis on developing the social sustainability of cities, there is little chance of achieving sustainability in their environmental and economic circumstances. Social capacity is dependent on the strength and sense of community, and the practice of civics and social trust. There is reciprocity between the environmental and economic needs of urban dwellers and their values and aspirations as framed by social/cultural practices. A community's artistic and cultural endeavours develop broader creative and innovative capacities that are increasingly necessary in dealing with market forces and pressing ecological concerns. Social capital is directly linked to a community's natural and financial capital.

MUSEUMS AND THE CULTURAL SECTOR

This submission argues that cultural institutions, such as museums, galleries and libraries, have a significant role to play in developing more sustainable cities. In particular, they can help develop social capacities that enhance a community's ability to create sustainable futures by:

- **Raising awareness of sustainability;**

- **Enhancing the practice of civics and social inclusion;**

- **Enhancing knowledge, cultural creativity and innovation;**

- **Developing cultural tourism and related economies; and**

- **Supporting family life and inter-generational equity.**

1.   Raising awareness of sustainability

Museums and other cultural institutions have a direct role in developing and communicating ideas about sustainability to urban audiences. Already, museums in this country, notably the National Museum of Australia, the Powerhouse Museum, and the Western Australian Museum, have developed exhibitions that examine aspects of sustainable living and lifestyles. Most major museums now incorporate sustainable practices in keeping with efforts to reduce their environmental 'footprint' by reducing waste and conserving energy, water and other resources.[5]

The permanent exhibition *Tangled Destinies* at the National Museum of Australia details the relationship between people and places in this country, including Australia's capital cities. The exhibition examines the development of ideas about landscapes and ecologies, and so underpins more applied debates about natural resource management and urban design.

At the Powerhouse Museum, in Sydney, *EcoLogic: creating a sustainable future*, represents issues related to consumption and environmental impacts, considering the 'life histories' of goods and attendant environmental and social costs, as well as their economic utility. The Western Australian Museum's *Sustainability WA* touring exhibition profiled the work of 12 ordinary people who were working to achieve more sustainable futures. It also encouraged audiences to participate actively in sustainability debates within their own communities.

Allied to exhibition programs, these institutions run substantial public outreach and schools programs that encourage debate and individual participation in sustainability issues and concerns. For example, the National Museum of Australia has run public forums on the threat of bushfires in urban areas in the aftermath of the Canberra bushfires in January 2003 and on water management and security. Its schools program has a strong component related to environmental history that includes information on urban conditions.

The capacity of museums to educate urban populations about sustainability issues should be further explored and developed.

2. Enhancing the practice of civics and social inclusion

A strong and capable community is one that has a strong civic life and social trust. Contemporary urban societies are characterised by diversity and difference, in ethnicity, age, class, gender and sexuality. Our cities are complex, organic forms that must reconcile divergent interests of these groups and other associations, peaceably and equitably.

Socially inclusive societies are able to resolve differences and help address the 'environmental, social and economic costs of continuing urban expansion'.[6] It is now commonly accepted that museums and other cultural institutions have a role to play in promoting social inclusion. Museums acknowledge their obligations in embracing diversity, and fostering interdependence and mutual respect, in their exhibitions and public programs.[7] This objective is supported by recent Federal Government policy documents, such as *Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity* (2003) and *Charter of Public Service in a Culturally Diverse Society* (1998). In the United Kingdom, the *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, PAT 10: Arts and Sport* (2001) has similarly identified social inclusion as a priority for museums and other cultural institutions. The American Association of Museum's report, *Mastering Civic Engagement (2002),* establishes an approach for museums to actively involve communities in their core business.

The contemporary museum is now regarded as a 'civic forum' for debate and discussion, rather than as a temple of high culture.[8] Anthropologist James Clifford's view of the museum as a 'contact zone' for people, cultures and ideas is also influential.[9] This sense of the contemporary museum as a 'neutral' ground where people meet to learn and debate issues makes it an important civic centre in urban settings. Sustainable communities are not individualistic, they are shared civic spaces.

The Western Australian Sustainability Strategy, *Hope for the Future,* recommends action to support the further use of schools and museums as community hubs.[10] This submission endorses that recommendation and asks that the role of cultural institutions as civic centres be recognised in any plan to create sustainable cities.

3. Enhancing knowledge, cultural creativity and innovation

The pace of change in contemporary cities presents significant problems that require innovative and creative solutions. This is especially the case as cities increasingly act as prime mediators of global flows and ideas to local and regional centres.

Increasing complexity in urban life and ecologies, particularly in terms of service provision, governance, design and planning, law and order, and social equity, requires creative and flexible skills in any community. New museums such as the National Museum of Australia present ideas in accessible and involving fashion, using the latest media technologies to enhance the message. They are places that both represent and encourage creative endeavour, through their content and also in the ways this content is presented.

An alert, skilled, and healthy labour force is the most productive asset of a society. It is also the most able to make decisions that balance competing needs and obligations. As democratic learning institutions for every age, Museums are central to the cultural and creative life of any community, and act as a standard of society's values about ideas and information.

This submission asks that the role of museums in developing cultural knowledge and creativity in Australian communities is recognised and supported.

4. Developing cultural tourism and related economies

Tourism has emerged as one of Australia's most significant growth industries, notwithstanding the downturn experienced in the aftermath of the World Trade centre terrorist attack.

A significant contribution to this growth is made by cultural tourism. Cultural tourism embraces the full range of experiences visitors can undertake to learn what makes a destination distinctive - its lifestyle, its heritage, its arts, its people - and the business of providing and interpreting that culture to visitors.

Museums are significant resources for enhancing cultural tourism opportunities in urban settings. In 1999, 27 per cent of all international tourists visited a museum in Australia.[11] While the proportion of domestic tourists visiting museums on an overnight trip was much lower, around 4%, this still represents a significant share of the domestic market for cultural tourism experiences (second to history/heritage building, sites or monuments – 5%). Museums and other cultural institutions are therefore significant drawcards and help create a fabric of tourist experiences upon which cities can rely for visitor streams. These visitors sustain significant tourist and related service industries, an economy that provides foreign currency earnings with relatively low local impact.

This submission asks that planning for sustainable cities take account of the value of museums and other cultural institutions in supporting cultural tourism economies.

5. Supporting family life and inter-generational equity

Sustainability is based on the notion of inter-generational equity. In addressing the needs of today, the needs of tomorrow must not be compromised. This necessarily means that communities must develop a clear conception of their own generational diversity and interests.

Museums and other cultural institutions are unusual in that they serve as generational meeting points, especially in urban settings. Most cities now experience a high degree of spatial stratification related to age. Recreation and use of public space is often determined by specific age cohorts, with limited mixing. Figures from the National Museum of Australia indicate that museums attract a mixed audience of wide age range. While the largest proportion of visitors to the National Museum in 2002/03 was in the 36-55 year age group (43%), there was significant visitation among children and teenagers (5%), those aged 21-35 (23%) and 56 and over (29%). Family groups made up the highest proportion of visitors to the Museum, about 46%.[12]

There is real value in museums as rare places where ages and, more specifically, families meet. They particularly support shared familial experiences, affirming the capacity of parents to share and develop knowledge with their children. These learning patterns practically develop shared inter-generational experiences and ideas that support healthy communities.

This submission argues that museums should be recognised for their role in developing inter-generational knowledge and awareness of age interests, a central issue in enabling more sustainable cities.

CONCLUSION

This submission argues that social sustainability is a necessary precondition for dealing with the substantial economic and environmental challenges facing Australian cities. Issues related to the social/cultural dimensions of city life and experience must be addressed alongside environmental and economic concerns.

The submission further contends that museums, and by implication other cultural institutions, have significant and particular roles to play in making cities sustainable. In this it supports the view of Museums Australia, the national peak body for museums, which argued in its Sustainability policy that:

> *Social learning and behavioural change are fundamental to achieving sustainability. Museums have a role in building collaborative relationships and using education and research to raise awareness, to encourage the development of new skills and the ability to embrace and adapt to change.*[13]

In particular, the submission asks the Committee to note and recognise the importance of these institutions, and more broadly of social and cultural concerns, in its deliberations on creating and maintaining sustainable cities by 2025. It asks that:

- The capacity of museums to educate urban populations about sustainability issues should be further explored and developed;

- The role of museums as civic centres that enhance social inclusion should be recognised and enhanced in any plan to create sustainable cities;

- The role of museums in developing cultural knowledge and creativity in Australian communities should be recognised and supported;

- Planning for sustainable cities should take account of the value of museums and other cultural institutions in supporting cultural tourism economies; and

- Museums should be supported in their work to develop inter-generational knowledge and awareness of age interests to secure more sustainable cities.

The National Museum of Australia commends these principles to the Committee for its consideration. The Museum is willing to elaborate upon these issues as may be required.

30 October 2003

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[1] G. Brundtland (ed.), *Our Common Future: World Commission on the Environment and Development,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987.

[2] *Hope for the Future: The Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy,* Perth, Government of WA, 2003, p.5.

[3] J. Hawkes, *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's essential role in public planning,* 2002, Melbourne, Cultural Development Network, 2001, p.32.

[4] 'Introduction', in World Commission on Culture and Development, *Our Creative Diversity,* Paris, Unesco Publishing, 1996.

[5] See Museums Australia, 'Museums and Sustainability: Guidelines for Policy and Practice in Museums and Galleries', *Museum National,* May 2003, pp.14-19.

[6] House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Heritage and Environment, Sustainable Cities 2025, Term of Reference, no.4.

[7] See Richard Sandell (ed.), *Museums, Society, Inequality,* London, Routledge, 2002.

[8] See E.T. Linenthal and T. Engelhardt (eds), *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past,* New York, Metropolitan Books, 1996, p.23.

[9] J. Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1997, passim.

[10] *Hope for the future,* p.248.

[11] Cultural Ministers Council, Cultural Tourism Statistics, August 2001, http://www.dcita.gov.au/Printer_Friendly/0,,0_6-2_4010-4_112578,00.html

[12] 'Visitor Evaluation: Analysis of Results – demographics, attitudes and behaviour', unpublished paper, National Museum of Australia, 2002/03, p.7.

[13] 'Museums and Sustainability', p.15.