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Museum Policy <i>B. COHEN</i>	1
National Museums – National Responsibilities <i>E.B. ROWLISON</i>	7
The National Role of the Museum of Australia <i>D.F. McMICHAEL</i>	9
Collecting the Present for the Future: Contemporary Documentation <i>G. CEDRENIUS</i>	12
Collecting the Present for the Future: Australian Museums and Contemporary Australian Society <i>M. ANDERSON</i>	17
Melbourne's Living Museum of the West – A Museum without Walls <i>O. FORD</i>	19
Imagination and Place: Experiments in Historical Education at Port Arthur <i>P.W. BOYER</i>	27
The Pros and Cons of the Block Buster Art Exhibition <i>A. ELSEN</i>	32
Travelling Exhibitions: Problems and Solutions <i>B. SKOOG</i>	38
Something, but for Whom? Thoughts on Ethics and Transitional Art <i>J.V.S. MEGAW</i>	43

6

Melbourne's Living Museum of
the West – A Museum without
Walls

O. FORD



Olwen Ford, Director of Melbourne's Living Museum of the West, is an Honours graduate of the University of London, where she studied History at the London School of Economics. She has a Dip.Ed. from the University of Melbourne and for some years taught history at Marian College, Sunshine and English to adults at Midway Migrant Hostel. She has extensively researched the history of local communities in Melbourne's west. This has included a decade-long commitment to researching and making known one of Australia's most interesting industrial sites, the Humes site, in the Maribyrnong River valley. Her main concern is people's history and the involvement of local people in documenting and exploring their own history.

In June 1984, a new museum emerged on the Australian scene. Its name was initially the "LIVING MUSEUM OF THE WEST", under an impression that Melbourne was the centre of the universe and that the term "the west" was self-explanatory. It had no fixed address and moved a little unsurely for its first few weeks. Its brief was so ambitious that it could not be described in one or two words. At times it seemed that the new museum, with its staff of twenty two, was a monster with 22 heads, 44 arms and legs, all going in different directions, encumbered with little box-like machines and metres and metres of cassette tape, film and typewriter ribbon. In another sense, the new museum was so vast, so complex and diverse that it could hardly be seen at all – the museum was around us and in us and in the people we met each day. For Melbourne's Living Museum of the West is an entire region, on the western side of town, the town being one of Australia's major cities. The region is the museum and the museum is the region.

The concept of a "living" museum can be both intimidating and challenging. Another perspective may help to make some of the ideas behind Melbourne's Living Museum of the West a little more comprehensible. The museum is a story – the story of the people of Melbourne's western region. It's also the search to discover the story of the people of the region. In this search, the people of the region are the main resource. The region itself is the other main resource – its plains, its creeks and river valleys, its waterfront, its beaches, its huge tracts of industrial complexes, its stone quarries, its streetscapes, its old and new buildings. The interaction behind the people and their environment is part of the story. The story is complex and of major significance in the Australian context and in a world that is still reeling from the impact of industrialisation.

Melbourne's western region is both rural and industrial, but in the area near the heart of the city, industry is the

dominant force. Factory chimneys, huge tin sheds, great industrial monoliths, are located near residential neighbourhoods, some with a history going back to the late nineteenth century. Defence industries and the petrochemical industry occupy enormous spaces. The meat industry and its associated by-products first began in the region in the 1840s. The metal trades, the quarrying of bluestone, the manufacture of explosives and fertilisers, have been important in the area for over a hundred years. Some of its establishments have been on a large scale, employing hundreds, sometime thousands of workers and being rated as of national and international significance in terms of output and technological significance. The importance of this contribution is now being recognised. But those who worked in these industries have not had much of a chance to tell their story. As in other parts of the world, the history of working people has been neglected.

The upsurge of interest in ordinary people, in local and family history, in a new social history, is occurring in many parts of the world. This interest is possibly all the greater in a region suffering from the current recession and changing patterns of trade and new technologies. The region and its people are going through hard times. It seems that in times of economic crisis, people look back. The urgency of the task of recording and documenting cultures that are changing is forced upon us. Little has been recorded in our region so far, in terms of documenting the culture of working people, their work processes, their social life, their language, their humour, their family and friendship networks, their union activities. Little has been done in a regional context to record the experiences of the thousands of migrants that came and settled in our area over the last three or four decades. What did they bring with them and what was the impact of their coming?

Beginnings

It was with a sense of urgency that Melbourne's Living Museum of the West was created. In a region where major industries were dying, where thousands of meat workers and metal workers were being retrenched, where thousands of young people had never had a job, it was possible to put up a submission for substantial funding through a government employment program. In a state which was preparing to celebrate 150 years of European settlement, it was possible to argue that a region which had played a part in the pastoral, industrial and cultural development of Australia should have a slice of the birthday cake. With the help of the Commonwealth Department of Home Affairs, this slice was especially generous. The commitment to providing jobs was a major factor. The two submissions for funding of a living museum in Melbourne's west were not made in a cultural vacuum. There were already numerous programs, events, groups, which showed links between environmental groups and issues of heritage and conservation. There was a strong network in terms of community facilities and government services and a major grassroots movement to improve an environment adversely affected by industrial pollution. There were a number of annual festivals, community arts centres, migrant resource centres, community and school projects. A campaign to save an old stone meat cannery,

later Humes Pipe Works, brought together hundreds of people from a diverse range of backgrounds. Yet there was no over-all effort to research and present the region's rich and diverse history.

There were seven museums in the region – 4 Historical Society museums in old buildings; 1 museum on a warship; 1 open-air railway museum and 1 gracious mansion (Werribee Park). All of these were run on a voluntary and part-time basis, except the gracious mansion. The ideas which led to the birth of Melbourne's Living Museum of the West, from its very beginnings were to break new ground. Like all good inventions the ideas came from different directions.

1. The idea of a river valley museum linking several historic sites, including historic industrial sites, on the lines of England's Ironbridge Gorge.
2. The idea of a museum of work, located in Melbourne's west, an idea that was influenced by developments overseas, for example in Sweden, France, Germany, and the U.S. including developments in museums of contemporary history.
3. The idea of using an old stone factory and its riverside site to show and interpret the history of working people on the site, over 130 years of history, within the context of the Maribyrnong River valley and Melbourne's western region.

Local member of Parliament, Joan Kirner, with some government encouragement convened a meeting. The meeting reflected the enthusiasm of local people for the idea of a "Museum of the West" and also provided an opportunity for local people to learn of developments overseas, through Eva and David Yencken. The three strands of that meeting have been crucial in the development of the museum project – the local interest, enthusiasm and commitment; the support and encouragement from government, also linked to a major study then being undertaken by the Department of Planning; the input of those in touch with museum development in a wider context. These three strands were reflected in the composition of the Museum's Committee of Management and have influenced the development of our aims and the rationale for our existence.

Major funding was granted early in 1984, through the Community Employment Program and Victoria's 150th Anniversary Committee. Basically the money was intended to cover the wages of a sizeable full-time museum team of 22 people. Most of the team were to be recruited from those who were registered as unemployed. Those recruited came from a variety of backgrounds, including work backgrounds and ethnic backgrounds. This factor is especially important in the life and growth of the museum. Its team is no ordinary team. The diversity is especially important in a museum designed to be by and for the people of the region.

Melbourne's Living Museum of the West is a people's museum, a multi-cultural museum, a museum which focuses on the history of working people up to the present and which involves the people of the region in the process of research and presentation.

The aims of research and presentation are the main emphasis in the first year of the museum's life. The initial emphasis on research can be seen in the structure of the first stage. The majority of the Museum Team are "Research Team Members" in research teams each led

by a co-ordinator, each focussing on a different theme – Work, Women in paid and unpaid work, Migration. We also have a media team, which includes a photographer, a video camera operator and a graphic artist. Last but not least is the secretarial team which is currently engaged in typing up a large number of transcripts from tape-recorded interviews.

The museum's aims include the intention to use a wide range of presentation methods, including exhibitions, video, publications, theatre, public events and other participatory activities. The development of a heritage resource centre for the region, together with a mobile museum service are linked to the concept of the museum as the region. Our long-term aim is to establish a permanent ecomuseum within the context of the region. Ecomuseums are best understood by looking at actual examples, such as those in France and elsewhere in Europe and the Caribbean. The western region of Melbourne, with its distinct character, in terms of its geography, its history and its relationship to the metropolis, seems an especially appropriate entity for an ecomuseum. There are, we believe, few areas like it in Australia. The aims of Melbourne's Living Museum of the West represent a vision which is inspiring but difficult to achieve in a short time. The greatest challenge of all is the term "living museum". "How can a museum be living?" we are asked. "It's a contradiction in terms". The answer lies partly in the way the museum is operating in the first year of its life. This in turn relates to the way money was allocated in the first place. A few points may illustrate why and how this new museum is indeed living.

A Living Museum

The museum has a large team, as a result of the Community Employment Program grant. The diverse array of skills and abilities and personalities is a great strength and a generator of museum energy. Some of the younger team members had never had a job before. Some had gone through the ordeal of retrenchment. Ages range from 19 years to 57 years. Educational background varies from Form V to tertiary and post-graduate education and technical training. Languages spoken include Italian, Greek, Yugoslav, Macedonian, Vietnamese. The mixture of backgrounds is both stimulating and demanding. People's enthusiasm and commitment and dedication have been impressive. Even the inevitable tensions are part of being a living museum, a people's museum.

The team chosen to some extent reflects the diverse character of the region – its multi-cultural, multi-lingual character, its diversity of culture, its experience of hard times. The areas being researched relate closely to areas of concern to team members themselves and their lives – work, migration, role of women, the environment. For many of us, the job of being in the museum is more than just a job.

The museum's initial mode of operation has been oral history. Many contacts have been made and many stories told. Modern technology has accompanied the inter-active, living, oral history process. Tape recorders, transcribers, typewriters, video and camera all play a part. We see our responsibility to those we have inter-



Bill Glenn – suburban drover, Newmarket.



Peter Rachovidic, metal worker, agricultural tool factory, Werribee.

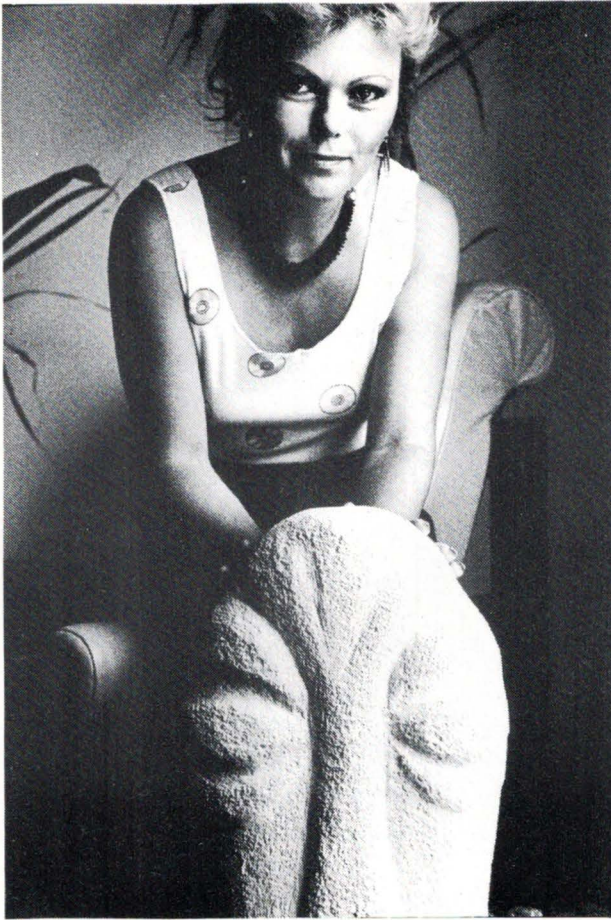


Migration Team – Melbourne's Living Museum of the West. Left to right – Teena Cross, Vesna Duzelovska, Flavia Graziotto, Chau Minh Ho. "Our team members are very much part of local communities, including ethnic communities".

viewed as a major concern, so we have consent forms and try to ensure that copies of tapes and transcripts get back to those who have been talking to us. We believe that people who share their experiences and memories with us should remain in control of their story. We see oral history as a co-operative venture, a two-way process, not an activity to collect material.

The Living Museum is no longer living if the provider of museum material is completely forgotten and kept at a distance from the final product. There was great enthusiasm at our launching, held in a major shopping centre. Many people whom we had interviewed came along. We are trying to keep in touch with them by sending out a regular newsletter and by keeping them informed on museum events in the future. Oral history often also leads to the discovery of amazing photographic and archival material. In such cases our main concern is to borrow and copy such material rather than to collect originals. On occasions people have donated significant artefacts, for example, a work uniform, but collection of artefacts is not our main concern.

We are trying to present our research in ways that are enjoyable, interesting and satisfying to the local community. This is still in the developing stage. Our launching was a very public and crowded affair, with music and humour and noise, with food and drink as well as speeches, videos and a photographic exhibition. Since then we have had the opening of an exhibition of the work of a young Vietnamese artist, when a medley of Australians and Vietnamese enjoyed Vietnamese food and Australian drink. We are finding that food and drink are an integral part of any exhibition.



*Eva Enders, sandstone sculptress, Keilor.
"Common ground for all the women interviewed
was creativity".*

We are cataloguing our collection so that our research, especially our cassettes, our transcripts and our photographic material, our artefacts and other items collected, can be retrieved for use by others and by ourselves. Such a collection provides a base for further research, active investigation and ongoing living history. Our method is to fill in summary sheets for each cassette, each photograph or set of photographs, each artefact. This is transferred to a computer worksheet and passed on to the computer of the local institute of technology, Footscray, to link in with an existing bibliographical project which is operating in the region – WESTDOC. The computer does the indexing and our first index will be produced in November. Our listed collection will seem small in physical terms, but it represents a wealth of experience and memory shared by a wide variety of people.

We are thinking, sharing our ideas, developing our ideas for the future. There are many directions to be followed. One of the most exciting is in the area of adult education and literacy programs. Jenny Mitchell, one of the Museum's team co-ordinators, is involved in a program with Footscray TAFE. The oral and visual components of the Museum's work can make a major contribution to such programs. People can begin from where they are and build up confidence and competence.

Above all, the Museum is living because it involves the people of the region. It is from contact with the people that the story emerges – the themes, the anec-



*Jack Howlett of Sunshine, sharing memories with
Jenny Mitchell, the Museum's Assistant Director.
"Above all, the museum is living because it involves
the people of the region".*

dotes, the tragic stories and the funny stories, the vivid detail, the collections of photos, the examples of ancient crafts, tools, work shoes, union notebooks, diaries, poems, documents, relating to migration, paintings. Less tangible, but very important is the feeling that is communicated – the affection and loyalty shown, loyalty to the region, to the homeland, to a particular workplace, to workmates, to family and friends. There are also darker sides to such stories – some experiences may be too painful to tell.

The Museum is living because it is people-focussed. The people of the region include the Museum team, the people who have been contacted, throughout the region and beyond, the people who have not yet been contacted but who can be regarded as future audience, or, as in the case of school-students, as fellow workers. The school students are especially important since they have access to their parents and grandparents – people who might otherwise be difficult to contact. By this method, the school student/researchers can bring their own knowledge and experience to bear upon their questioning. Even so, it seems that school students need help to become fellow-researchers. We have been talking to teachers in groups and individually and learning what they feel would be useful. We are considering an approach whereby we provide students with a how-to-do-it kit, introductory background material and a helpful hints manual relating to sources in the region and approaches to interviewing.



A Vietnamese art exhibition in Williamstown, Melbourne's oldest suburb. Left to right: Roger Trudgeon, (Ministry for the Arts), Son Thanh Nguyen, Museum team member, Le Van Thai, the artist. "Son 'discovers' a Vietnamese artist and we are treated to a feast of his work".

In this way we hope to increase the number of researchers in the region. Again, the emphasis is on the process, the activity, the development of skills, the discovery of new knowledge. Hopefully we may be able to develop a system whereby the researches of school-students are passed on to the museum collection or published in some form.

In a region that is often regarded as unattractive and lacking in facilities, it seems important to communicate to younger people some way of coming to understand their environment and the people they know. From knowledge comes understanding and with understanding comes power to bring about change where change is needed, or at least to see the environment with new eyes and an awareness of how it came to be the way it is.

The Living Museum is committed to presentation which will reach the people of the region. Publication is one way of doing this and we are moving into this phase now with diaries, calendars, booklets and books. We will be working through radio and video and have developed links with a theatre company – WEST theatre – which is committed to participatory and interactive theatre. The travelling exhibition is a special challenge and we look forward to learning from the Swedish experience. Travelling exhibitions seem specially important in a region which is vast, ill-served by public transport and with a number of major centres, especially shopping centres.

For some of the people of our region a travelling exhibition will be the only way we can reach them. For those who are competent in spoken English, but literate only in their first language, an exhibition seems far more appropriate than a book. Both exhibition and publication

are seen as a way of giving back to local people something of what they have shared with the research teams. It is also important to help local people sometimes when they want help, for example with videos, photography and sound recording. This often involves recording events that community groups consider important. To quote our photographer, Peter Haffenden, "This is an attempt to find out what the community perceives as its living history. We also see our role as giving the people a sense of their own history as being as much a part of real history as any artefact in a museum or any major event given lots of publicity. We are keeping our parameters of living history as wide as possible so we expand to fit the communities' needs and extend what pre-conceptions we may be limited by. In some ways we are helping to create the history we are recording".

In many cases our team members are very much part of local communities, including local ethnic communities. As they already have access to people, cultural and language barriers can be overcome. Bryan, a former shearer, links up with his former mates and uncovers a whole network of suburban drovers, auctioneers and butchers which at Newmarket virtually represent a country world in the middle of a big city. Son "discovers" a Vietnamese artist and we are treated to a feast of his work. His fellow-countryman, Chau, makes known our Living Museum through the national newspaper, the Bell of Saigon. Yet Chau and his team-mates – Vesna (from Yugoslavia) and Flavia (Australian born of Italian parents) also find it a challenging and worthwhile experience to interview other migrants, for example, from Poland. They bring their own experiences to bear on their interviews and approach their task with flexibility



*Oil refinery tanks in Altona.
"Melbourne's western region is both rural and industrial".*

and sensitivity.

Those looking at the theme of women in unpaid work have been concerned to give women an opportunity to speak for themselves, as individuals, not as housewives. They have found that the common ground for all the women interviewed was creativity. They have been impressed by the stunning examples of handicraft they have seen – some of the ethnic crafts are of very high standards, outstanding even in a national context, for example the work of a Lithuanian weaver, a Latvian embroiderer, a Maltese lace-maker. They have noted the interaction between domestic and artistic activity, and have suggested that women are less inclined than men to put aspects of their life in unrelated boxes.

The early researches of Melbourne's Living Museum of the West are focussing on huge themes, themes which are of more than local significance. Each theme – work, women's work, migration, is part of a broader context with its own existing research and literature. There is a great value in seeing these themes as part of an integrated whole. Workers are often migrants, and sometimes also women who live in a particular environment. A local or regional study makes it possible to look more carefully at the total picture – a picture which is both complex and simple. For our first few months our museum teams have been working on different themes, but for our next stage we may be looking, for example, at a total workplace from different perspectives – work, migration, women, the environment. The work re-union can bring out the wholeness of human experience for many who have lived and worked in Melbourne's western suburbs. For many of those who worked at the vast establishments of Angliss's meatworks or McKay's harvester works

there was no strong barrier between home/neighbourhood and workplace. Their friends and relatives worked for the same firm. Marriages were made at work. There are many shades of experience in the industrial communities of Melbourne's west – the explosions that could kill three young women in one go, the horrible accidents, the heavy lifting required in many jobs, the cold and the monotony. But also there were times of humour, mateship, kinship, the sense of belonging, the feeling of being part of one large family, there were war songs sung on the job at ICI. The girls received high wages – danger money – and were described as the best dressed girls in the west. There is great enthusiasm for any re-union. There is sharp awareness of hard practices, and a philosophical approach to difficult times as well as the militant unionism which has also played a part. For many people contacted by Living Museum team members, work was a satisfying experience.

This culture is different from the culture associated with opera or life in an affluent residential suburb. It is a culture with roots in the region – a culture that has been through hard times but maintains its loyalty and affection for the place and its people. There are other cultures which are also strong in the region – the various ethnic cultures which survive their transplantation to a foreign land, which are kept going by ties built in new communities, through language school, church, through social events, through community centres. Each new wave of migrants brings in new strands of culture and in time this is reflected in the physical environment as new buildings are erected to cope with perceived needs. No artefact in a museum with walls can adequately convey the nature of these changes. How can a museum convey a sense of



*Old stock route between Newmarket and Angliss meatworks.
"The people of the region are the main resource. The region itself is the other resource".*

the struggle to improve the environment? One interesting possibility is to develop the idea of the ecomuseum – to regard the buildings and natural features of the region as part of the museum, the artefacts of the museum. Such an approach must go hand in hand with research and interpretation. There must be increasing opportunities for ordinary people to record their own history, the history of their own trade, their own neighbourhood up to the present. Everyone has a store of knowledge and experience which can be shared, given the opportunity. The wealth of oral tradition needs to be backed up by research using a wide variety of sources. For its first few months of life Melbourne's Living Museum of the West has concentrated on the oral approach, on living memory. This has had the advantage that we can say to people in the region who may be diffident or hesitant, "You're the expert. Nobody else knows what you know. Please join us in the process of discovering and showing and telling the story of our region". At some stage, Melbourne's Living Museum of the West will try to go right back in time to discover and tell more of the Aboriginal people who once lived on the plains and in the river and creek valleys. At some stage, once the museum has some sort of permanent working base, it will be possible to provide spaces for local people to develop their own exhibition about what seems important to them. Before too long, hopefully, the museum will acquire a bus which will enable it to travel throughout the region – both as an exhibition bus and as a research bus – park in the street for a day and get people to drop in their photos for copying, or leave a name and address for a chat and an interview. At some stage, it may be possible to develop a museum of contemporary history. For the moment, we are an infant museum, with a very long way to go.

From our initial crawling stage we are now moving at a great rate, learning all the time. The experience we are gaining, the contacts we are making, the momentum we are building up must not be lost. We will be striving to become a permanent fixture on the museum scene, but hopefully we will never lose the feeling of being part of the region and of being responsible mainly to the people of the region.

The use of an employment scheme to begin our museum raises some questions. Without it, the museum would have been perhaps a small team of "experts" instead of the broad base of people from many walks of life and with a range of experiences and contacts to help them in their work.

Without it we would perhaps never have started. Yet it is questionable as to whether it is fair to employ people on a project with only short-term job security. Much has been expected of us because we are such a large project. Much cannot be done in twelve months. It has taken years to develop some of the main ecomuseums of France. In our voyage through time and space and with a major commitment to interactive exhibitions, we will, like all museums, need substantial funding in the future to enable us to live and grow. Although we are at the service of local people in our region, we also regard ourselves as part of a world-wide movement to record and present working people's history. We owe government and the museum world our thanks for the encouragement given us and hope that it may continue in the future.

In return we hope to give back some of the strength and excitement generated in a museum which is living and closely bound up with a region and its people.