



## What's the Difference? Design Solutions for Regional Locations

In recent years there has been major growth in the development and redevelopment of museums and interpretative centres throughout regional Australia. This expansion creates opportunities for interpretative design to be used to reinvent many of our cultural sites and venues. Significantly this new focus on regional areas has seen greater recognition of value in community-developed collections and institutions. It is essential, then, that exhibition developers (designers and curators) ensure that the intrinsic worth and nature of these institutions are enhanced, rather than lost, in the redevelopment process.

Increased visitor access to our regional collections and histories can be of great benefit for both the museum and the community – or it can see them reduced to a series of stylistic conventions. The exhibition approach therefore plays an important role in ensuring not only that the integrity of the collection is maintained but also that the museum itself does not end up as a generic space – such as might otherwise be found anywhere else in Australia.

An approach worth considering is a low intervention strategy – one that seeks to reveal the features and stories of the

collection/community, and its subsequent heritage values, in an unencumbered and perhaps unfashionably simple manner. It is worth remembering that while we may experience a place through material and media, it is in the regional context that we are so often confronted with this material in a continuum, due to locality and proximity to source. This allows us our best access to the identifying culture and tone of the region.

What is vital about these collections is the nature of their coming into being – which is often through the concerns of individuals in the community. In this environment it matters not so much how material has been displayed, but why it was brought together in the first instance – through passion, history, loss, material/cultural value, tourism and so on – that defines the design challenge.

Regional cultural exhibitions should not be assigned any lesser value due to a perceived lack in 'design values' but rather should be regarded as having the unique ability to speak for a community's sense of place, connections and history. This itself is a great asset, offering the exhibition team the opportunity to create a stage or forum that, through

the design process, provides the community with an active and accurately reflected environment in which to articulate their stories and concerns.

It is important that designers and museum staff work closely throughout the exhibition development with their stakeholders (volunteers and the local community). These are the custodians of the collections and stories and it is fundamental that they retain a continued ownership of the exhibition or interpretation space.

The practicalities of design are also particularly important within the regional context. Physical requirements, budgets, isolation from services and long term plans of the organisation can play a major part in the final design. These requirements can be approached as challenges rather than as obstacles to the project.

Significantly different regional circumstances allow for quite different design responses. Galleries are unlikely to be crowded with visitors – so that quite different circulation rhythms can be expected from high-pressure urban sites. Big City values are often defined through modish presentation, where more direct and quieter techniques can suit the style of the regions. Big Impact sophistication is the norm in the Big City – it takes less to be as effective in the regions. The best design approach will surely be that which most truly mirrors local community values and traditions. Ultimately each region will speak best accepting and using its own voice.

Regional projects are seldom well enough resourced to be able to compete with better-funded Big City institutions – but then, the Average Visitor to the regions is unlikely to demand comparable levels of fashion and sophistication.

Be confident: be contemporary, be relevant, but speak with your own voice.

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