



ASSEMBLY A New Conversation about Museum Research

A national cross-sectoral initiative designed to reimagine new forms of museum collaborative research for public value

ASSEMBLY is an initiative developed by the Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMaGA), in collaboration with the Australian National University (ANU) and Monash University that invites Australian museum and university sectors to come together to reimagine research collaboration aligned to their shared public values.

This article serves as the second in a series of *think pieces* that form part of the theoretical, strategic and practical underpinning to asking the question: **How might we reimagine new forms of museum collaborative research for public value?**

This second article explores how a model of publicly embedded collaborative research might be configured. In setting a course towards this, we believe that it would prove useful to start from a museum (not academic) perspective. Although museums are invested in research, there has been little critical reflection within the Australian museum sector about how these research efforts are manifested. In thinking through future opportunities for museum research collaboration – or **museum/research** as we've termed it, it makes sense to start by seeking to better understand prevailing attitudes towards research in a museum context. Specifically, in this text we explore the ways that museums currently consider, enact and value research, before reflecting on how the perspectives they offer might inspire a reconfiguration of the purpose of museum/research that aligns with their roles as public, social and civic agents.

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Episode 2 – Configuring museum/research trajectories

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In the introductory article to this series of conversation-starting *think pieces*, we outlined why thinking differently about the role and value of research can help museums and galleries along with universities to purposefully interrogate, productively understand and proactively respond to the growing strategic, social and civic demands they both face today (Malde, Dziekan & Russell 2024). This signalled an opportunity for museums and universities to mobilise research as a connective strategic capability. For the most part existing research collaborations have tended to focus on the functional ability of museums to support and service the needs of academia, rather than produce shared value. Therefore, we outlined the critical importance of distinguishing research collaboration (as an

institutional imperative driven by the self-serving interests of either partner) from collaborative research (as a relatively untapped capacity that holds mutual benefit for all parties involved). This subtle shift, we believe, has the potential to reorient the basis for how research partnerships between universities and museums can be formed to achieve common purpose and have greater value and impact in the world.

This second article responds to this opportunity by exploring how such a model of publicly embedded collaborative research might be configured. In setting a course towards this – and given the dominant academic framing of existing research connections, it might be helpful to start from a museum (not academic) perspective. Although museums are invested

in research, there has been little critical reflection within the Australian museum sector about how these research efforts are manifested. In thinking through future opportunities for museum research collaboration – or **museum/research** as we've termed it, it makes sense to start by seeking to better understand prevailing attitudes towards research in a museum context. Specifically, in this text we explore the ways that museums currently consider, enact and value research, before reflecting on how the perspectives they offer might inspire a reconfiguration of the purpose of museum/research that aligns with their roles as public, social and civic agents.

What is the current status of research in the museum?

Museums hold a deep existential connection with research. The idea that museums are “sites of knowledge” has prevailed since the 16th century, from the time when royal and private collections provided the basis for systematically interrogating the world at large through its material culture (Findlen 1994). And with the opening of the first public galleries during the 18th and 19th centuries as part of the European Enlightenment, the concept of the “research museum” was born (Anderson 2005). For many across the sector, research continues to beat at the very heart of a museum's *raison d'être* – a perception neatly encapsulated in the observation that ‘there is no research without museums, and no museums without research’ (Graf et al 2016). For museums globally, the importance of

research is acknowledged explicitly in outward pronouncements of function and purpose, as the current International Council of Museums definition of a museum attests: *A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that **researches**, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage* (ICOM 2022).

In an Australian context, the institutional rhetoric of research is expressed in similar terms by larger federal and state museums. A number of these institutions have internal research departments, even specific research institutes, that follow a model of traditional academic research with staff employed in designated research roles who pursue disciplinary lines of enquiry that adhere to established academic research methodologies.¹ This work often attracts funding through competitive research grants and its outcomes are disseminated in academic, peer reviewed journals. Even where major Australian museums do not have dedicated research institutes or departments, research is still clearly stated as an important strategic function.² In contrast, many smaller regional museums and galleries don't outwardly state any explicit organisational connection to research. This, of course, does not mean that they don't engage with research in some form or other. Research conducted by museums is not, and never has been, reducible to a single, uniform definition. Beyond generic institutional pronouncements of research and its importance, it is particularly illuminating to see just how differently research is practiced by Australian museums.³

Australian museums find themselves en-

gaged in research across a range of different areas. Looking across the sector, three predominant types of research activity are evident. These provide an indicative frame of reference for the field that contemporary museum/research encompasses, namely: collections-based research, audience research and research communication (Malde & Villarroel 2024).

Collections-Based Research

This research type treats the role of museums as **custodians of collections**. This has proven to be a longstanding catalyst for much museum-based research. The Council of Australasian Museum Directors notes that ‘museums and their collections provide a critical research resource which generates ground-breaking in-house research projects and collaborations with other research agencies and academies’ (CAMD 2024). This focus is found in most major Australian collecting museums, whose research agendas are built around their deep discipline-based knowledge and subject area expertise largely related to art history, social history, sciences (natural, planetary, technological), and anthropological studies. There are also over 200 university museums in Australia that emphasise the use of their collections as vital research infrastructure (CAUMAC 2018).

Most commonly, collections-based research relates to what can be described as *collection field research*. This type of research activity concentrates on the positioning of objects in their current or historical contexts (economic, physi-

cal, political, cultural, environmental or social) in order to interrogate the creation, design, exchange, use and significance of them as material culture. Collections-based research may also incorporate aspects of *collections management & conservation research*, which seeks to understand the chemical and physical properties of materials, their methods of manufacture and the deterioration processes that affect their preservation. It may also include *object-based research* that focuses on the design, manufacture, function, provenance of artefacts.

Museum collections-based research typically adopts a traditional academic framing. It is enacted by designated “experts” (usually curators or in-house scientists/researchers) and often pursued along disciplinary lines of enquiry that adhere to established conventions.

Audience Research

Audience research recognises the role of museums as **audience-facing enterprises**. Here, research is often used to derive insights about audiences that help inform key museum strategies, including audience engagement & development, marketing, fundraising and donor engagement. This might interpret audiences in a variety of ways - as customers, visitors, users, people - depending on the flavour of audience research being undertaken, and the specific needs of funders, boards and museum leadership. These flavours of research typically range from cruder forms of *visitation research* that capture quantitative measures of visitor footfall, to *market research* that influences the



approaches used by museums to attract and retain new audiences, to *evaluative research* that helps museums understand whether their offerings and services are having the desired impact on their intended end-users, to *human experience based research* that seeks to understand and improve the diversity of human visitor experiences within the museum and offset the ableist tendencies that are reinforced in most museums by addressing accessibility, inclusion and well-being.⁴

Research Communication

Museums are also important **content providers and communicators**. Much museum research is arguably motivated by an external communication agenda i.e., a particular exhibition may influence the specific museum disciplinary /collections-based research that is undertaken at that particular moment. This content communicator role also helps satisfy the mutual needs of museums and universities by treating exhibitions as the primary means of translating research findings and socialising research outcomes for audiences. Academic research helps shape rigorous and relevant content for museums and their audiences. In a reciprocal way, academic researchers have come to appreciate that museums provide a useful gateway for engaging the public with their research as part of a growing impact agenda. These practices adhere to the basic tenants associated with science communication that developed as part of the emergence of science-based museums and centres that peaked in Australia in the late

1990s (Griffin 2011).

Whilst other concentrated research activities can be identified in Australian museums – for example *digital media-based research* and *museum educational and learning research*, these aren't especially widespread in current institutional research priorities. More representatively, the triad of collections-based research, audience research and research communication preoccupies much of the attention and scholarly efforts of most museums. Together, these demonstrate the utility of research that underpins the work of many Australian museums, with many fruitful collaborations constellating around them. For individual museums seeking to better understand the benefit of engaging in research to their work, this taxonomy provides an effective point of reference.

Yet, when considered against the capacity that museums need to cultivate to become more responsive to the increased complexity that exist outside their doors, they provide only a very constrained articulation of Australian museum research activity, by boxing research into disciplinary subjects and functional pursuits. It can be argued that the taxonomic shape that much museum research conventionally “shoehorns” itself into, says more about the defaults imposed upon it; either by administrative frameworks used to account for academic research that resort to the codification of discrete fields of research⁵, or operationally by the way that a museum might align its research activity according to its own existing internal structures.

Such an institutionally embedded view of research doesn't resonate with the ecosystemic

nature of the many contemporary challenges that museums face, the broader public and civic networks they are part of, and the value that society could – and should – derive from museum research (Pilon 2013). For museums to initiate a more publicly engaged – rather than institutionally closed or quarantined – approach, we submit that research should become more open and reflexive towards the external knowledge systems that museums increasingly find themselves engaging and interacting with today.

Configuring the knowledge systems in which museums participate

Modern societies rely heavily upon their knowledge industries to sustain their advanced economies. Theorisations of this relationship help distinguish between various *modus operandi* of how knowledge systems work, mapping an evolution in how research has been valued across these systems. This begins with a traditional model of academic research that is positioned within a taxonomy of disciplines and designed to add to the stock of disciplinary knowledge without prioritising concerns driven by practical use or application; otherwise described as *Mode 1 or Pure Research* (Gibbons 1994). Over time greater onus has been placed upon the ways that research discoveries can leave the laboratory, as it were, and situate themselves more directly in contexts of application, particular within industry settings (*Mode 2 or Applied Research*). From here, emphasis has moved towards establishing more creative and networked knowledge environments that gener-

ate research that is more collaborative, diverse and heterogeneous (*Mode 3 or Triple Helix: Networked Research*) (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff 2000). More recently, focus has turned towards responsible innovation that concentrates on the cultural-socio-ecological dimensions of the future (*Quadruple and Quintuple Helices or Socio-Ecological Related Research*) (Carayannis et al 2012). This evolution of research value across knowledge systems is critical as it highlights that museums should not only rely upon traditional scholarly and/or institutionally framed models of research. They need to also consider the value of research that aligns to more situated, collaborative and socio-ecological agendas.

But in acknowledging the importance of these more relational and progressive models for research, museums must think beyond the discourse of knowledge innovation and economic value that underpins them. After all, the ways knowledge systems operate is inherently political. As Michel Foucault argues, knowledge and power are intrinsically linked. Knowledge is created through an enactment of power. Conversely, knowledge contributes to the development of power by shaping dominant discourses that give meaning to social practices (Foucault 1972). We can see this enacted through university knowledge systems, which in nearly every part of the world adopt derivations of the Western canon as a form of ‘intellectual colonialism’ (Fals Borda & Mora-Osejo 2003). The diverse epistemologies of other Peoples of the world, including Indigenous based knowledges, are typically excluded on the basis of race, gender or sexuality in what has been termed by some



as *epistemicide*. In this context, the struggle for global social justice is intimately linked to global cognitive justice (de Sousa Santos 2007).

As important knowledge institutions operating within contemporary society, there is a growing imperative for museums to critically reflect upon their place within these systems of power by questioning how knowledge is extracted and considering whose knowledge is being used and for what ends. These deliberations might entertain new systems of knowledge democracy that build upon an acceptance of multiple epistemologies, which affirm that knowledge is created and represented in multiple forms, and an appreciation that knowledge is a tool for taking action to help create a more socially just, sustainable and healthy world (Hall & Tandon 2017). But doing so requires museums to not only consider what research they undertake along with its applied, collaborative and socio-ecological dimensions, but also demands they reflect deeply on how this knowledge is produced, shared, used and valued. Through committed effort, a reconceptualisation of museum/research that is more thoroughly embedded in the world can be achieved.

The **Table** on the following page illustrates the evolving role of museums and their relationship to research as derived from the exploratory Research Perspectives of Australian Museums & Galleries study by Malde & Villarroel (2024).

Mapping out a more socially embedded model for museum research

It is most helpful in this regard that the Australian museum sector is not starting from scratch. A fundamental insight gained from a recent study into the research perspectives of Australian museums and galleries (Malde & Villarroel 2024) was the way museums structure research is not always the way that museum professionals perceive, practice or understand its benefit or impact. Whilst museums may align research to institutionally orientated knowledge production in accordance with their traditionally established roles as custodians of collections and cultural heritage, audience-facing enterprises or communicators of cultural content, museum practitioners recognise that their museums inhabit alternative public roles that inspire different forms of public research value. For them, research agendas within museums are bending towards pressing questions of public interest rather than being rooted to the vested interests of disciplinary research. In such ways, research activity is undertaken less as a rigidly constrained organisational pursuit, and more as fluid modes of socially embedded endeavour. For many, their expressed desire is for museum research relationships to move from transactional, ad-hoc or uneven research collaborations with universities towards research that is enabled and actioned through a growing collaborative culture. These perspectives help sketch a potential reconfiguration of how museum/research could be framed, valued and practiced.

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF MUSEUMS & THE PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

PRESENT

Museums as preserver / holder / communicator
of collections and cultural heritage

FUTURE

Museums as social / civil / public agents

RESEARCH FRAME

Research framed as
institutional function

Research framed as
public value

RESEARCH AGENDA

Research focused on
disciplinary-specific subjects & objects

Research focused on
public interest challenges

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Research enacted as fixed types
of organisational activity

Research enacted as flexible modes
of publicly embedded activity

RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS

Research enabled through
transactional connections

Research enabled through
collaborative culture



In closing, it should be stressed that this proposed reconfiguration does not attempt to dismiss or erase more traditionally established understandings of museum-based research out of hand. Neither does it seek to prescribe how any new modes of museum/research should be undertaken. Instead, it might be considered a heuristic device for those museums and their practitioners that wish to explore alternative approaches through which museum/research might be undertaken for wider public benefit. It is hoped this rearticulation reflects how the museum's social role and civic purpose can inform and inspire dialogue across the sector and beyond, and in doing so, facilitate how a model based on research action might be practically implemented in the future.

To pursue a better shared understanding of the practical implication of this approach – in the culminating “episode” of this series of articles, we will ask: Is such a reconceptualisation of research useful to museums and beneficial – even liberating – to the practitioner-researchers that work within them? And if so, what are some of the forms of public value, types of challenges, modes of socially embedded activity and principles underpinning collaborative culture that might inform the basis for future museum/research to achieve greater social relevance?

Endnotes

¹ The South Australian Museum [<https://www.samuseum.sa.gov.au/research>], Australian Museum [<https://australian.museum/getinvolved/>

<https://museums victoria.com.au/research-institute/>] and the West Australian Museum [<https://museum.wa.gov.au/research/research-areas>] being cases in point.

² The National Museum Australia represents research and scholarship as ‘central to all of the Museum’s activities, including the development of collections, exhibitions, publications and program’ [<https://www.nma.gov.au/explore/curatorial-research>]. For its part the History Trust of South Australia states: ‘We research, collect, preserve and share material culture and document our non-material culture to better understand the past and the present’ [<https://www.history.sa.gov.au/vision-values/>].

³ The Powerhouse Museum’s Research Strategy (MAAS 2018), for one, recognises that ‘there are various levels of research undertaken in the museum context’.

⁴ See for example: Research that provides universal museums access to the blind [<https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2023/09/06/research-to-provide-universal-museum-access-for-the-blind.html>], The Sensational Museum [<https://sensationalmuseum.org/about/the-project/>] and Understanding the International Audience Engagement Well-being Framework [<https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/international-audienceengagement-network-iae/international-audience-engagement-well-being-framework/>].

⁵ Field of Research classification, otherwise referred to as FoR codes in an Australian and New Zealand context, is a means of categorising research into major and related-sub-fields

of research and emerging study. This statistical classification methodology is used to measure and analyse research development and publication output of universities, tertiary institutions, national research institutions and other organisations. <https://www.arc.gov.au/manage-your-grant/classification-codes-rfcd-seo-and-anzsic-codes>.

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The conversation seeded by this *think piece* (and those that accompany it) will lead onto a series of nation-wide assemblies held during the second half of 2024. These gatherings will be convened online and in-person, coinciding with the 2024 AMaGA national conference taking place between the 17th – 20th September 2024 in Ballarat, Victoria.

While focused at a national level, this project also forms into an expanded network of research observatories being established internationally through association with the Institute for Digital Culture (University of Leicester, UK). Interested practitioners associated with any Australian museum, gallery or university are invited to join us to explore these ideas further; as only by doing so collectively, can we determine and map our shared way forward.

To find out about ASSEMBLY, including how to be notified about future development and updates, please visit:

<https://amaga.org.au/Web/News/Articles/ASSEMBLY--A-New-Conversation-about-Museum-Research.aspx>