The opening of the Melbourne Museum in 2000 marked the end of a period in which the thematics, locations and corporate arrangements of Victoria’s nineteenth-century state museums were thoroughly overhauled. While the provocative siting and expressive architecture of the Melbourne Museum are emblematic of the political style of state premier Jeffrey Kennett, who led a Liberal (conservative) government from 1992 to 1999, the merging of colonial museums of natural sciences and technology to form the Museum of Victoria in 1983 provides a necessary point of reference for the Melbourne Museum project.

The Museum of Victoria was a response to intellectual challenges posed by social history, postcolonialism and environmentalism, as well as practical problems associated with poor accommodation and visitor experience at the library–museum complex in Swanston Street in Melbourne’s CBD. A thematic structure of science and technology, natural sciences, indigenous studies and social history undergirded the new entity and the first social history curatorial appointments made. The development of The Story of Victoria, an exhibition that wove together the state’s natural and human history, signalled new, more inclusive museum narratives.

Planned building development on a site adjacent to the existing Swanston Street complex was thwarted by heritage considerations and dwindling political support. Heritage management dilemmas, though, offered an alternative solution. Abandoning plans for a single building, director Robert Edwards (1984–1990) proposed a Smithsonian-style campus model. The first component, Scienceworks, opened in 1992 on the site of a disused pumping station on the Yarra River in Melbourne’s industrial western suburbs. In 1998 a second campus, the Immigration and Hellenic Antiquities Museum (the latter, a personal interest of Premier Kennett) opened in a former customs building on the southern fringe of the city.

New possibilities for museums to combine education, entertainment and tourism engaged the interest of planning and finance bureaucracies during the 1980s, and the state government included a museum in its plans for a cultural, residential and business precinct on the south bank of the Yarra River (Dovey 2005). However, political fallout from the economic recession in the late 1980s and burgeoning public debt following the crash of a state government bank brought defeat of the state Labor government. While incoming Premier Kennett was eager to politically distance his government from its predecessor, he built on its strategy of major project development through public–private partnerships. He abandoned the skeletal framework of the Southbank museum to a convention centre and, financed by gaming tax revenue from the new Crown Casino, selected a new site in a public reserve in the suburb of Carlton, on the northern fringe of the CBD. The choice of the site was rich with symbolism. It was adjacent to the Royal Exhibition Building (REB), built for the Melbourne International Exhibition of 1880–81, an artefact of the gold-rush prosperity and brittle confidence of the city described by contemporaries as Marvellous Melbourne.
Melbourne architects Denton Corker Marshall (DCM)’s winning entry in the 1994 museum design competition paired Melbourne’s nineteenth-century exhibition infrastructure with a dramatic twenty-first century variant. DCM’s building runs along the same east-west axis as REB, creating an expansive and somewhat desolate plaza between. The internal configuration of Melbourne Museum gestures towards REB’s central circulatory spine (as well, perhaps, as surveyor Robert Hoddle’s grid plan for Melbourne), but there the similarity ends. The rectilinear form of the DCM design is punctuated by an angular ‘blade’ soaring above the Forest Gallery, an ecological exhibition in the building centre that recalls earlier plans for Southbank. A dedicated children’s museum on the building’s western side imitates a Rubik’s cube, its angular, tumbling appearance a motif for other structural elements expressed out of the building’s core.

Relocation of the site from Southbank to Exhibition Gardens contributed to a persistent Melbourne narrative of the alienation of public open space. Residents of the surrounding suburb of Carlton maintained a vigorous campaign against both the site and the DCM design, achieving partial success with a reduction of the length of the blade cantilevering over the Forest Gallery. However, the merits of arguments against juxtaposing the museum building with REB were undercut by a history of unsympathetic additions to the latter and the use of its curtilage for car parking. Ironically, in 2004 REB and its gardens became the first non-Indigenous cultural site in Australia to be inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage List.

The initial public encounter with Melbourne Museum’s interior is a view through a glass wall of staff offices on upper levels of the building, a common feature of late-twentieth-century museums that fuses democratic and disciplinary instincts. The interior design, with circulation corridors running past the galleries along the building’s length, gives exemplary attention to visitor orientation but reinforces thematic divisions that evoke earlier institutional and intellectual histories: the natural sciences and human history sections are separated by the forest, where the two co-mingle. Carolyn Rasmussen’s outline of the museum’s program development suggests that the strong interpretive and authorial intent of curatorial staff was pulled back by Museum Board of Victoria chairman Professor David Pennington’s injunction to focus on ‘core knowledge’, at least in the natural sciences galleries (Rasmussen 2001, 390). However, neither the Science and Life and Mind and Body galleries sermonise; their emphasis falls towards critical inquiry and constructivist learning theory in object-rich environments. A reflexive thread runs through the natural science galleries (admittedly, an imperfect title given the range of the displays), with early collections placed in their intellectual and institutional contexts. Indeed, museum stories emerge as some of the most engaging; the anti-evolutionary convictions that shaped foundation director Frederick McCoy’s display of gorillas, and curator William Blandowski’s unflattering comparison of new fish species to museum board members are but two.

The Mind and Body gallery benefits from the concentration of publicly funded research in Melbourne, particularly in the biomedical field. Equipment from Commonwealth Serum Laboratories highlights its pioneering research into vaccines and antivenoms; a more adventurous interpretation might extend the theme to discussion of the consequences for our intellectual ‘commons’ of widespread commercialisation and privatisation. Side-by-side displays of ‘virtual reality’ visual technology and the 1949 CSIRAC computer – the world’s fourth resident memory computer – suggest the hazards of museums attempting to match the world of commercial entertainment rather than concentrating on their strengths in authenticity. The aesthetic and educational richness provided by the room-sized CSIRAC is unmatched by the passive cinematic
experience offered by the ‘virtual room’. A soaring space on the northern wall of these galleries accommodates megafauna collections and a richly detailed exhibition on evolution.

The eastern side of the building houses the indigenous and social history galleries: Bunjilaka (discussed elsewhere in this volume), Te Vainui o Pasifika and Australia Gallery. Te Pasifika displays water craft from Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia, its narrative of indigenous exploration and trade given added context by criticism of the National Museum of Australia’s lack of attention to early British seafaring and mercantilism (Commonwealth of Australia 2003). Australia Gallery’s title points to a wider problem for the major Australian museums in finding an appropriate narrative structure and range for their social history programs. Australia Gallery is probably the least resolved of the Melbourne Museum galleries, in both content and design terms. Each vignette of the entry display Windows onto Victoria: Eight Moments in Victoria’s History is interesting, but the display is unconvincing as an ensemble approach to the state’s history. Melbourne: Stories from a City is richer in contextual detail, and, together with displays on Melbourne industry, working life and sport (confined to football and cricket), underscores the point that Australia Gallery is largely focused on Melbourne’s urban history. Intangible heritage is given welcome space through the treatment of schoolyard chants; suburban experience is less satisfactorily approached through a set from the Melbourne-based soap opera Neighbours. Both installations are heavily graffitied by visitors fulfilling their brief to contribute to the schoolyard exhibit. Australia Gallery also houses the Melbourne shrine to the famous New Zealand-born racehorse Phar Lap – its relics are spread across three Australasian museums. The interpretation of ‘Big Red’s’ popularity is aided by discussion of the development of broadcast media and the uplift of sporting success during the inter-war depression. Finally, a small community collections area in this gallery continues the trend of Australian museums towards provision of spaces that invert the conventional relationship between museum staff and audience, with wall panels of previous exhibitions closing off questions about the even-handed use of this gallery.

Having excised part of Carlton Gardens for the museum building, the Forest Gallery returns a small portion as a simulacra of Victoria’s tall mountain forests. The interpretive intent of Forest Gallery (‘People see the forest in different ways and this influences how they interact with it’) is initially overwhelmed by sensory contrasts with the other galleries. However, this is a subtle space that rewards those who linger.

The first component of Melbourne Museum to open (1998) was an Imax large-screen cinema, co-developed with a private cinema company. With its combination of civic and commercial elements (the latter also found in car parking, shop and café concessions, sponsored galleries, and touring exhibition hall), Melbourne Museum conforms to Mark Schuster’s use of the term hybridisation to model the spectrum of ways that cultural institutions have responded to pressures exerted by new public management outlooks and declining state support (Schuster 1998). The Melbourne Museum campus successfully integrates visitor and museum services within an accessible form. As architectural critic Paul Walker (2001) observed, the building has reasserted a distinctive role for public architecture in Melbourne. However, governments are generally more supportive of capital works projects than recurrent costs incurred thereafter. Securing the flow of public funds to support research activities has proved troublesome in Museum Victoria’s past. In the 1980s the museum reinterpreted its agricultural history collections to focus on ecological sustainability. This project serves as a metaphor for the sustainability challenge that lies ahead for Melbourne Museum.
REFERENCES


