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**Telling migrant stories in museums in Australia: Does the community gallery still have a role to play?**

**Chiara O'Reilly, University of Sydney  
Nina Parish, University of Bath**

**ABSTRACT**

Much attention in recent museum studies theory has focused on questions and practices of inclusion. The community gallery has been traditionally reserved as a space to engage and actively seek contributions from diverse communities and to open the museum up to new voices. This article considers the community gallery's current function across different scales of museums in Australia - comparing approaches at the local and state level - where it has most often been used to engage with ethnic diversity. It examines some of the trends evident in current practice and questions whether this space can continue to be an effective and important part of contemporary museum practice. Does a dedicated community space establish a clear sense of inclusion? Or does it mean that groups are essentialised within the museum, treated to a one-off showing of their story to be replaced by the next featured group?

**KEY WORDS**

Community, Museums, Diversity, Inclusion, Australia, Immigration.

In a migrant culture such as Australia, where four out of every ten Australians is born overseas, questions of identity and belonging are recurrent topics for political debate and cultural study (Lopez, 2000; Neumann and Tavan, 2009; Soutphommasane, 2012). Identity cultures and politics represent a particular challenge for contemporary museums that strive to tell stories of diversity whilst also establishing cohesive historical narratives. The community exhibition space, although a relatively recent inclusion in contemporary museums, is now a widely recognised feature of museum practice and contributes to filling many gaps in conventional museum displays. In Australia, it has been extensively adopted as a method of representing community and telling stories of migration and this article seeks to establish and examine its history and reflect on some of the current trends in its use.

Our article addresses a number of key questions for this space across a range of museums in Australia today. If multiculturalism is part of contemporary Australian identity, can and should the community gallery continue to play an effective and important role in contemporary museum practice? Does a dedicated community space establish a clear sense of inclusion? Or does it mean that groups are essentialised within the museum, treated to a one-off showing of their story to be replaced by the next featured group? These questions matter in a society where diversity is the norm, and the challenge is to include and represent this diversity within mainstream museums in a meaningful way. In focusing on the community gallery as an evolving space within traditional mainstream museums, we consider how it has offered certain museums a pathway to develop their storytelling with regard to migrant narratives, and how it has developed because of changes in practice and ideas of museums more broadly. We provide a survey of how specific Australian museums, ranging from small local

institutions such as the Hurstville City Library Museum and Gallery (New South Wales) to state-based organisations such as the Migration Museum (South Australia) and the Immigration Museum (Victoria), have made use of the community space. Through these case studies, we discuss different approaches to the community gallery in order to examine and compare ethno-specific examples and experiments in intercultural exhibitions to consider critically the current value of these spaces and comment on their future development. Our research has been developed from a study of the existing literature on migration museums; site visits; and, importantly, interviews with key staff in these institutions to reflect on the approach and the challenges the industry sees for itself. The focus of our study is firmly on the value of this practice to museums, while further research is needed to consider the value of the space to the communities themselves.<sup>1</sup>

This research explores how community exhibition spaces contribute to and enrich conventional museum displays. They are, however, spaces where many questions and challenges are raised and they require further critical consideration for their role in shaping and defining community. Although these spaces are typically small, they are crucial fora as they open up new possibilities for community engagement and can allow for experimentation and the development of a sense of ownership of the museum by diverse communities. Their widespread use in Australia has even been seen in traditionally conservative institutions, such as art galleries. For example, in research on the Art Gallery of NSW (AGNSW) in Sydney, Ien Ang (2005: 314) celebrated the inclusion of a community 'wisdom room' in a blockbuster art exhibition on Buddhist art

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<sup>1</sup> This paper represents initial findings from a wider research project that examines the representation of diversity in social history museums in Australia.

(2001-2002) as it brought different Buddhist communities inside the physical space of the dominant culture and established a safe space for collaborative dialogue.<sup>2</sup> In many respects, these spaces can be understood as an embodiment of contemporary ideas of the museum, celebrated by museum theorists such as Richard Sandell, as ideally they have a role 'in enabling visitors to engage with, make sense of and negotiate difference, in ways which privilege concepts of equality, cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect' (2006: 72). Generally, they are prevalent in social history museums and museums of world cultures where the concept of a new telling of history that strives to be inclusive and makes greater use of oral history has been fundamental. Having a dedicated space for community-generated content and a community voice has in these newer institutions been welcomed as it can allow for a meaningful sense of participation in how communities tell and represent their own stories. These galleries are typically part of a professional space, often supported by professional staff, but with the community responsible for content generation and sometimes covering the costs of exhibition making.

The consideration and representation of communities in museums are driven by the growth in contemporary social policy of ideas of equality and social justice, combined with new ideas of history. These ideas in international museological theory have been developed most consistently by Sandell (1988, 2006 and Sandell and Nightingale, 2012). Sandell advocates a repositioning of ideas of inclusion in the museum and his work highlights the traditional failing of cultural institutions to embrace, in any

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<sup>2</sup> The experiment at the AGNSW appears to have been a one-off. The gallery has since turned to other models to expand diversity in its audience. See C. O'Reilly and A. Lawrenson, 2014, 'Revenue, relevance and reflecting community: Blockbusters at the Art Galley of NSW', in *Museums and Society*, 12 (3): 157-170.

meaningful sense, diversity. His argument not only promotes the adoption of new methods, it celebrates the core role of institutions in supporting ideas of diversity and their potential as agents of change and social inclusion (Sandell 1998, 2006).

Another important theoretical frame for our study has come from the work of Andrea Witcomb, which is particularly relevant for the Australian context with its focus on migration history (2002, 2009). Her research, combined with and drawing on her first-hand experience as a curator, highlights the challenges in this area and the very real pressures that exist. She carefully articulates the tensions between models of engagement and Australian politics suggesting that ‘at the heart of differing models of migration history are different understandings of national identity and citizenship’ (2009: 49). A further key contextual element to our survey is provided by Margaret Anderson’s survey of the understanding of history in Australian Museums (2011); a critical study of the fundamental shifts in approach across the 1970s to 2008. Here, she examines the rise of different models of exhibiting, collecting, and exploring history and the role museums have in remaining vigilant and active participants in contemporary debates on historical ideas ‘both in critiquing and celebrating the nation’s memory’ (2011). Our survey of the current understanding of the community space in Australia takes these earlier studies as key reference points to consider how today’s museums are responding to changes in exhibition practice and the idea of the museum.

Today community for museums has just as much to do with access and participation as telling community stories. Institutions are driven to be more inclusive and also by the shifting notion of the visitor as an active participant. Many studies have sought to explore this terrain, offering a wealth of case studies of different forms of practice and

approach and these underscore the challenges of establishing enduring collaborative approaches. (Key examples of this extensive literature include: Lang, Reeve and Woollard, 2006; Crooke, 2007; Watson, 2007; Simon, 2010; Golding and Modest, 2013). For example, Golding and Modest (2013) present new collaborative paradigms and offer a series of models for collaborative practice. Golding's own chapter in this collection is emblematic of new understandings of community. It examines the key role that these approaches can play, suggesting that: 'at the museum we can display evidence of our common humanity and cultural diversity while posing questions about what a museum is and can be, which vitally includes addressing racism and working to dispel fearful stereotypes for more accurate perspectives' (2013:14). In Australia, these concepts and new approaches are supported and reinforced by individual institutions' mission statements and standards documents such as the *National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries* which clearly articulates in principle B1 (40) that 'The Museum is used, supported and valued by diverse communities as a worthwhile place where people can express, share and discover significant stories, ideas and objects.' In examining a range of community galleries across various types of museums we seek to develop a critical understanding of how and if these ambitions are applied and to reflect on the contemporary challenges encountered by and in these spaces.

Ideas of a dedicated community space have played a key role in recent museum history in terms of the democratisation of museum space. It allows for the inclusion of an important diversity of voices in the museum, but it is also challenging to maintain and demanding in terms of resources. It is a space that is coming under increasing pressure, both because of space or lack thereof, but also significantly from within the museum sector itself, with increasing professionalisation and what could be described as a risk-

averse culture driving a need for a more polished or professional presentation.

Historically the community gallery was often seen as a space for community-generated and community-owned exhibits with the museum acting as a largely benevolent host.

From our research and discussion with the sector, museum intervention now seems to be becoming more the norm for community galleries, driven no doubt by increasing pressures for accountability and also potentially by the importance of audience numbers. Increasingly, these spaces seem to be shaped more by the museum rather than the community having a 'free-rein'.

The community space and the rise of new forms of telling history have played an important role in representing new ideas of community and diversity. Underpinned by issues of identity, the concept of community is nebulous and influenced by a wide variety of social and political issues. In Australia, ideas of community have been explored and challenged in heated political debates around multiculturalism, a term which was first used in the early 1970s and quickly became part of museum discourse (McShane, 2001). Viv Szekeres, in 'Museums and Multiculturalism in Australia', highlights two core government-commissioned reports that assisted the defining of new ideas of communities for museums in Australia: the Pigott Report, *Museums in Australia* (1975), and the Galbally Report, *Migrant Programs and Services* (1979). Szekeres singles out the Galbally Report as a turning point for the relationship between museums and communities as it 'highlighted the existence of communities of shared interests and pasts and raised awareness of issues about cultural identity' (2011). This identification of community continues to be key to the community gallery, where ideas of community have most often been defined by a particular idea of a singular community. The shared aspect underlined by Szekeres and the tensions this brings need to be further

understood, as suggested by Witcomb when she discusses collective activities in producing images of community: 'Despite the rhetorical separation of the act of representation from the activity of producing that representation, the Museum and its client groups are co-producers in the imaging of community' (2003: 83). For many groups, the community gallery has represented a safe environment to explore settlement history and diversity from an ethnic perspective. In this context, it is interesting that it has only been in the last decade that the notion of community has been widened to include broader cross-cultural or even trans-cultural definitions - here the Powerhouse Museum (Sydney) has been a leader, developing community exhibitions that have been defined by place, special interest, and most recently by disability together with more traditional exhibitions focused on ethnic groups. Before exploring this aspect in further detail, it is necessary to outline a wider context for how the history of immigration and settlement has featured in Australian museums. This overview seeks to position how this subject has been collected and represented in recent decades by museums and how there has been a movement to establish both specific government and also community-run museums which treat it.

### **The subject of immigration in Australian museums**

Australian museums offer an important case study in this area because of the rich history of immigration that has transformed and shaped this former British colony. Although this history is now celebrated, this has not always been the case. Many studies have remarked how Australian museums were painfully slow to tell stories of Australian history (Anderson, 1991). This is not surprising but instead representative of a long-held lack of self-awareness. As far back as 1933, the Carnegie survey of Australian Museums and Galleries noted that there were only three museums that

focused on Australian history, and none of them exhibited contemporary history (Markham and Richards, 1933: 44). This situation began to shift after the Second World War, when questions of identity and national cohesion grew in importance, in part due to the waves of post-war migration, but also due to a growing sense of self-confidence (Webber, 1986; Anderson, 1991). Despite this, as late as 1975, the Piggott Report continued to note that there was no museum that presented 'an integrated Museum of Australian History' (17).

In Australia, the history of immigration and settlement is a vital part of contemporary cultural identity. Yet, it has only been in recent decades that Australia has sought to establish specific museums and policies that focus deliberately on collecting and documenting stories of migration. These recent developments are an important part of the context that frames the value of community spaces and how they are used today. Accordingly, permanent displays and specific institutions to deal with the themes of immigration and settlement were slow to arrive and it is unsurprising, but nonetheless disappointing, that, according to Eureka Henrich (2013: 784), the first permanent exhibition looking at stories of migration, *The changing face of Sydney*, opened at the Hyde Park Barracks in 1984. The Migration Museum (MM) in Adelaide opened in 1986 and was the first museum dedicated to immigration in Australia and the world (Henrich, 2013: 783).<sup>3</sup> This small museum, housed in a former lying-in hospital, took a dynamic approach to collecting and engaging with stories of migrants from its establishment. It is significant that this museum, together with the Constitutional Museum (1979-1995) and the South Australian Maritime Museum (established in

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<sup>3</sup> Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York (USA) was long planned, but did not actually open until 1990. See Desforges and Maddern, 2004.

1986), were part of History Trust SA, a then new organisation set up to explore South Australian history. As a group of institutions, including the more recent addition of the National Motoring Museum, they are best understood as evidence of the innovative cultural policy that was part of the significant achievements of the progressive left wing government of Don Dunstan (first in office from 1967-68 and then from 1970-79) undoubtedly coupled with the impressive creative will of their staff (Anderson, 2011; Horne, 1981).

Since then, in Australia, there has been one other physical museum devoted to immigration, established under the aegis of Museum Victoria, the Immigration Museum (IM) that opened in 1998 in Melbourne. Situated in the old Customs House building, the IM is impressive in terms of its physical scale and for how it positions itself on its website and in various publications as an organisation that displays 'Moving stories of people who have migrated to Australia'. Its parent organisation, Museum Victoria, formally established a collection policy for this area, The Migration and Cultural Diversity Collection, in 1990, that is at the heart of the IM (McFadzean, 2012: np). The most recent museum dedicated to immigration in Australia is a virtual one, established in 1998 in New South Wales: The Migration Heritage Centre (MHC) based at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. Since its foundation, there have been occasional calls to establish a physical museum in NSW, but to date the small team at the MHC continue to work in this virtual area.

Alongside these dedicated venues, immigration is of course addressed within larger and smaller organisations. At the national level, immigration is featured in the displays and collections at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra (2001), in the permanent

exhibition, *Journeys: Australia's connections with the world*, and in Sydney at the National Maritime Museum of Australia (1991) in their permanent exhibition, *Passengers*. The theme also features in some state-based museums such as the Western Australian Museum (Witcomb, 2003), but this is not the case in all states. Local museums also actively tell migrant stories. Small and often council-run, these museums have the closest links to actual communities and are frequently at the grass roots of significant patterns of social change. The objects collected here and the web of stories told are compelling and might in time allow for the fullest and most representative sense of Australia's immigration history. This brief overview underlines the relative paucity of museums engaging with this area across Australia and thus the value of community spaces either within these organisations, which have championed them, or across other museums as a method of recognising and exploring social diversity.

### **Australian museums, community, and giving a voice to community**

Before examining some precise examples of community galleries, it is also important to acknowledge a recent trend in contemporary museums that have seen a growth in the foundation of professional community-specific institutions. These museums represent, in Australia, what Szekeres has perceptively defined as 'an agent in identifying and preserving key elements in a particular culture and transmitting these to future generations' (1990: 209). Melbourne's Museo Italiano is exemplary of this movement. It officially opened in 2010 with aims, according to its website, to display and interpret 'the experience of Italian migration, and the culture created by Italians in Australia'. Located in the heart of the suburb of Carlton, Melbourne's 'Little Italy', the Museum is surrounded by Italian restaurants, one of the most visible legacies of Italian migration. The Museum is firmly based in and within a community, closely aligned with and

supported by CoAsIt (Comitato di Assistenza Scuole Italiane, an Italian social welfare organisation established in 1967). It is not solely a museum but a vibrant cultural hub that hosts a lively program of school tours and Italian language classes, as well as being the home of the Italian Historical Society and Italian Resource Centre.

This diversity of functions makes it a core site for its community and a potential wider pool of visitors. In this, it is typical of new conceptions of the museum as a space that is layered with meaning and is much more than its physical collection or displays (Message, 2006; Simpson, 2001). The Museo is a significant physical testament to the legacy and importance of Italian migrants who settled in Australia; it is intimately linked to a specific community where they are able to offer their own vision of Australian history in displays which foreground a shared Italo-Australian history. Text panels in the permanent display, when we visited in 2013, named the Italians on the 1770 explorations with Captain Cook, and indicated the Italian ancestry of Donald Bradman, an 'icon of Australian manhood'. These historical facts find a new importance in the display, which help to celebrate the long, but little-known, history of Italo-Australian heritage, and the ongoing contributions of this migrant community to contemporary Australia.

The Museo Italiano, The Hellenic Museum (2007), The Museum of Chinese Australian History (1985), all located in Melbourne, together with the various Jewish Museums throughout Australia (including the Jewish Museum of Australia (Melbourne, 1995) and the Sydney Jewish Museum (1992)), and the recently opened Islamic Museum of Australia (Melbourne, 2014) are evidence of the vested interests that groups have in claiming and documenting their own history, celebrating their place in society by using

the dominant cultural format of the museum. Mora Simpson identifies this trend as an international movement where communities have 'become much more actively involved in the process of making representations and turned the focus upon those who, in the past, were so often neglected by collectors and curators of social history' (Simpson, 2001, 71). Here they establish a formal space to organise and tell a particular history. Operating as professional museums, as opposed to the many small-scale often entirely volunteer-run institutions across Australia, such as the Portuguese Ethnographic Museum of Australia in Camperdown, Sydney, these new institutions are well resourced and employ professional staff. Indeed, many are vibrant players in the cultural landscape of their cities, and have empowered their communities. They are, however, the exception, and not all ethnic groups have established their own museums. As a group, these museums represent substantial communities with an established history in Australia. Many, which are either too small or too recent in terms of arrival, are excluded from such grand ambitions (Szekeres, 2011). Even with the emergence of this type of community museum, the community gallery within broader organisations continues to have relevance particularly as a space where smaller and less powerful communities can be represented.

### **An enduring community space: community-generated exhibitions**

#### **Hurstville City Library Museum and Gallery (NSW)**

The ethno-specific exhibition in a community gallery, which concentrates on and celebrates a specific ethnic group, is now a well-established format. It comes in part from the taxonomic structuring of knowledge favoured by the modern museum since its inception. Ethno-specific displays are opportunities for a dedicated focus on a particular group; in this they can allow for a cohesive engagement with, and a focused telling of, a

specific story of identity and belonging. The example of the Hurstville City Library Museum and Gallery is particularly revealing in terms of how it has developed its dedicated community spaces using the ethno-specific model. This council-run museum is situated in a very diverse part of Sydney as outlined on the council's website, which gives details of its Multicultural Services. Their quarterly magazine, *Dragonfiles*, is bilingual – English / Mandarin– reflecting the current demographics of this suburb, which was historically more white-European. This institution is dynamic but small. The Museum has four exhibition spaces: a permanent display exploring the local history of the region; a main temporary exhibition space, and two smaller temporary spaces, the Dragon's Lair Gallery and the Spotlight Gallery, where different communities come and put on exhibitions.

The exhibits in the Spotlight Gallery rotate ideally every twelve months, and are very much community-led. Since the establishment of the Spotlight space, in 2009, the interest and support for it has come from within the Museum's own audience. For example, Gemma Beswick, the Historical and Cultural Services Coordinator at Hurstville, in her interview, told us that the Indian population in Hurstville, although small, was very active. She described how via the main gallery exhibition in 2009, *From Saris to Surf*, they had then progressed to involvement in the community space.<sup>4</sup> Subsequent displays have followed a similar path, with exhibitions on the Croatian and Greek communities coming directly from community members who were inspired by the display, or had a pre-existing association with the council, that encouraged them to approach the Museum about an exhibition. This small space is highly traditional in terms of exhibition type and format, with objects displayed in one vertical case and two

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Beswick (18/07/2012).

small landscape cases, accompanied by a freestanding text panel. The objects typically come from people involved in the exhibition with items loaned for its duration. The exhibitions are obviously limited in scope by the space and, particularly, the style of cases, which, in many respects, determine the types of objects on display. For example, the large vertical case is ideal for showing a traditional costume. Smaller horizontal cases suit small objects while text panels are included inside the cases, and are supplemented by the single freestanding panel. The limitations of the display format highlight the core function of the community gallery, as articulated by Witcomb, to be about displacing 'the authority of the museum and to foreground *people* rather than objects' (2003: 82). However, it is also evident that these types of displays help to support engagement across communities and a real measure of the space's significance, beyond the individual story, comes from the opening event that accompanies any exhibition, with large numbers of people attending from within the local community, including sometimes diplomatic representatives of home countries. These events generate a sense of community, and can reinforce ideas of belonging and value. In our interview, Beswick described openings of exhibitions in this gallery as often turning into a festival, or a party, generated and determined by the community in terms of food, entertainment, and structure. In effect, she suggested that they became 'a celebration (for community members) to come and see themselves in the museum'.<sup>5</sup>

The displays at Hurstville come from within the community, but they benefit from practical support from staff at the gallery, and, in many ways, this can be seen as an extension of the local history group or the special interest group, promoting a particular story of settlement, without the long-term investment needed to secure and support a

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Beswick (18/07/2012).

permanent venue. The Spotlight Gallery has been a successful element for the Museum: it has allowed for more coverage of local history and complements the migration theme panels from the permanent exhibition which focus on the various phases of migration history in the region. The focus of the Spotlight Gallery has thus enabled the Museum to recognise and celebrate the achievements of ethnic groups in local history, and enriched material established in the permanent display on the local region. Its temporary displays have also addressed shortcomings in the collection of the Museum, which is particularly poor on contemporary history.

To date, however, the groups that have used this space have not represented the full diversity of the local community. For example, the Chinese community, which is the largest ethnic group in the local government area, is yet to be involved with the space (id. Population experts, 2011). Interestingly, the Museum does have a number of Chinese volunteers, who offer tours of the space in Mandarin, but the Museum has found that they hesitate to donate to the collection as ‘they don’t think they’re part of the story’.<sup>6</sup> This excerpt, from our interview conducted at Hurstville, highlights the very real barriers to access that can prevent or dissuade a meaningful sense of engagement by community, and how it remains an ongoing challenge for museums to ensure that community space is used, like any other display in a museum, in an even-handed manner. Elizabeth Crooke has demonstrated that, despite the best intentions informed by policies and guidelines, the interest in engaging with cultural institutions, and publically presenting history, must in effect come from the community itself. She observes how this partnership is ‘sometimes transient, often personality led, and frequently only best used and known amongst the community from which they [the

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Beswick (18/07/2012).

exhibitions] emerged' (Crooke, 2007 8-9). Crooke's observations support the evidence at Hurstville, and underline the fundamental challenge for all institutions in ideas of inclusion: it is not only to do with the institution's desires, but also with the communities' perceptions which are central to the success of any initiative.

### **Migration Museum (SA)**

The Migration Museum (MM) in Adelaide was a trailblazer in the use of the community space in Australia and internationally. One year after its opening in 1986, the MM introduced a gallery called *The Forum* as a community-led exhibition space, at the physical heart of the Museum's displays. Ever since, this space has hosted an incredible diversity of community groups in an attempt to fulfil the Museum's mission of showcasing the full history of migration to South Australia. *The Forum* was conceived as a means 'to empower community groups by the transfer of skills and through the opportunity to present their own image of themselves' (Migration Museum, 1993). The idea was inspired by a similar space, *Speakers' Corner*, a lively and often polemical part of the Constitutional Museum in Adelaide that opened at the end of the 1970s. This, according to Anderson (2011), was the first dedicated community-run space in a museum in Australia. At the MM, the success of the space is ongoing; it is reasonable to suggest that few display ideas survive for so long, and today, *The Forum* is booked up by community groups at least three years in advance.<sup>7</sup> Although humble in scale – it is a simple corridor space with a single entrance and exit - *The Forum* has been credited with inspiring the development of similar spaces at the Museum of London and the Museum of New York (Benson, 1995), and it also influenced the establishment of a comparable space at the IM in Melbourne.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Budimir, Curator at the Migration Museum (18/07/2013).

In Adelaide, exhibitions in *The Forum* have run regularly, with each lasting three months. In her history of the MM, Christine Finnimore (2008) proclaims that in its first twenty years, this space hosted over fifty different groups, and it has continued to thrive since then. Finnimore's account stresses *The Forum's* principles, and underlines its importance as a space where groups can present history 'in their own way', thereby acting as a meeting space between cultural groups and visitors, a view closely echoed in the arguments of Sandell. Here groups can:

explain and interpret their stories through costume and objects, photos and text as well as visual media. They can even provide stories of 'living history' by meeting the visitors themselves and talking with them (Finnimore, 2008: 75).

The exhibitions are again defined by the display space available – a limited number of small cases and panels - but nonetheless it has allowed for a sense of diversity to be represented, and helps the Museum to fulfil its aim, as outlined on its website, 'to discover the many identities of the people of South Australia through the stories of individuals and communities'. A key and important difference to the displays in the Spotlight Gallery at Hurstville is that although *The Forum* is highly specific, the temporary exhibitions held in this space are always framed by the broader focus of the Museum on migration history, which situates them in an important wider historical and political context.

### **The ongoing challenges of dedicated community spaces**

In all the institutions included in our survey, as is evident in the literature, one of the most important challenges for the community space is its resource intensive nature.

This problem is only compounded in smaller institutions, as the space demands support

together with the maintaining of community connections during and beyond projects. The speed of the rotation of exhibitions, even on a small scale, demands planning, support, and time. Although driven by the idea of allowing community voices to be heard, staff are actively called upon to develop and support exhibitions, and potentially also as negotiators or facilitators. In both Hurstville and Adelaide, organisation costs are covered by the communities themselves, and support from the museums is largely in kind. The spaces are designed for a community voice, and challenges do regularly arise when a contentious issue of interpretation or details around a historical dispute are raised. This, in particular, can be difficult to manage, and requires the establishment of safe boundaries both for the community exhibiting as well as the museum and the wider audience. An innocuous instance of this is evident in a recent exhibition in *The Forum* in Adelaide, *From South Bhutan to South Australia*. Before the exhibition even opened, the identification of 1500 refugees from southern Bhutan by the community presenting the exhibition was questioned in the public comments section on their webpage. The Museum responded quickly to this comment, on 6 January 2014, with the curator, Corinne Ball, stating how 'the 1500 is given by the southern Bhutanese community members who are putting together the exhibition'. All museums working in this area have examples of how histories that are contested at home continue to be challenged in new environments, and how communities are often in dispute and divided over the significance of historical details. Managing these and the expectations of all stakeholders is central to the success of the relationship between museums and communities but is also clearly resource-intensive.

Furthermore, the community gallery is not just a distinct physical space within the museum, it is also thematically distinct; the disjunction between it and the main

exhibition spaces can be regarded in both a positive and a negative light. Community displays tend to have an inward focus; they are developed by specific individuals with a vested interest, and the time to devote to telling their story. It is worth noting that organised groups tend to dominate the calendar in Adelaide. During 2013, *The Forum* hosted four exhibitions: *Keys of Hope* put together by the Australian Friends of Palestine (16 December 2012 – 28 February 2013); *SA Muslim Women's Journey* by the Muslim Women's Association of SA (9 March – 31 May 2013); *The Barwell Boys: Centenary of SA's British Farm Apprentices*, by the Barwell Boys and Little Brothers Family and Friends Association (3 June – 30 August 2013); and finally, *Discover Bosnia and Herzegovina* organised by the Optimists, a Bosnian Seniors group (7 September - 6 December 2013). Hosted in a museum, these exhibitions can have an inherent exclusivity as they may be speaking to their own community, rather than the broad public that a museum needs to attract. Thus, audiences can be comparatively limited, and both self-selecting and self-serving, which seems counter-intuitive to ideas of increasing access. Furthermore, neither Hurstville nor the Migration Museum keep specific statistics of visitor numbers to their community galleries as they are not considered as separate from the overall space of these museums. These gaps in documentation are a definite weakness when attempting to establish their reach.

Although the displays are important, a much broader value is gained via the process of developing an exhibition. Museums, such as the MM, excel at this aspect as they actively encourage groups to develop public programs and events to help open the Museum and the exhibition itself to a wider audience. The exhibition developed by the Muslim Women's Association of South Australia (MWASA) is a clear use of this format to strengthen community relations and recognise the contribution and challenges faced by

specific groups. For the MWASA, the exhibition was seen as ‘evidence of some 20 years of hard work by the organisation’, and throughout the exhibition the Museum provided tours and professional development for teachers, which fit neatly with its standard range of outreach programs (Hasanovic, 2013). Alongside an opening event, the exhibition was also integrated into the MM’s wider program for History Week in 2013 (a state-wide history festival). Here, in partnership with the MWASA, the Museum hosted two special events: ‘Islam in Adelaide’ (11 May) and ‘Countering stereotypes: being a Muslim Women in South Australia’ (18 May). Both events sought to develop wider community understanding and harmony, as advocated by Sandell, and also to reach beyond the individual organisation to new audiences, aiming at important goals of social inclusion and participation.

From the analysis of the use of community space at the Hurstville City Library Museum and Gallery and the Migration Museum, it is evident that community galleries continue to have an important function in celebrating specific communities, and increasing access, inclusion, and the participation of those communities within the museum space. As Witcomb suggests, they have a double function, serving to ‘help to maintain, document and preserve ethnic heritages and give ethnic communities a sense of their public value’ (Witcomb, 2009: 54). These exhibits allow for the telling of specific stories, often absent from the wider museum, which focuses on broader narratives or more recognised history. The voice of that community is thus heard and empowered through its inclusion in an official space. Furthermore, the process of developing an exhibition and the focus gained from an exhibition is for any group an opportunity to foster a sense of ownership and pride in their own history and contribution to community. In their temporary nature, these exhibitions encourage a rotating program of different

groups. They allow for the introduction of new objects into the museum, which can, in turn, open new collection areas, and also underline the value of loans to expanding collections and the use of oral sources as a part of history.

Despite these benefits, as suggested earlier, the community gallery often occupies a peripheral space in the museum, which means that it can also reinforce barriers and distance between communities. As Witcomb states, the community space is also able to 'reinforce the distance between mainstream Australia and ethnic groups' (2009: 54). There can be a lack of connection to the broader story that is told in the main galleries and a pronounced inward focus. Audiences can be limited, which then tempers the notion that these spaces open up the museum to new audiences. The story being told may also be restricted by a powerful individual's influence within a community and, therefore, may be more exclusive than how it may first seem. These exhibitions can be lacking in objectivity, rendering them overly celebratory, and focused on telling people's stories with little critical engagement. There is also a challenge in these spaces as they can seem outdated in the current museological landscape and inconsistent in terms of style and quality of finish to other professionally managed spaces (Simon, 2010: 296). It remains the case that these exhibitions tend to stress what Ian McShane has termed the 'enrichment narrative' (McShane, 2001: 125), that is, positive stories of transformation and contribution, and there is clearly little opportunity or interest from museums to use these spaces and their community-generated content to face the challenge of dealing with the difficult and darker aspects of migrant and community history.

### **Thematic shows: a move away from community content to curated exhibitions**

This apparent self-interest and lack of critical questioning is without doubt a weakness of the community space and increasingly museums have adopted and experimented with a more intercultural approach as a different way of using the community space to more actively promote dialogue and critical enquiry. This idea of the intercultural is not new, as attests the exhibition held at Museum Victoria in 1992, *Bridging Two Worlds: Jews and Italians of Carlton*, which developed out of a partnership between the Museum of Victoria, the Jewish Museum of Australia, and the Italian Historical Society (Henrich, 2013: 789). However, it offers a useful way of reimagining community engagement as it celebrates an intercultural vision that can invite a more complex conversation and also implements a more professional format. This is in line with previously mentioned developments in museological theory and, in particular, Modest and Golding's identification of international trends towards 'new collaborative paradigms within museums' (Modest & Golding, 2013: 1), which have seen new models of consultation and collaboration to include and engage with community.

### **Immigration Museum (VIC)**

Working across groups is more easily facilitated by a thematic focus that allows for a different approach to storytelling, as the *Sweets: tastes and traditions from many cultures* exhibition held in the Community Gallery at the IM from 15 March 2012 to 2 June 2013 shows, with its cross-cultural model of collaboration across five groups (Indian, Italian, Japanese, Mauritian, and Turkish), all from Victoria (Immigration Museum, 2013). In our discussions, Padmini Sebastian, Director of the IM, was keen to emphasise the importance of the process in this intercultural initiative:

And the process is actually more important than what you see on the floor. I mean what you see on the floor is great, but bringing those groups together and

getting them to know each other, build relations, share their heritage and stories, and seeing them, because we had this gathering at the end and a debrief, seeing them actually develop friendships beyond here is an extremely valuable part of the process.<sup>8</sup>

As Golding emphasizes, this is part of a broader shift that is reimagining the role of the curator. She observes that ‘themes of co-curation and new dialogue offer nuanced distinctions of what a curator is and may be, who is empowered to represent the diverse communities, whose voices remain silenced or softer toned, and to what extent meaningful collaboration may differ from participation’ (Golding, 2013: 25). In comparison to community-led ethno-specific exhibitions at, for example, *The Forum*, with regard to styling and degree of design, the *Sweets* exhibition was a much more professional product. This is because of the direct involvement of a museum professional, Emily Kocaj, Exhibitions Manager at the IM, who managed the project, and brought her expertise in facilitating community partnerships to it.

The universality of the theme of sweets opened the exhibition to many different cultures: after all, and this was very much the premise behind the theme of the exhibition, who doesn’t like sweets? The Museum organised other events on this theme: the ‘Sweets Festival’ on 18 March 2012 was a great success, as can be seen from the video footage and the comments left by members of the public on the IM’s website. A follow-up one-day festival celebrating chocolate, entitled ‘Melt’, using another universal food theme, was held on 26 May 2013. This festival involved Belgian, Mexican, and Brazilian communities who had not been featured in the *Sweets* exhibition, thus allowing for a further widening of reach and broader ideas of diversity. As Luciana

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Sebastian (25/07/2012).

Fraguas points out in the on-line video from the festival: 'The Melt Festival wasn't only about chocolate. You're getting to know a new culture in a new way. People get together and they share their recipes, and they share their stories.' It is this commonality of experience which is important and which is foreground in the intercultural format: people may have different histories, different opinions, but there are experiences to be shared – these can be as seemingly irrelevant as about chocolate – but they point to a larger collective consciousness. The museum becomes a place where people come to an understanding of others' points of view - both as shared identity and through the affect produced by these exhibitions - but also to the realisation that not everybody thinks alike.

These intercultural displays are powerful in the cohesion and collaboration that they actively promote; they are examples of the definition of intercultural, articulated by UNESCO, as they celebrate the 'existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect' (UNESCO, 2005). They do, however, have limitations and care needs to be taken that the community voice remains present and has perceived authenticity for the community and the museum. This no doubt requires a delicate balance between all participants to ensure that the exhibition and all discussions remain open, and are collaborative. This is a demanding process for all, and, in reality, often struggles to move beyond the inherent tensions and complexities of the numerous stakeholders involved in the process (Lynch and Alberti, 2009; Golding and Modest, 2013). The work of Lynch and Alberti illustrates effectively this challenge in establishing meaningful collaboration. They observe that, despite the best intentions, it remains important to acknowledge that:

encounters still resonate with the museum's role in essentialising difference. Western institutions continue to maintain borders and to privilege particular ways of knowing. Consciously or not, those who staff museums and galleries have been trained and socialised to think and know in those ways, and museums are not set apart from global economic injustice and the reality of racial conflict and prejudice (2009: 14).

Another important limitation is again the resources that community exhibitions demand, and the risks involved. These are exhibitions which require a great deal of support and project management over a significant period of time in order to allow for meaningful engagement and participation by groups who may have no experience in producing exhibitions. The lead figure from the museum must play a diplomatic role to ensure that groups feel supported and that the collaboration occurs without any one group dominating or determining the content or final product - in the case of the *Sweets* exhibition this was reinforced in the exhibition's very structure with each group allocated the same physical space. Lynch and Alberti advocate for a form of radical trust that would shift fundamental ideas about the museum's protection of fact and truth, commenting that 'in practising radical trust, the museum may control neither the product nor the process' (15). Their radical position is certainly not evidenced in the final products of *Sweets* but this type of exhibition does challenge the traditional role of the museum, and gives access to a fuller picture of diversity in the final product.

There can be no doubt that the intercultural requires a careful balancing act between competing groups of interest. Here, the sense of community comes across not as a cohesive group but as one that is inherently diverse and mixed. The challenge of collaboration raises many fundamental questions for museums, and our findings are

echoed in the work of Kimberly Keith who observes that this means that ‘difference and diversity must simultaneously be negotiated in relation to the object, the museum’s narrative, its audience and the personal and professional positions of individual practitioners’ (Keith, 2012: 49).

### **What lessons are to be learnt?**

An essential matter raised by our interviews, consideration of displays, and review of the literature, is the need to continue to debate and question the community space and how it is used, be it in its focus on specific groups or in a more intercultural approach. The MM and the IM are both actively using the community gallery to present a range of community voices. The IM, by its rotation of different exhibition formats in its community gallery, is exploring the function of the space in ways that move beyond the claim on their website that the community exhibitions are about the opportunity to ‘Tell your community’s experiences and stories of migration and diversity’. Their experimentation with collaborative cross-community exhibitions, such as *Sweets*, places a greater emphasis on process to celebrate diversity, but they also importantly continue to support community-specific exhibitions in their community gallery space. Although sweets and chocolate festivals have been organised by this museum, the list of community-specific (from Victoria) cultural festivals on the Museum’s website is actually far longer, ranging from Bosnian Herzegovinian to Vietnamese. In Adelaide, the MM’s *The Forum* is central to their displays. In discussions with individuals from the Powerhouse, this museum appears to be moving away from the community gallery model, although this is yet to be confirmed in planning documents. Hurstville City Library Museum and Gallery values the community-specific, but is also exploring the intercultural approach outside its dedicated community gallery. Like many small

museums, Hurstville is limited by the scale of its community display space and a lack of dedicated support to enable community engagement with the space. It has recently adopted a more intercultural approach as a format for its main temporary exhibition space in a commissioned photography exhibition: *Living Hurstville: Portraits of a Community* that ran from July to October 2013. This exhibition presented a broader picture of the diversity of the local area than that offered in the community space. It did, however, represent a much more significant investment by the Museum, which is particularly costly for a small institution in terms of staff time, as it required two years of development to conduct interviews and commission photographic portraits of its eventual 40 participants.

Much has been written about community and its importance to museums, but the realities of practice and support are often very different (Golding & Modest, 2013; Watson, 2007). The examples we have examined in this article are further evidence of what Golding has characterised as part of the process that is transforming 'exhibition spaces, from sites where knowledge is transmitted to passive audiences to potential forums or contact zones where new voices and visibilities are raised and new knowledge(s) actively constructed' (2013, 25). Golding's articulation of this environment is especially the case in intercultural exhibitions as they foreground new ideas of participation, and new ideas of the display as a discussion between museum, participants and audiences. This development further emphasises the resource-intensive nature of these spaces and the particular challenges of working with communities. Some have argued that there is a chance of ghettoising, rather than including, community by affording it its own dedicated space. There are issues of representation here which draw on postcolonial theory: who is speaking for whom in

these galleries? Who is representing whom? Does your 'I' represent my 'I'? Szekeres (1995: 63) quotes Gayatri Spivak in one of her articles on this subject: 'in claiming marginality we are assuring the validation of the centre mainstream position'. Is the community gallery actually emphasising that that community is not part of mainstream culture and Australian society? Are museums in fact essentialising communities by using the community space? Would they be better off expanding ideas of community within the whole space? This brings us full circle to the question of representing the day-to-day multicultural reality of many urban Australians. However, the dangers of more established communities dominating these spaces and some communities not being represented at all are still very present, and a balance needs to be struck between what government-run museums present and what is preserved and featured in the community-specific display.

In conclusion, it would be foolish to pronounce the death of the community gallery or to challenge its relevance to museological practice either in Australia or internationally. It continues to represent a precious chance to develop diversity in the museum, and diversity in audience. The community gallery can offer a particular story that is of value and needs to be recognised in the official space of the museum, but it must also acknowledge that this is not the only story. The Migration Heritage Centre, with its online digital model, may offer a certain advantage in this respect in that the presentation of stories can be ongoing and interconnected, but for this to be achieved, at a meaningful level, the organisation needs further financial support and staff. Above all, community engagement needs to be challenging and critically engaged, and that can be difficult in a focused celebratory space, telling a community-led story. The museum needs to lead and support communities to develop braver exhibitions and displays that

will challenge spectators and participants to think more deeply. One innovative way of doing this outside the community space would be to interrupt permanent displays with community-generated content, inviting groups to tell their own story alongside the mainstream, as has been done in engaging with First People's narratives (Museums Australia, 2005; Peers and Brown, 2003). It is important above all to recognise that the community gallery remains an indispensable space within the museum, mostly because of its value to community groups themselves, who see it as a chance to showcase and celebrate their place in Australian history and society; an aspect that our current research project plans to consider in greater depth.

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Anni Turnbull, Powerhouse, NSW (19/07/2012)

John Petersen, Migration Heritage Centre, NSW (19/07/2012)

Padmini Sebastian, Immigration Museum, VIC (25/07/2012)

Margaret Anderson, History Trust SA (17/07/2013)

Vedrana Budimir, Migration Museum, SA (18/07/2013)

Viv Szekeres, Migration Museum, SA (18/07/2013)

Dr Moya McFadzean, Museums Victoria (25/07/2013)

Emily Kocaj, Immigration Museum, VIC (08/08/2013)