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City revealed: The process and politics of exhibition development

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts
in
Museum Studies

at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

Daniel Charles Patrick Smith
2003
Abstract

This thesis examines the ways in which the process of exhibition development and the politics this involves affects the practice of history in the museum. It does this by establishing the broad parameters of history practice in the museum and places this in relation to academic practice, focusing on the New Zealand context and specifically upon Auckland War Memorial Museum. From this basis the thesis examines the development of City exhibition at Auckland Museum as a large-scale museum history exposition. The development process for this exhibition was created with the aim of changing the traditional Museum approach so as to create a more engaging and scholarly history exhibition than is traditional. At the same time however, there was also an aim of retaining the appearance of the traditional Museum within this programme of change. These aims were to be met by the innovation of the collaboration between an academic historian and the Museum’s practitioners in the development process.

The research is based upon a detailed investigation of the roles played by the exhibition team members and the decisions, negotiations and compromises that they made through the development process. Beginning with their original intentions and concepts for the exhibition its metamorphosis into the exhibition as it was installed in the Museum gallery is traced. Emphasis is placed on the resonance that the various decisions and changes carried into the finished exhibition. The findings indicate that the Museum’s traditions of developing and displaying knowledge exerted a strong conservative effect over the exhibition development in conflict with the programme of change. This conservatism vied with the authorial intentions of the exhibition development team. As a result of this influence the exhibition developed leant towards the conventional. The unexpectedly orthodox outcome resulted from the absence of critical museological practice. The thesis argues that although Auckland Museum had undergone extensive restructuring, including the introduction of new exhibition development processes and a new outlook as an organisation, the conception of history in the Museum had not changed. Ultimately this precluded that the practice of history in the institution would advance through the revised exhibition development process. However, the development of City did help achieve the updating of social history in the Museum and remains a platform upon which a more critical approach to the past can be built.
Acknowledgements

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# Abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DS</td>
<td>Daniel Smith</td>
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<tr>
<td>JB</td>
<td>James Belich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MB</td>
<td>Margaret Belich</td>
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<tr>
<td>RW</td>
<td>Rodney Wilson</td>
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<tr>
<td>RY</td>
<td>Rose Young</td>
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Plate 1 Footprint E showing the final proposed layout for City exhibition. Rose Young City Project Files.
Prologue: City

Plate 2 Auckland War Memorial Museum, main entrance. Collection of Auckland University Art History Department.

Plate 3 Auckland Museum ground floor plan. City is located in the back left hand corner from the front entrance (the room with the bridge icon). Image from Auckland Museum website, URL: http://www.akmuseum.org.nz/web/floorplans/ground.html
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