

The role of the university museum in community development

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Abstract

The development of universities as participants in the cultural life of a city is a new and welcome development that in many cases has been led by the university's museums.

This paper discusses the resulting change in the perception of university museums, both within the institution and among the broader community, and argues that university museums have a unique potential to be cultural players and leaders within their university and community. With direct call on experts across a diverse range of subject areas they have an ability to provide an extraordinary range of public programs from performances, concerts, and artist interventions to more traditional lectures and forums.

The benefits can be enticing. For some museums that have gone down this path and strategically aligned themselves with their university's goals, these developments have led to an increased visibility (internal and external) and funding (including new buildings and increased staffing numbers).

Case study: The University of Sydney's Museums and their role in developing and defining the university as a cultural precinct.

Introduction

Like many universities of its age, the University of Sydney's cultural resources are rich and diverse, comprising two public museums, three art gallery spaces and a performing arts centre as well as specialist museums used primarily for teaching.

On the university campus on any day or night can be found an equally rich and diverse array of exhibitions, talks, performances and concerts. Yet many of these events are held in isolation, disconnected from one another.

I want to investigate the role of the university's museums as both venues and as leaders, co-organizers, and promoters in opening up the university to the community. I also want to look at their role in creating a cultural precinct to assist the university in achieving its aim of turning itself from an inward-looking institution to an outward-looking one.

The university's museums are one of the few parts of the university to undertake a deliberate strategy to connect with the broader public, to create programs that welcome those outside the university community, outside the 'ivory tower', on a consistent and on-going basis. They break a continuing perception of the university as being separate and closed off from the broader community.

We have a rich array of things happening across the campus and at the same time, a broader public unaware the University is an accessible and welcoming place.

In the same way that bringing together the museums through a recent amalgamation gave them a collective strength, so bringing together the university's cultural activities into a cohesive precinct creates something greater and more effective than each individual activity.

Someone must lead this and take the role of bringing it together. Museums with public programs as a part of their core business have staff with the expertise to organize events, publicize them and bring together the extraordinary talents disseminated throughout the campus. Staff, speaking the language of academics, can engage with a broad range of specialists and, at the same time, engage just as effectively with school-aged children and members of the general public. They become ambassadors

for the university, communicating and making accessible research and innovation often hidden from public view except for a fleeting press release.

In defining and harnessing all that is happening on campus, what we end up with is a vibrant and active precinct, a cultural precinct, open to the public and recognized and associated with a variety and diversity of cultural experiences: performing arts, visual arts, social debates, etc.

Why is this important?

The creation of a cultural precinct within the campus provides a focus for what in many cases is already happening in a university. It provides a voice to the many programs and activities being undertaken by faculties and departments and the museums and performing arts spaces and provides a bridge to engage with wider and diverse communities.

An example of the energy that can be created started with a faculty that had an idea for a lecture on the restoration of the Acropolis in Athens, to be delivered by a visiting academic. As originally planned it would have reached the usual small group of followers, mainly architectural students and perhaps engineering students and alumni. The organizers sought the museum's assistance to host a small reception for it. Initial discussions soon resulted in the event becoming larger and of higher profile, with more prestigious speakers coming out from Greece. It grew to encompass the big issues – repatriation of cultural property, debates over restoration versus conservation, focusing in this case on the inevitable discussion over the repatriation of the Parthenon marbles.

What started as a single lecture ended up as a two-week long series of talks, lectures, events and performances across the campus and a two-month museum-based exhibition. It reached new audiences and received widespread media coverage. Generous financial support from the Greek community for our programs followed and we are now holding a Greek Day in the Nicholson Museum as an annual event.

The cultural life of the city

Defining ourselves as a cultural precinct puts us in competition with other recognized cultural precincts in the city, competing for visitors and participants for events. This is not necessarily a bad thing.

The University of Sydney has followed the strategy of involving ourselves in the cultural life of the city, working together with other institutions and with community events such as Science Week, History Week, Festival of Sydney, Chinese New Year and the gay and lesbian Mardi Gras. The connections we have made by involving ourselves in these events have led to on-going partnerships, the creation of new programs, and promotional support.

Results

Overall the effect of these programs has been positive:

- visitor numbers to the museums have tripled over the past five years, as have donations to the museum;
- membership of the Friends organization have more than tripled bringing with it a powerful group of advocates and supporters;
- and with each new month brings offers of gifts of paintings and artifacts as well as notification of intended bequests.

The university itself has changed to become more inviting as the 'gated village' disappears. I feel it is no coincidence that benefaction to the university is at record levels.

Challenges

Having set the standard and level of activity we now need to sustain it. Budgets are still challenging, and staffing levels are too low as expectations placed upon us keep rising. There is a danger of failure borne out of initial success.

The quality and standards of programs need to be constantly monitored and balanced with the need to take some risks in what we do.

We need to build on these developments and at the same time strengthen our connection and use of collections with the core teaching, learning and research of the university.

Curatorial staff are often torn between the needs of the collections and the demands placed on them by the more publicly-focused agendas, with exhibitions and public programs sometimes driving research. For some staff it has meant a shift in the way they allocate their day.

Summary

We are still finding our place in the broader cultural landscape of Sydney, but the approach we have taken has strengthened our position and profile within the university and has provided a new emerging and evolving cultural precinct for the University and the City of Sydney.

Contact

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