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Communicating cultures: buses food and museums

Abstract

Extract:

The national conference Communicating Cultures was organised by Museums Australia and was held from 21-24 November 1995 in Brisbane.

Keywords

international community, cultures, indigenous people

CONFERENCE REPORT

COMMUNICATING CULTURES: BUSES, FOOD AND MUSEUMS

by Paulette Dellios*

The national conference *Communicating Cultures* was organised by Museums Australia and was held from 21-24 November 1995 in Brisbane. The Minister for Communications and the Arts was to, have officially opened the conference by pre-recorded video from Parliament House. However, even this 'reproduction' of the 'real thing' became a 'replica' when a message was read on behalf of the Minister. It was the first disconcerting sign of communication within the culture of the arts.

The conference handbook described the "much greater inclusion of Indigenous speakers and delegates" and the "culturally appropriate involvement of Indigenous people." In the plenary sessions no one officially communicated that some Indigenous people were trying to organise a protest against the conference. One learnt this unofficially from the Indigenous participants during the hurried refreshment interludes. It has been said of museums that it is important to look at what is left unsaid. This was equally true of the museum conference.

Communicating Cultures may have communicated a lack of cultural understanding. Some museum professionals analyse representations of space within the museum to deconstruct the museum's ideology. Yet, how was space 'interpreted' within the 'storyline' of the conference? The venue was the Brisbane Hilton. All the sessions were held in rooms without windows, on a floor without windows. The museum has often been described as a 'tomb with a view' but in this case the venue was a tomb without a view. For someone with a different cultural construct of space, the venue was burial alive.

Another significant sign of how space was culturally constructed and how it structured communication was shown in the traditional lecture-hall seating arrangement. However, the conference handbook had emphasised that "the seating of all Plenary Sessions has been deliberately arranged in a semi-circular rather than lecture-hall format." This was also absent in the Parallel Sessions and was only apparent when participants sat on the ground and formed circles of communication over their culturally constructed menu of sandwiches.

Escape from the tomb without a view had to be weighed against the concept of time, which is another cultural construct. The conference scheduling made for frantic fragmented experiences—things half understood, people half seen, questions half answered, and sandwiches half eaten. Was this an attempt to reconstruct the traditional museum experience? Interestingly, one of the delegates from Malaysia most enjoyed the presentation by an Aboriginal speaker because of the way in which his concept of time unfolded.

The issue of responsibility is one which museum professionals are quick to add to their rapidly expanding definition of self. The anthropologist Mary Douglas has highlighted the extensive social, cultural and symbolic significance of food. Who was responsible for the conference dinner where the Malaysian participants paid \$55 to sustain themselves on bread because no

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one had considered their dietary needs? What does this communicate about museums communicating cultures? A revealing parallel is provided by the international conference on Malay Studies organised by the Beijing Foreign Studies University in June 1996. The participants from Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei were highly impressed by their Chinese hosts' efforts to cater for their Muslim dietary requirements.

The Australian conference *Communicating Cultures* also raised an interesting question of how much does it cost to communicate cultures? No papers were handed out but one could purchase audio cassettes (another form of artefact to add to one's collection). An individual tape cost \$10 and the complete set was \$180. The theme of culture as money was also evident in the paper presented by Prof. David Dolan, Director of the Centre for Cultural Heritage Studies, Curtin University. He spoke on AusHeritage, a national business network, which will provide "cultural heritage services" overseas, particularly in Asia. There are no ideologically free museums, and yet, it is assumed AusHeritage business services will be.

One of the keynote speakers at the Australian conference was Dr Amareswar Galla from the University of Canberra and Co-ordinator of the Cross-Cultural Working Group, International Council of Museums. The theme was 'Museums, Technologies and Indigenous Cultures' and he focused on the opportunities offered by new technologies. He related an Indian adage in which opportunities are like buses in remote areas—if you miss this one, you never know when the next one is going to come along. He raised issues of equity of access and cultural control. It may be useful to remember in the rush to get on the bus to double check the destination.

Another bus story comes from an international congress held in Malaysia from 6-7 September 1996. The theme of the congress was 'East Asia Museum Networking'. The organiser, the Sultan Alam Shah Museum, was so concerned about the delegates' welfare that a bus was provided to ferry them to and from the museum. It takes two minutes to walk to the museum from the hotel but it involves crossing a busy road. There always seemed to be a museum bus ready at our footsteps, even if we weren't running according to schedule. Incidentally, the schedule was leisurely enough to provide time for communicating, networking and shopping.

The overseas delegates to the Malaysian congress were from Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, Korea, Japan, China and Australia. The congress was an instructive lesson on the etiquette of international relations. The flags of the delegates' nations were prominently displayed during the opening ceremony. We were well fed throughout the two days and the meals were held in the outdoors section of the museum (a different concept of space). There were congress dinners (which were free) on both evenings. Gifts were presented to the delegates after their paper presentations and also during the final dinner, which was attended by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Tourism (the 'real thing'). No detail was overlooked—delegates were even given a refund to cover airport tax. What does such an approach communicate about cultures? Hospitality and generosity of spirit are both 'intangible cultural heritage' and 'national treasures'. Perhaps, Asia can offer its "cultural heritage services" to Australia.

The international 'community' of museums has been rethinking the museum for over thirty years. Museums Australia describes itself as "the peak body for the museum industry." It may have mastered the meaning of 'industry' but it has yet to creatively explore 'communication' or 'culture'. *Communicating Cultures* missed the bus in 1995. In 1996 Museums Australia will present its national conference *Power and Empowerment—Preparing for the New Millennium*. I doubt I'll be at the bus stop. Sandwiches, the millennium and museums are a distressing mixture.