

MIND THE GAP

SuperStudio 2015

Friday 7th –
Saturday 8th August 2015



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The Premise

Cultural identity is beset and defined by inherent tensions. On the one hand it is expansive and dynamic and driven by individual pursuits and creativity; on the other it is reductive and static, confined to dumb symbols of the lowest common denominator.

While cultural identity does imply a collective framework, any attempt to define, classify, or limit is subject to a range of editorial frailties, and trying to pin down a definitive outcome that states what cultural identity is, is invoking the likelihood of failure.

In this exercise we hope to explore this inherent tension by tackling ideas around cultural representation and material (and non-material) culture – objects and urban frameworks. This places us squarely in the realm of ‘museums’ – places where we ‘show’ outcomes of our cultural production – artworks, objects, etc. While we usually think about museums and galleries as formalised institutions, located perhaps in a cultural precinct, they can be placed almost anywhere – from roadhouse toilet, to local park, or even on-line.

The Framework

In the following extract from Andrea Witcomb’s paper on the poetics of exhibition design and the ‘Architecture of Rewards’ the idea of gaps and a non-curated narrative is proposed. This is where the investigation will start.

“Conventional forms of exhibitions can be described using Barbara Kirschenblatt Gimblett’s terminology as being either ‘in situ’ or ‘in context’ displays. Both of them have a strong narrative form. An ‘in situ display’, such as a historic house with its period rooms or a diorama of a habitat in a natural history museum, involves a theatrical assemblage of objects to tell a story. While generally understood as immersive in that they present a picture and in a sense allow the viewer to be inside the space, they are relatively closed texts... The same applies to the ‘in context’ display, where objects are interpreted not by recovering their setting but by the use of didactic labels, graphs and images. New contexts are provided for a disparate group of objects which are placed within a narrative produced by the curator using either juxtaposition, taxonomies or an external narrative structure such as a narrative of progress, discovery or exploration. This is probably the most common form of exhibition style with objects in front of graphic panels. The narrative is sequential, gaps are filled in by the curatorial voice and the visitor is invited to move alongside the display in order to get the narrative or story.

In some recent forms of interpretation however, gaps are purposely created in order to invite the visitor to play a game and become the interpreter. Rather than give you the story, you are given clues and invited to co-produce the story. As with video games, the structure is there as are some of the narrative elements. But the finished production is only available through the process of engaging with the site. Indeed, the finished production will be as different as each visitor and entirely dependent on what ‘work’ they engage in. Importantly, this is the case not only because each visitor will bring with them different sets of knowledges and interpret the site differently, as they would with any exhibition, but also because the exhibition itself is set up to generate these differences by refusing to provide a complete narrative.¹



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The Stuff

The following selection of 'objects' largely taken from the collection of the National Museum of Australia (NMA²) could generally be considered as part of Australia's 'National' identity.

- » Phar Lap's Heart (NMA)
- » A windmill in the West (Peter Carey³)
- » Convict Love Token (NMA)
- » Faith Bandler's Gloves (NMA)
- » Pie Floater
- » Azaria Chamberlain's Dress (NMA)

The significance or importance of these objects is defined by the events and people they are associated with, and that have 'shaped' Australia's culture. Our aim is to liberate these objects from the bounds of the NMA, and to investigate what new narrative might appear if they are inserted into a different or more local context; a context that might not be understood as a traditional museum or gallery space.



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² <http://www.nma.gov.au/collections/highlights>
³ A WINDMILL IN THE WEST

'But this is not a caravan, not a real caravan. It resembles an aluminium coffin with a peculiar swivelling base constructed like the base of a heavy gun. The soldier has no idea why anyone would design it that way, but he has taken advantage of it, changing the direction of the caravan so that the front door faces away from the wind. Changing the view, is what he calls it, changing the view.'

No matter which way you point that door the view doesn't alter. All that changes is the amount of fence you see. Because there is nothing else - no mountains, no grass, nothing but a windmill on the western side of the line.'
from 'A Windmill in the West', 'The Fat Man in History' by Peter Carey, 1974

Creating the Gap

The insertion of these objects into a place with a desire to store or show, in many ways defines that place as a museum or gallery. Because places also have cultural significance,⁴ the interrelationship between the object and its context, and the interrelationship between sets of values, means that the potential for new meaning or new narrative is formed.

The 'Gap' Witcomb discusses can be considered the space between the values (of objects and context) the space between different objects and spaces and the space between actual places. All of these are elements in the development of a new narrative.

People make their own story. Pieces here and there, and the interrelationship between them create the narrative.

Exploring the Gap

Examine *all 6* of the selected objects and understand their values as they are generally recognised in the NMA's collection (and elsewhere in relation to the pie floater⁵ and Carey's text). These need to be summarised in your own words (and images). While many of you will be familiar with either the objects themselves or their history, others will not. As in the main, they are part of the NMA's collection, it is implied that they are considered to be part of Australia's cultural identity. Participants from non-Australian cultural backgrounds may have a different understanding, or different, but no-less valid, view of their significance.

Select a building or site – a place, or series of places that you know. These will form the context for the display of these objects. The place may be 'selected' from existing buildings, spaces, urban, suburban, rural areas. If they are a series of places they may be within walking distance, or they may be spread across the country, or even further. You need to understand and iterate the significance of that place or places – in your own words and through images and drawings. You must also state your reasons for their selection. The physical context plays a key role in the developing narrative: the relationship between the object and its context is critical to the experience and the meanings created and presented.

The next step is to insert the 'objects' within the 'place' or 'places' that you have selected. This act denotes these as cultural spaces; it changes their nature from their existing or traditional context to a new civic one. Within this part of the task you are to provide ways of showing these objects within their new context. As a designer there are a number of opportunities and constraints that you must consider in this part of the process:

- » The relationship between the viewer and the object.
- » The multitude of varying cultural backgrounds and general demographics of your audience; who are these people, where do they come from, and why are they here?
- » The site ownership: Are you proposing to use public or private space and what effect/s will that have on your proposal.
- » What are the conservation and display constraints such as security and lighting that govern the showing of these objects. Keep in-mind the material nature of the 'objects.'
- » Temporary vs permanent installations



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Back and Forth

It is the designer's responsibility to select and adapt the place, and take a curatorial role in the presentation of that 'object.' The designer has to take a position on the nature of the identity or cultural significance of both object and place in order to make decisions about the architectural and display mechanisms required.

While the outcomes are related to the presentation of the 'objects' within the selected contexts, they should be seen as an integrated 'experience' where the act of viewing/engaging is by its nature contributing to the development of an overall **Poetic** narrative.

Through a sequence of experiential sketches, notes or other means, you are to elaborate both your new narrative and the developed experience. These must give some detail about how the display will work, what the spatial experience will be like, and what the connections are.

Submission requirements

While you may use whatever methods and media you feel comfortable working with ultimately the submission will be a series of digital images that describe your proposal. Each team will provide a minimum of 1 image, up to a maximum of 15. Alternately, the presentation can be video based but all presentation methods should aim to stay within a 5 minute time frame.



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