

## Commonwealth Association of Museums Triennial: reflections on a special triennial

**Shae Trewin**

The theme of the Commonwealth Association of Museums triennial conference, held in partnership with the Auckland War Memorial Museum and Waikato Museum and with support from ICOM Aotearoa New Zealand, was “The View from Here: Sustainability, Community and Knowledge Systems”.

With almost 90 delegates attending from across the globe, the timing of the conference was particularly poignant as rapid retractions of indigenous rights, representation and expression were rolling out within and outside Aotearoa. Set within this destabilized global context there could be no stronger justification for a sector self-assessment. The rains that soaked attendees on the first day were symbolic of the cleansing put forward by the opening question “are Museums talking in nouns or verbs when positioning or promoting bicultural practices and partnership, and when speaking of de-colonising traditional museum practices?” How is it that annual plans year after year can promise deliverables upholding bicultural values and frameworks and yet progress seems barely evident? The frustration waiting more than 20 years for galleries to be revitalized, and the lack of connection with new generations of tamariki and diaspora within supposed representational spaces, is evidence of a sector needing to change.

Over the following days, as the rain continued to pour, kōrero of fear, loss, hurt, indignity, grief and uncertainty set within museum contexts were expressed in community stories, poetry, personal experience, creative writing and artistic expression. These shared experiences were evidence that museum collections, sites and buildings are not neutral nor necessarily safe spaces for indigenous and first nation communities. The magnitude of injustices shared was deeply moving and was a profound reminder of the fundamental role museums hold as repositories, or physical manifestations of memory, and thereby witnesses of history and shared community experience.

As the sun began to emerge by the end of the week, presentations on breaking down barriers to using or accessing museums and collections were shared. Addressing community concerns, controlling the narrative in traditionally unsafe spaces, taking collections out into the community, and implementing indigenous-led working structures/systems were discussed. Fundamental to each emerging success story, is the essential presence, partnership and participation of indigenous and first nation communities across museum operations. Presence and partnership creates trust, improves collections care, fosters kaitiakitanga rather than ownership, and creates new pathways for community engagement, connection and education. For buildings and sites of significance, partnership leads to respectful care, informed consent, and clear boundaries on access and protection. Barriers to achieving genuine partnerships were also shared including the need to open spaces or expand working areas, creating resources, allocating budget, being creative, embracing the challenges, and reprioritising needs to achieve operational and strategic outcomes.

What are those outcomes? Joy was a theme that emerged later in the week particularly after experiencing Wharenui Harikoa (“House of Joy”), a crochet extravaganza of colours and aroha. Artists Lissy and Rudy Cole’s kōrero resonated with themes shared earlier in the week of experiencing loss and marginalisation of their cultural knowledge, traditions and practices. But, through their art they created a spectacular life size expression of healing and resilience that helps to restore joy to those who enter. The other outcome was sharing; active listening, being heard, expressing needs, talking with rather than talking for communities engaged in a museum space. Communicating our

differences and similarities, our goals and fears, our hurt and our joy, is fundamental to navigating and implementing successful partnerships with indigenous and first nation communities. However, the challenge “are we talking in nouns or verbs?” will be an enduring reminder of the change still needed in museums and the responsibility of those who work there to implement.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to ICOM New Zealand for the opportunity to attend this conference and to connect with the CAM community.

Ngā mihi nui ki a tatou.