

A new Museum for Western Australia

Dr Alex Coles, Newly appointed CEO of the WA Museum

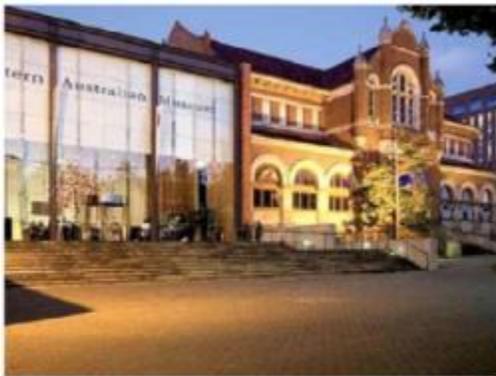
Thirty members of the Royal Society of Western Australia, their guests, and the general public, attended the Ordinary Meeting on Monday October 18th 2010 at Kings Park Administration Building to hear Alec Coles OBE, the new CEO of the Western Australian Museum, deliver a talk on his visions for the Western Australian Museum.

Alec believes that it should be remembered that Museums are there for public benefit and that public value, not institutional value, should be their driving force, and he is determined to persuade Government to invest in a new Museum for Western Australia in Perth, but believes that it is for the Museum to make its case. The Museum should be turning itself inside out, renegotiating its relationship with its audience. His clarion call to Western Australia, after years of waiting for a new building, is to see the Museum as a solution, not a problem!

Alec structured his talk around four themes:

1. Why I (Alec Coles) am here?
2. The history of the Museum – a proud legacy
3. A philosophy for museums
4. A new Museum for Western Australia

In terms of “Why I am here?”, Alec described the inter-related reasons why he accepted the position as CEO of the WAM – the Post, the extraordinary place that is Western Australia, the potential, and the prize.



The Post



The Prize

Alec then moved on to describe the history of the Western Australian Museum, illustrating it with historic photographs of old buildings, commencing with the Old Goal, and its isolation in Old Perth, tracing a history from the Geological Museum, to the Public Museum, the Perth Museum and Art Gallery, the acquisition of wings such as the Jubilee Wing, the Beaufort Wing, the Mammal Gallery, and the Battye and Alexander Library, and the various personnel involved in this history such as Battye, Alexander, Glauert, Ride, leading to the Museum Board in 1959.



The extraordinary place that is WA



The Beaufort Wing



The Mammal Gallery

Alec then illustrated a range of museums around the World to show their style and attractiveness - these included Washington, Wellington, San Francisco, and Newcastle upon Tyne as a background and template of where the new Museum of Western Australia could go. The Mission of the Museum of Western Australia is:

to help people explore their identity, culture, environment, and sense of place, and to celebrate the diversity and creativity of this extraordinary place.

With that objective, Alex explored the current building and arrangements of the Western Australian Museum, and the potentials for the new Museum. Problems to solve included: an outdated Museum (reflecting the State reputation, not fit for purpose (poor user experience), limited display space (missed opportunities), closure of the Francis Street Building, a disparate site, and as a building it was “out of sight out of mind”. However, there was a potential to realise in that a new Museum would be a State pride!, there could be user focus through experience and innovation, the foreground of the Museum would be to showcase its fantastic collections, since there are extraordinary stories to tell, in Perth there should be a coherent site that is people-traffic permeable and welcoming, the Cultural Centre could/would be reactivated, and there could be a more sustainable model of operation.

This innovation has already begun, because Perth visitation increased from 321,000 in 2008/9 to 410,000 in 2009/10, the Nick Cave: exhibition attracted young adult audiences that the Museum traditionally doesn't reach, the exhibition on Dinosaurs Alive! resulted in very high summer holiday numbers, and A Day in Pompeii was the most successful temporary exhibition ever, with over 100,000 visitors. Additionally, there has been partnerships in fashion, theatre, and art.

With this, the Western Australian Museum has developed a new set of aims. It will be a place where all the people of WA can express and explore their diversity, pride, identity and sense of place; where Indigenous people are central to ownership and governance; it will support the development of education and learning opportunities; and it will steward WA's collections. It will also promote academic research, contribute to conservation, support and enforce the heritage legislation, be environmentally, socially and economically sustainable, contribute to public health and well-being, and promote and support tourism.

The underlying Principles for the New Museum will be

1. Public value
2. Inspiration Inclusion
4. Respecting Aboriginal peoples
5. Accessibility
6. Enterprise and innovation
7. Trust and Authority Learning
9. Sustainability
10. Excellence

Alec outlined the Government priorities that would be met with the new Museum: activating the Cultural Centre, a safer City Centre, a link project and Transport hub, a State Theatre Centre and Northbridge as a cultural centre, and Beaufort Street back to being two-way.



Site location with a Cultural Precinct

In his vision of a new Museum, Alex then outlined the content of the proposed museum, drawing on the State's treasure of mineral deposits, the meteorites, ancient landscapes, dinosaurs, the myriad of marine life, the unique modern and ancient life and biodiversity, the Longest Story, i.e., of Western Australia's first contemporary arts, the history of Australia at War, Australian history, amongst others.

Alec then turned to the potential designs of the new Museum, centered at Northbridge. From a range of locations with the proposed Cultural Precinct, and considering plans, levels, access, floor area, expected number of visitors, the expected population growth rate of Perth, and various other constraints and opportunities, Alex talked through a range of plans and site analyses and options, comparing with yardsticks of other museums and how successful they were. He then discussed the proposed new Museum against benchmarks and criteria for design, these being: the site should be permeable, i.e., accessible, open and welcoming to as wide a cross section of the community as possible; it should be active, i.e., open and activated street frontages and ground plane; it should be legible, i.e., clear and obvious entries, universal access, way-finding and circulation; it should have identity, i.e., an expression of museum aspiration, civic importance, location and community role; it should be diverse, i.e., be able to promote and support a wide range of museum, research and other activities; it should have experience, thus supportive of an exciting, vibrant and dynamic visitor and community interface; it should be connected and be able to support and promote an “inside out” museum with a broad community relevance; it should be flexible, i.e., an adaptable site development that allows for change in the short and long term timeframes; it should be sustainable and be able to support “triple bottom line” sustainability aspirations for community benefit; and it involve heritage, i.e., be respectful, meaningful and celebratory response to its context. However, there will be some significant time before changes become visible because the Francis Street Building is to be demolished by mid 2012, Capital funding schedule shows commencement of project in 2013/14 budget, there will be two years of design planning with construction commencing in 2015/16, and there will be three years of construction and fit-out for large options completed in 2017/18.

To prevent the loss of momentum in planning, Alec suggested that recurrent budget bids for 2011/12 and 2012/13 should contain bids for staff to continue with museum planning and capacity building, and also there should be bids for planning and implementing projects and programs on-site to capitalise on momentum gained from the success of A Day in Pompeii and Dinosaurs Alive!

Alec ended his talk with a series of images showing the spirit of the Western Australian Museum in its people, discovery, the cutting edge of research, the commitment, the “Elephant in the room”, and when the Museum is completed and successful *“one day we will look back (at these times) and laugh!”*