

# Museum of Sydney

*Gary Warner, AV and Computer Projects Coordinator on the MoS, talked with George Alexander and Kurt Breerton about what is looking less a mausoleum than a walk-in data port of call.*

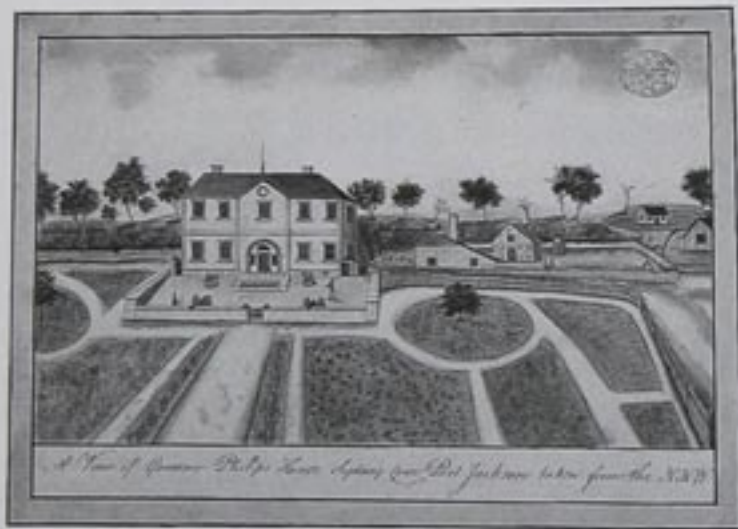
**T**he city's most important shrine to British settlement, the Museum of Sydney, built on the site of the First Government House, will now process thousands of visitors who want to bask in the rosy-fingered dawn of the age of human dispossession down under.

Like any new monument the Museum of Sydney has been asked to participate in a cultural debate. Given the fragmentation of contemporary culture there is a crisis in collective memory. Once one's head was the only hardware. The past was kept alive through stories. By ritual and by rote. Later came writing (stelae, cuniform rolls, papyri, books). Maps, diagrams, architectural blueprints, geometric formulas. Now we live in a culture of permanent playback. All the information about Greek, Celtic, or Tantric cultures might comfortably fit on a few CD-ROM discs. Using a new concept in museology, the building hopes to be less a mausoleum of dead cultural artefacts than a kind of electronic layer-cake of interpretations capable of being revoked or transformed. Now through the terminal darkly we see shadows of the past, ghosts of ourselves. Is this response to the dissolution of the past merely pandering to our consumption-rapped 1990s?

Gary Warner: "With the digital technology we are putting in place it was extremely important to me that you could be able to build in changes as the circumstances demanded it. We will be raising issues about the staging and reception of historical information through the reconstruction of sites, displaying of memorabilia and manipulation of these audio-visual digital technologies. You want the technology to deliver difference for you. It is no longer enough to fix history into a single image for all time. [...]A theatrette is being set up as a digital resource centre for visitors to come and use for talks, installations or screenings. This space is designed to also engage with people outside our resident museological, historical and archaeological experts. We want to

activate the museum as a site of cultural practice rather than as a collection of relics to gaze at in wonder".

From the beginning, archeologists, historians, politicians, media and administrators have been angling for a say in the meaning, preservation and significance of the site. In 1982 a tender was accepted for the commercial development of the site bordered by Phillip, Bridge and Young streets in the Sydney CBD. The Department of Environment and Planning requested an archeological



*A view of Governor Phillip's House, Sydney Cove, Port Jackson  
Anon., The Natural History Museum, London*

survey of the (then) carpark, and the original footings of Australia's first Government House exposed fragments of metal, bone, and glass artefacts. In 1984, then Premier Neville Wran, announced that the site would be preserved in an imaginative development. Architects Denton Corker Marshall Pty Ltd were selected to undertake the project from a design submitted in competition.

Museums are theatres of cultural and historical remembrance. Whose memory do they serve? Whose privilege is it to represent this diversity? History is always a cobbled collection of fragments masquerading as a seamless picture of the way it really was. The question is whether you try to spak-fill the cracks and gaps or show the ruins and fragments as testaments to our desire to remake the whole with all the political, cultural and social implications attached.

The centre and keystone of British settlement, the First Government House means different things to different people. The caretakers—the Historic Houses Trust—try to avoid the usual patriotic ballyhoo surrounding 1788. Peter Emmett, senior curator in charge of development, speaks not of origins and birth, but of a "turning point". A cusp whose two branches of fear and promise meet and curve.

Captain Arthur Philip RN—colonial, Christian and capitalist—took over the reluctant fertility of the soil and the rain from the sky from its indigenous custodians. From 1788 to 1850 nine governors displayed the workaday heel of European management of human and physical resources, displacing and depopulating the local Eora people along the way.

Is there ever any way of avoiding indigenous people's pain in the face of colonial takeovers? If so then Sydney is not a shining example. To live in Sydney—we are reminded in Fiona Foley and



Fiona Foley and Janet Laurence, *Edge of Trees*. Installation outside the MoS. (Above and right)

Janet Laurence's "*Edge of Trees*" installation located in the plaza—is to stand squarely in the nation's obliteration and internal exile of the Koorie people. The forest of trees behind which the locals looked at the "discoverers" now are over-inscribed columns of timber, and I-beam steel, holding hair, ochre and sap. They fill you (us) with a sadness akin to moving around a memorial—through a stand of rusted metal trees and wooden electricity poles that talk to you in whispers just audible above the city traffic. There is a ring of pathos to these forms that are meant as a shrine that the living Sydney Koories have

to their lost Eora past and that are

dwarfed by 195 years of intensive urban development.

Asked to blend themes—intellectual, educational, political, commercial, communitarian—the architects, have handled the rehabilitation of this site with sensitivity, even a certain reverence. The building doesn't advertise the girdings of power, it is no temple of colonisation. In the spirit of self-critical museology Peter Emmett has chosen artists, rather than museum studies functionaries. Through the material registers of plates, clay pipes, copper nails, artists have tried to evoke the density and everydayness of life in the new port city of Sydney, its microhistories, its flows and cross-currents of trade. These elegaic relics, conjured on laser discs and interactive computer screens, become part of a virtual museum capable of being transformed, rather than set in grey concrete, pressed under plate glass or fixed in official tomes.

Moving into the foyer where the mix of materials and settings projects a postmodern clash of times, the visitor is confronted first by a moving floor to ceiling video image of the Sydney environment as the First Fleeters would have experienced it (or so it is imagined). Using digital imaging technologies (*AfterEffects* software, scanned 5"x4" transparencies at 64 base resolution,

4000 pixels fine and then projected onto a bank of monitors) scenes slowly move across the wall. The effect is contemplative or meditative and is enhanced by audioscapes designed by David Chesworth.

Kurt Brereton – “I don’t know if you remember the 1970s audio-visual installations at the College Street Australian Natural History Museum in Sydney? One of the displays was called *The Desert* and it composed a three dimensional red sand dune with a stuffed dingo standing

on top in front of a slide projection wall. A day in the life of the desert was projected onto this diorama with James Dibble (the number one ABC TV News reader of the time and mythical voice of objective truth) providing the monologue. That set up was a great example of the postwar electro-mechanical model of interactivity. Visitors could push buttons that activated spot lights on stereotypical scenes or set off simple machines inside mundane objects.”

Gary Warner – “Yes I remember those displays well. We have certainly shifted on into the 90s digital world. Many museums still cling to that electro-mechanical model because it is safe and easily recognisable to visitors. Those installations look more real and natural to people. That’s why we have a team downstairs who’s average age is 27. This fact has already caused some controversy in the museum world. It is a tribute to Peter Emmett that we have had the opportunity to realise many of those concerns we have shared since the early 1980s. For example, there is no separation between the technical and administration staff in our working philosophy – everyone is linked through the ethernet for one thing.”

The artists represent a generational turnover that marks a break from History seen with a capital H. Post Braudel, post Foucault, the idea of a linear authoritative history was thrown out in favour of a heterogenous model of competing histories, official



*A native going to fish*  
Anon., The Natural History Museum, London

bounties into common circulation.

Filmmaker Ross Gibson, historian Paul Carter, and Aboriginal curator, David Prosser evoke the polyphonic and plural voices of the past talking at cross-purposes through *trompe l'oeil* holograms: dreamscapes that are activated by infra-red proximity detection technology (the same equipment used by surveillance companies). An otherwise silent room of dumb objects is transformed into a talking sound and light show depending on where you choose to stand in the room. Fun house entertainment strategies are married to the historical bond store form to deliver various themes on living in the colony.

Audiences are fickle, always between infatuations. It will be interesting to see how it works and sits amongst Sydney’s other memorials. At the end of the museum there is a simple open glass enclosed room that looks down Phillip St towards Circular Quay. Walking the tightrope between connotations of a colonial ship’s quarter deck, fortress lookout and Sydney headland cave, this cube of glass exposes the inside past to the outside present. Visitors become the exhibits for street viewers. Says Gary Warner, “We look like little dolls to those people down on the street and hopefully they will become curious too and want to come up for a good look around their past.”