Reviews


Museum Studies seems to have reached a certain stage in its trajectory of discipline-development – four major anthologies (two British, two American) were published in 2004-5 and a fifth has emerged this year. I’m not sure whether this indicates the coming of age, or the middle age, or the penultimate explosion of authority on the subject but, in the privileged role of a heritage academic, I’ve read (almost) all of the four of them and marvelled that just three items are duplicated among them. As evidence of the flourishing of museum commentary, this suggests that whatever its lifecycle stage, Museum Studies is in very good health.

That it’s possible to construct four anthologies is partly due to the two big markets of English language publishing, but the differences are not merely national. Each has a perspective and a purpose (as Andrea Wilcomb showed in her review in the August 2005 issue of MAM of *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts and Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*), Gerard Corsane’s collection is framed by the perspective that museums, galleries and heritage sites are species of the same phenomenon; its overall purpose is to review museum and heritage thinking in the 1990s, just tipping over into the 2000s. Gail Anderson’s vision, by contrast, is tied much more tightly to the operational frame of the museum in a discourse of change management.

Corsane’s collection might be seen as the sequel of Kenneth Hudson’s now quaintly-titled *Museums for the 1980s*, which was a brave book with an extraordinarily wide compass at a time when little had been published. The task of representing what has changed since then is breath-taking.

In 28 articles, the collection offers an overview of thinking about heritage/museums in the last decade of the century, highlights the big issues such as repatriation and multiculturalism, focuses on tourism as the vehicle of vast impact on heritage, and reviews the central problem of democratising a field of essentially elite culture. Most of the articles come from journals, a few from books and a few more from conference proceedings. There is a handful written specially for the volume to review the theoretical positions taken for granted in
the articles, such as Andrew Newman’s ‘Understanding the social impact of museums, galleries and heritage through the concept of capital’ – very useful.

This is the big picture of where and how heritage/museums fit in the socioeconomic scheme of the world. Authors are from around the (admittedly largely Anglo) world, but it includes pieces from South Africa that hadn’t come to my ken before, and a rare item on the politics of the Asian museological taste for ‘ethnographic villages’, drawing on cases in China and Indonesia. The references and further readings are enticing.

It is very satisfying to come across articles one remembers reading in the journals, for even wonderful articles tend to slip in memory unless there is an immediate need to note them. It’s even better to discover items from books one always meant to look at but were just a bit too peripheral to get to the top of the must-read pile. Then there are a few gems one would never have come across in the ordinary way of things, such as, for me, the Asian museum village analysis.

Anderson’s anthology is tighter and sleeker, with 34 items, almost all from the 1990s and early 2000s. Based on the notion that museums must change, are changing and are thriving as a result, there is less sense that museums are social constructs in a wider world and more that museums can achieve social construction – it’s a can-do perspective: perhaps characteristically American?

What I mean is exemplified by the excellent Kotler brothers, non-profit marketing gurus, whose article title ‘Can museums be all things to all people?’ is answered with an invocation to strategic planning via goal-setting. They hit the spot of both the impossible demands museums find themselves faced with these days, and the only rational managerial response. Right in line, the final of five sections of the volume serves up ‘The role of leadership’ as ‘the essential ingredient’ of successful museum change.

This collection too contains many old friends. Marilyn Hood’s germinal article ‘Staying away: Why people choose not to visit museums’ is specially welcome in this country, because it appears that the postbag carrying all of Australia’s subscriptions to the April 1983 issue of Museum News (in which it was first published) went astray – I swear there is not a library copy in the land. That piece exists only in photocopies of photocopies, cut and pasted to get around the columns and ads in the original magazine, in Museum Studies reading bricks. At last, a clear, legible version!

The market for both anthologies is primarily the university textbook scene. But I join with Anderson, who writes of her hope that seasoned professionals, volunteers and trustees might find the collections as useful as newcomers will. Is it utterly naive to propose that, harried and exhausted as museum people tend to be, they could be refreshed by a chapter a night for a month? Our profession now contains many who have worked for ten, twenty and even thirty years in
museums – who have lived through, have created, many of the ideas that are now presented in comprehensive, theoretically informed writings. Acquire a copy you can underline to your heart’s content, and give yourself a pat on the back as you read.

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