

29 July 2005

Ms Jill Irvine
Heritage Inquiry
Productivity Commission
PO Box 80
Belconnen ACT 2616

Email: heritage @pc.gov.au

Dear Miss Irvine

I am writing to make an initial and very brief submission in response to the Productivity Commission Issues Paper *Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places*.

Museums Australia is the national association working on behalf of public museums and the people who work in them. Museums Australia's definition of a museum includes public art galleries, university museums and collections, 'corporate' museums (collections accessible by the public that are owned by government departments or businesses), science centres, keeping places and collections forming part of historic properties and heritage sites open to the public.

Having only become aware of the call for submissions in early July, we have been unable to consult fully across our wide-ranging national membership network. (www.museumsaustralia.org.au).

Some of our members will be making individual submissions directly to you or the issues relating to their buildings and sites will be encompassed within the submissions from State, Local Government and other authorities.

Museums are similar to both libraries and educational institutions and are often housed in key heritage places in major cities and regional areas. Such heritage buildings and places are part of the identifiable architectural profile, specifics of place and/or the local atmosphere of the town or centre; at the heart of the community's self identity and a marketable point of difference from other neighbouring areas.

When small communities are intent on saving a local historic building no longer viable for its original purpose (eg courthouses, custom houses, prisons, warehouses, banks, hospitals, rural schools) often the first response has been to establish a museum. In many instances this action has had positive impacts for all concerned.

However often such museums, developed in haste to protect what the community regards as its inheritance from demolition or worse, insensitive reuse for commercial purposes, suffer from a lack of adequate funding for the presentation of exhibits/marketing/ and the employment of qualified staff. Money raised, often by volunteers, usually has to be applied to maintaining the structure itself. Not to be denied is the revitalisation brought about by a community recognising the value of its heritage and working together to find a

proper reuse option. This coming together of local interest and energy has other intangible but often measurable benefits, and the funding of research projects to qualify and quantify such benefits would contribute significantly to your inquiry.

Without significant professional and government support the museum option for the "saving" of a heritage site can often in the longer term become very difficult to manage. Inflexible and draconian application of the Heritage regulations and the Burra Charter can also paradoxically contribute to a heritage place falling into disrepair and disuse. Effective community consultation, implementation of skilled long term planning and local government/bureaucratic commitment to heritage as a key priority are essential to the successful maintenance and re-use of heritage sites.

Consideration also needs to be made with respect to the unique characteristics of museums and their role within society.

In order for Museums Australia to contribute usefully to the scope of your considerations, the Association would be prepared in to work with your department to contribute to relevant research projects emanating from this inquiry or required in the short term to contribute to your findings. For example the development of a focussed questionnaire which can be circulated to our members, both institutional and individual, directly and/or posted on our website.

Should further information be required with respect to the museum sector, Museums Australia is available for further consultation, if we can assist in any way.

Yours sincerely,

Patricia Sabine
President

John Cross
Executive Officer

National Office
S: Old Parliament House, Canberra
P: PO Box 266, Civic Square, ACT, 2608
T: 02 6273 2437
F: 02 6273 2451
E: exec.officer@museumsaustralia.org.au
E: psabine@netspace.net.au
patricia.sabine@awm.gov.au
W: <http://www.museumsaustralia.org.au>

Museums Australia National Conference 2006:
14-17 May Brisbane, 'Exploring Dynamics - Cities, Cultural Spaces,
Communities'

