

Dr Rebecca Coates

Director, Shepparton Art Museum

Rebecca Coates is Director of Shepparton Art Museum (SAM), a position she has held since 2015. Located in regional Victoria, SAM is recognised for its national collection of Australian ceramics and is currently working with architects Denton Corker Marshall to develop a new purpose built art museum to be completed in 2020.

Rebecca has extensive professional art museum and gallery experience in both Australia and overseas. She has been a curator, writer and lecturer. Her previous roles include, Lecturer in Art History and Art Curatorship, University of Melbourne; Associate Curator at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA); the Melbourne International Arts Festival; the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford; the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne and the old ACCA. She speaks and writes regularly on contemporary art and theory, curatorial practice, and art in the public realm. She is an Honorary Fellow, School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne, and has held a number of board and advisory roles, as Chair of City of Melbourne's Public Art Advisory panel, City of Stonnington, and the Australian Tapestry Workshop. She holds a PhD in Art History from the University of Melbourne.

Is There Such a Thing as Arts and Culturally led Economic Renewal?

In May 2015, Greater Shepparton City Council resolved to accept the findings of a Feasibility study and Business Case for a new art museum in Shepparton. A \$34.5M AUD building, this was a bold and ambitious step for a local Council located in central regional Victoria, around two hours from Melbourne. Arguably, this was as bold a step as commencing the Collection 80 years previously in 1937. The new Shepparton Art Museum (SAM) is to be a tangible demonstration of the way that arts and culture could and should play an essential role in a regional centre, playing an important cultural and economic role and contribution to the region's renewal and growth. With the most significant collection of Australian ceramics in regional Australia, and a dynamic program of exhibitions, education and public programme activities, the new Museum is designed to help foster a strong sense of engagement, ownership, and pride for visitors and local audiences alike. Co-located in the new Museum are Kaiela Arts (Shepparton's local Aboriginal community arts centre), and the Visitor Information Centre. The building has the potential to bring people together, in an outstanding example of exciting, innovative, best-practice contemporary museum architecture. One of Australia's most exciting new art museum projects planned to be completed in November 2020, new SAM is firmly rooted in its unique context and place. This paper examines the way that an arts and culture policy can lead an agenda.

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Introduction to the Shepparton Art Museum

Shepparton Art Museum, or SAM as it is affectionately known, is set squarely in the centre of regional Victoria, Australia. Greater Shepparton has a population of around 64,000 people, and is located on the Goulburn River floodplain. It is about 2 hours north of Melbourne by car, the main means of transport. Though there is a regional rail line, services are infrequent and rolling stock old.

SAM is now recognised for many things that differentiate it from its colleagues and other regional galleries. It has a unique collection focus, as the leading collection of Australian ceramics in regional Australia. The ceramics collection spans objects from Australia's first European settlement, Indigenous artists working in the ceramics medium, to contemporary artists expanding our understanding of ceramics in a contemporary context. The SAM Collection also includes notable Australian historic works of art, a growing contemporary collection, and an important collection of Indigenous Australian artworks. SAM is recognised for how it engages, informs, excites and inspires audiences young and old, from near and far, through a dynamic programme of exhibitions and educational and public programmes conceived to have strong local relevance, while critically engaging with global contemporary ideas.

The Need for Rejuvenation

SAM is currently undergoing its most ambitious development in the 80-years since the first painting was acquired for the Collection in 1936. In May 2015, Greater Shepparton City Council resolved to accept the findings of a Feasibility study and Business Case for a new art museum in Shepparton. It envisaged a \$34.5M AUD building that will provide a new home to SAM, the Visitor Centre for Shepparton and new premises for Kaiela Arts, Shepparton's local Indigenous community arts centre. The building is a bold and ambitious step for a local Council located in a regional centre not especially known as an arts and cultural mecca.

What prompted Greater Shepparton City Councillors to endorse a business case to build an ambitious new art museum, committing \$10M as part of the funding required for this major new \$39.5M stand-alone cultural space in a unique part of central Victoria? And what did those involved in the project believe that an arts and cultural infrastructure project of this kind could offer local community and visitors to this part of the state?

A Culture-Led Economy for Shepparton

Of course, arts and culturally led economic renewal is not a new phenomenon. We are all familiar with Richard Florida's thesis of creatively led economic growth, and the theory that high profile international events, activities and business clusters will attract creative workers from related fields with higher economic productivity (Florida, 2002). Management consultants McKinsey and Co. found that a thriving cultural sector is an essential part of what makes a city great, while in 2014, an article in *The Economist* noted that more than two dozen new cultural centres focused on museums were due to be built in various countries over the following decade, with an estimated cost of \$250 billion (Economist 2014).

The 'Bilbao Effect' is now a well-used and oft-cited term: Frank Gehry's modernist architectural monument is widely seen as the centre-piece in revitalising the depressed industrial economy of the Basque region of Spain. But economic renewal of this sort is never quite that simple. While a new museum or cultural facility contributed to the transformation of the city into a vibrant and attractive place for residents, visitors and inward investment, as Beatriz Plaza, an economist in the Faculty of Economics at the University of the Basque Country (Bilbao, Spain) noted, it was part of a much larger economic redevelopment strategy to generate growth (Janes, 2016). As she put it, the museum is the highly visible 'icing on the cake'.

Australia has had its own 'Bilbao effect', with the creation of David Walsh's MONA, Museum of Old and New Art which opened in 2011, a confection of Cortene steel and contemporary architecture located within one of the most disadvantaged municipalities of Tasmania, Glenorchy. MONA has been widely credited with turning Tasmania's economy around, and putting the Apple Isle back on the cultural tourism and international destination map. Terms such as 'Hobart's cultural renewal', 'cultural regeneration', and even 'Tasmania's

cultural renaissance' have all been used to describe the growth in visitor numbers to the state, from New York to Melbourne (Hawthorne, 2014). There is certainly a widespread belief that if you build it, they will come. Kate Isabel Booth voices a note of caution however, reminding us that, 'without deliberation and planning, culture-led urban regeneration can amount to nothing more than an enhanced city image (Booth, 2017).' Research does not always support the dream.

Bendigo has similarly undergone a cultural renaissance in the recent past with a strong economic impact. Under the directorship of Karen Quinlan, Bendigo Art Gallery (BAG) has attracted international fashion blockbusters, and shifted its image from that of an important regional gallery with an interesting collection to one that brings in millions of dollars in tourist revenue. Bendigo's population is around 110,000, making it one of the largest regional centres in Victoria. With numerous tourist attractions and community facilities, recent figures suggest that BAG generates \$20 million annually for its local economy (Shmith, 2014).

SAM's business case for a similar arts and culturally led economic and social renewal project envisaged the new museum as a place with 'the artist at its core ...' The vision of the Business Case was that: "SAM will be a museum with the artist at its centre, a meeting place for the Region's people, providing captivating art experiences and connection to the Aboriginality and multi-cultural origins of the Region's heritage" (McArthur 2014).

The Business Case noted that this new building should:

- **strengthen the environmental base** giving new visibility to the opportunities which the Goulburn river and its surroundings present.
- **strengthen the economic base** of the city.
- **strengthen the social base of the region**, providing one of the only (undercover) public spaces where people can learn, share, and express themselves.
- dramatically **strengthen the region's capability to engage with the ongoing journey of reconciliation** and cultural celebration.
- **provide a major piece of new accessible public infrastructure, facility and services**, setting a new benchmark in accessible infrastructure, so as to make the Museum accessible – particularly for people with disabilities.
- significantly **support planning for the servicing of forecasted growth**, and also dramatically propel forward **the creation of greater diversity of the economic base, so as to build greater resilience** into the Shepparton regional economy.
- provide the necessary planning to enable a new museum **to cater to a much larger number of Victorians living in North Central Victoria**.
- be a **resource and destination for students** studying in the region, and create new educational opportunities by tapping into the academic faculty of these universities.
- The ultimate aim of the new museum is a gigantic step forward in the improvement of cultural infrastructure, **giving Shepparton the ability to turn visitors into residents and ultimately investors**. This conclusion is based on the full economic impact and feasibility study that was done on the new museum and **its capacity for job creation**.

The Business Case focused equally on the social, cultural and economic arguments underpinning the creation of a new Museum. It proposed both a tourism opportunity and a 'landmark', or 'iconic' building for Shepparton residents. Arts and Culture were seen as the vehicle to reach greater ambitions. Bendigo, MONA, and even Bilbao, Spain, were used as examples. Councillors endorsed the Business Case and the borrowing of \$10M towards the new building in May 2015.

History and Demography of Shepparton

Shepparton is not, and may well never be, Bendigo in terms of population and growth. Its history is different: while Bendigo is central to Victoria's Gold Rush boom-town story, Shepparton has always focused on farming, agricultural machinery and immigration. Arguably, it embodies Australia's multicultural policies at work.

Shepparton also has a long, strong and proud Indigenous history and living culture. Located on the traditional lands of the Yorta Yorta Nation, also comprised of the Bangarang and other clans, Shepparton is home to the second most populous Indigenous language group in Australia, and the largest Aboriginal community in Victoria outside Melbourne. The community has a strong history of Indigenous advocacy and leadership, both nationally and internationally. In the 2016 census an estimated 3.4% of residents have Indigenous heritage, and approximately 16% of residents were born outside Australia (ABS, 2016).

Shepparton is known for its diverse, multicultural population. Waves of migration from the 1930s onwards have resulted in a strong, culturally rich community. In the aftermath of World War 1, migrants came mainly from Southern Europe, predominantly Greece, Italy, Macedonia and Albania. Post World War II, further migration occurred from Europe with many Turkish immigrants settling in the region. In the late 1980s, Punjabis from India and Pacific Islanders began to arrive. In the 1990s Greater

Shepparton welcomed Afghani, Iraqi, Sudanese and Congolese populations. In the 2016 census, Shepparton had a greater proportion of people born in Asia than any inland area except a few mining regions. And more of the population was born in the Middle East and Africa than any Australian region other than its capital cities (Wood, 2017). SAM works to develop strong ties with many in these communities, creating exhibitions, programmes, a Collection, and educational opportunities that have meaning and value for many.

Socially and economically, Shepparton has innovated and grown. Greater Shepparton is a key regional hub, with a strong farming community recognised as a significant producer of dairy and orchards. Often dubbed the 'fruit bowl of Victoria', it is the centre of the Goulburn Broken Rivers farming area, which accounts for 25% of the total value of Victoria's agricultural production, and produces more than half of Australia's apricots and peaches; four in five pears, and one in three apples (Australian Bureau of Statistics).

The Development of the New SAM

Since the Business Case was endorsed in May 2015, progress has been swift. The initial Business Case projected a budget of around \$34.5M. Funding has since been secured from state and federal governments, private philanthropic foundations and individuals. The funding is divided into roughly four sections: \$10M from Council; \$10M from the State Government; \$10M from the Federal Government; and the SAM Foundation has committed to raise approximately \$12M, with around \$4.5M allocated to the building project, and a further \$8M towards an endowment. As with all art museum projects, fundraising efforts continue.

Architects were selected through an Australian Institute of Architects endorsed Architectural Competition. This attracted 88 Expressions of Interest from leading Australian architects and a number of international firms. Five

architectural companies were selected by an expert Jury to develop Concept Designs. Each offered visionary and exciting possibilities for a new Museum for Shepparton. At the April 2017 Council Meeting, Council endorsed Melbourne-based architects Denton Corker Marshall (DCM) as the winner of the Competition, and engaged them as architects to develop detailed designs and work on construction.

DCM's response to the architectural brief was to create a building with a small footprint, given its location on a floodplain next to a body of water and within existing parkland, five storeys high. This enabled it to look over the River Red Gum forest to the west, and provide a vantage point for the flat uninterrupted views around. Built on one of the prime sites in Shepparton, the building will be one of the visual landmarks as people enter Shepparton on the south road from Melbourne. As a beacon in the landscape, the architects see the building's monumentality, materiality and sculptural form as reminiscent of the land art of American Post-Minimalist artists such as Richard Serra.

Overlooking the wetlands and the River Red Gum forest beyond, the building also nods to its unique Australian context. With its overhanging, L-shaped façade plates, and glassed in ground floor, the building creates a new form of Australian vernacular verandah architecture, originally designed to catch the breeze and offer shade. These re-envisioned spaces create a place for people to meet, gather under protection and shade, and connect with activities inside the building. Galleries and interior spaces also link the inside to beyond, with a mix of picture windows and a discrete use of natural light in the galleries themselves. These sorts of considerations take the visitor's experience into account, cutting down on visitor fatigue and ensuring that the spaces feel relaxed and welcoming while not limiting the building's core activities.

One of the winning features of DCM's design is an Art Hill that links the first floor café to the surrounding landscape, and cleverly hides

building services from the public eye. This offers additional community spaces to relax, to view projections and art on the exterior façade of the new SAM, and links the new building with its surrounding landscape and public space. It means the building can be activated day and night, through innovative programming and activities, or simply through enjoyment of new public spaces.

Importantly, the new SAM will be more than just an art museum. It will be a community space, one that fosters pride and identity, and a place where people can come together through various activities. It offers a much needed new home to the Shepparton Art Museum, sorely in need of adequate collection storage and back-of-house spaces, increased exhibition spaces, and venues for workshops and educational activities. SAM's unique ceramics collection will be showcased throughout the building, extending beyond the gallery spaces. The new SAM will also house the Visitor Centre; commercial spaces including a café and a rooftop area for functions and events; and Kaiela Arts, Shepparton's local Aboriginal community arts centre. Accordingly, the building was conceived in the round: each façade representing a specific purpose and function, without a traditional 'front' and a 'back'. Sustainability and the environmental footprint of the building is also an important factor in its design.

Co-locating each of these unique and complementary activities in the one building is a first in Shepparton, and possibly even in Victoria. With extensive Indigenous consultation and collaboration, the building has the potential to be a major project of reconciliation and acknowledgement, working with and celebrating local Indigenous communities' continuous living culture, people and history alongside the history of Shepparton and its unique regional Victorian context. For Shepparton Art Museum, this narrative will be told through its exhibition programme, and public and educational activities, drawing on the strengths of the art museum's Collection to tell a story that is locally relevant, and engages with contemporary global ideas.

The Business Case recommended that SAM's governance structure be shifted so that the entity, previously Council owned and operated, will become a Company limited by guarantee. Greater Shepparton City Council will retain strong links with the new organisation which will care for, manage and display the Collection that remains a Council asset. The new SAM building is Council owned, and leased to SAM at a peppercorn rent. The Council will appoint two board members to the new SAM Board of Management and continue to contribute annual operational funds meeting the current level of SAM funding.

Transition of business is well underway. Business is expected to triple as SAM moves from a museum contained in a repurposed Council building to a stand-alone purpose built space. Operations, activities, staffing, budgets, and ambitions will accordingly need to expand to cater for this growth. There will be new opportunities for volunteers and community members to get involved, fostering and developing a sense of community connection through groups and activities. Revenue to continue to develop and run all of these activities will come in part from Council support state and government grants and funding, as it does now; from increased grants and private philanthropic giving for increased funding for projects and operations that are only possible with more space; and from the new commercial operations in the new SAM. SAM will remain a not-for-profit entity, whose operational model is designed to break even. More importantly, SAM will aim to create an exciting, dynamic, and engaging arts and culturally led experience for all.

Conclusion

The new SAM has the potential to become a building that brings people together, to enjoy art, to meet and relax with friends, as a place to work, or as a place to visit and get involved. The success is built in part on SAM's activities and the growing role that it plays in Shepparton's community. The current SAM already does many of these things, with activities, exhibitions and programmes. But through expanded partnerships, collaborations, and working together, the vision and ambitions that all have for the new SAM will be a collective and shared achievement and experience. This is the next stage in the exciting life of a regional art museum, with a unique collection focus and remit to audiences near and far. Artists, audiences, exhibitions, a unique collection, and context are core to this vision and the project's success.

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