



Starting or Improving a Museum

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Waterloo Region Museum, Canada. Photo: Scott Webb

Starting or Improving a Museum

Before you decide to start a museum, we recommend investigating all options and alternatives available to your collection, knowledge and resources. Could you establish a virtual museum via a website, present a temporary exhibition or create a publication? Perhaps you could contribute to a relevant museum or group already in existence? There might be collections, museums or historical societies already collecting and exhibiting this story that you could strengthen. Partnerships can sometimes be more powerful than going it alone. Starting a museum is a difficult and lengthy process so we recommend undertaking all the necessary research and planning.

PURPOSE

Make sure the museum has a clear focus so it stands out from other museums – put together a written *Statement of Purpose* to help set the museums direction.

Give some thought to who your museum is aimed at and what it will offer that is different from other museums. Who will visit it, why will they visit and what are their likely interests and needs now and in the future? An understanding of this will help you plan your museum so it can be relevant and well supported. A feasibility study may be very worthwhile, including focus groups with people representing potential visitors and supporters.

COLLECTION POLICY

Establish the museums key stories and decide (or review) what the museum is going to collect, and what it is not going to collect, in order to develop your *Collection Policy*. This is a museum's key document. It should relate very closely to the Statement of Purpose.

SIGNIFICANCE

Decide which are the really significant objects or collections for the museum. You'll need to establish:

- Which collection items you should gather more information about, and catalogue, store and display according to museum standards. There may be some collection 'gaps' in terms of the museum's key stories which would be priority collection areas in the Collection Policy.

- Which collection items have no significance and relevance – these should not be kept. If they have been catalogued there is a formal de-accession procedure required, otherwise any tactful process will do.
- If any items are better suited to an 'education collection' to be used as props for handling, dressing etc. These may be items with little heritage value, or duplicates of collection items, but they help tell one of the museum's stories. Develop a procedure for managing these separate to the collection records.

OWNERSHIP

Make sure the museum really does own its collection, and that people in the future can find out what each object is, what is important about it and where it is stored or displayed. Start using *Donor Forms* for all donations if you don't already do so. You may need to create a work plan to address any long term loans or objects with no documentation, to end up 'owning' the collection.

A Register needs to be kept that records every item acquired, and correct cataloguing procedures should be followed, recording as much information about each item as possible when acquired. It is generally better to use a specialist cataloguing program than try and devise one, or standard cataloguing paper based forms can be used and the information can be transferred to the computer at a later date.



1. Digitising a collection item. Photo: Tiny Empire Collective
2. A staff planning meeting. Photo: Tiny Empire Collective

INTERPRETATION PLAN

Talk about how you will present the collection and museum stories and bring your ideas together in an Interpretation Plan. This may include the site and buildings if these are relevant. This will cover what kinds of exhibitions, education programs, signage, talks, web content etc. the museum will present.

CONSERVATION PLAN

Develop a Conservation Plan for the collection (and buildings etc. where relevant), to guide you in caring for collection.

FORWARD PLANNING

To help organise yourselves to work through the processes described above you need to create a Forward Plan. Bring together everything you would like to do in the next 3 to 5 years. Include an annual work plan for the upcoming year covering who will do what, when by, and the budget.

CATALOGUING

Investigate how you will catalogue your collection. Victorian Collections is a free web-based collections management system that allows you to publish your collection online. Additionally they provide training for small organisations.

STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

Gather a good team of people to support the museum. Preserving and interpreting a museum's collections well involves a very wide range of skills and interests, including specialised skills in research, history, education, design, writing, editing, project management, customer service and so on.

Involving people with the right skills will help you to create plans that are well-informed, realistic and interesting, and can inform and guide everyone involved in the museum as it develops. Some people might be involved as volunteers, committee or staff members. You'll need to pay others for their time and expertise, and allocate adequate funds or apply for grants to cover your museum's needs.

FUNDING

Funding may be available for employing consultants to work on a Significant Assessment, Interpretation Plan and Preventive Conservation Plan. We recommend contacting Heritage Victoria and the National Library of Australia to discuss your eligibility for grants that they offer.

Additionally we would recommend getting in touch with the Arts/Culture department of your local Council to discuss your project further with them.

TRAINING AND ADVICE

Visiting and talking to people at museums that are similar to yours in some way is also extremely valuable.

Consider becoming a member of AMaGA to receive access to discounted training opportunities, regular e-bulletins and networking opportunities. AMaGA Victoria also has a consultants register for members and can provide you with contact details for consultants working within our sector who may be able to assist your project.

Membership options can be found at:

<https://www.amaga.org.au/join-amaga>

AMaGA Victoria's resources page hosts a variety of helpful templates, written resources, videos and research papers on various areas within museum management.

See more: <https://amagavic.org.au/resources/infosheets>



1. AMaGA Victoria members networking tour of Housemuseum Galleries. Photo: Celia Mallard 2. AMaGA Victoria Art Handling workshop. Photo: Bridget Forbes

Further information

Resource	Source	Link
The Small Museums Cataloguing Manual (basic advice on storage and collection management practices)	AMaGA Victoria	https://amagavic.org.au/assets/Small_Museums_Cataloguing_Manual_4th.pdf
National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries		https://amagavic.org.au/assets/National_Standards_1_5.pdf
Museum Methods	AMaGA	https://www.amaga.org.au/museum-methods
Recollections, Damage and Decay	Heritage Collections Council	https://aiccm.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/3_damage_and_decay.pdf
Collection Care	AICCM	https://aiccm.org.au/conservation/collection-care/
The Conservation Assessment: a proposed model for evaluating museum environmental management needs	Getty Conservation Institute	https://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/pdf_publications/evaluating_museum_environmental_mngmnt.html
Be Prepared: Guidelines for Small Museums for Writing a Disaster Preparedness Pla	Heritage Collections Council	https://aiccm.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/beprepared.pdf

AMaGA Victoria can provide assistance with the location of further information on collections care and conservation. Please contact: 03 8341 7344 or info@amagavic.org.au

AMaGA Victoria

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AMaGA Victoria respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work, the Boon Wurrung and Woi Wurrung peoples and honour their Ancestors, Elders and next generations of community and pays respect to the Elders of all the Nations of Victoria, past, present and emerging.