

# 'A whole new world': the young person's experience of visiting Sydney Technological Museum

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## Abstract

Histories of museums often neglect the viewpoint of visitors, concentrating instead on the protagonists in power relations that have shaped the organization. Moreover, few studies have been made of people's experiences of visits made before the 1980s, which is when the field of visitor evaluation emerged. In response to the lack of visitor perceptions on record, a study was undertaken into the long-term memories of people who had visited the Technological Museum in Sydney as children or teenagers between 1935 and 1969. In-depth interviews about early visits were conducted with twelve people and their reminiscences analyzed using a phenomenological approach. As a result of this process, three themes emerged that characterized the young person's experience of the museum: City Life, Adulthood, and Independent Discovery. Linking these three themes was the fundamental experience of Growing Up.

**Key Words:** Museum, memory, audience, visitor experience, children, phenomenology

## Introduction

In written histories, visitors to museums, like patients in hospitals, are transient, silent figures. Their most important feature is the number of them that have annually passed through the doors of the institution in question. At least patients, as a class, receive mention for the diseases they have borne in their suffering droves. Museum visitors, on the other hand, have generally only been remarkable for their social class and educational level, and even these characteristics were mainly presumed or imagined before the advent of 'visitor evaluation' in the 1980s.

Historians' attention is mostly concentrated on the intentions of museum founders, pronouncements of boards, interferences of politicians, aspirations of directors, imaginations of architects, acquisitions of curators, discoveries of researchers and objectives of educators. The voice of the visitor, for whom all this energy is ultimately expended, is rarely heard in the historical record.

A collection of essays on the history of Sydney's Powerhouse Museum has recently been published.<sup>1</sup> The Powerhouse is a cultural icon in the New South Wales state government's Arts portfolio. Arguably Australia's largest museum, its vast collection and innovative program of exhibitions cover science, technology, design, decorative arts, social history and Indigenous culture. Founded in 1879, for the greater part of its existence it was known as the Technological Museum, either officially or informally, and was housed in a building not far from its current site.

Commissioned as part of the Museum's 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations, the book of essays makes interesting reading, but although its various authors place the museum's development in a broader social context, much of the primary material for their deliberations is drawn from internal files, proposals, reports and correspondence. Once again the observations of visitors have largely been overlooked in the written account of a museum's development.

As a curator at the Powerhouse I was invited to co-author a chapter on the museum's intermittent efforts to promote health and hygiene.<sup>2</sup> But in an attempt to capture the neglected viewpoint of the visitor, I also undertook an independent but complementary research project based on interviewing older people who remembered visiting the Technological Museum as

youngsters over 40 years ago, during a period when the museum is now considered to have been a place of stagnation.<sup>3</sup>

In the decades following the Second World War a succession of directors, thwarted by lack of funds and government procrastination, despaired of recreating the place in the image of the modern science museums they had seen on international study tours. Although they managed to introduce new and sometimes quite innovative displays from time to time, the Technological Museum is now regarded by commentators as having been old-fashioned, overcrowded and almost moribund in its latter decades before massive government funding and commercial sponsorship resurrected it in the 1980s as the Powerhouse Museum in a nearby architecturally transformed power station.

But, unaware of the behind-the-scenes frustrations, what did children and teenagers think of the Technological Museum on visits over 40 years ago? What was the nature of their experience? In my project I set out to capture the essence of their experience by analyzing the recollections of people who visited the museum all those years ago.

### Background to the Technological Museum

From observation, archives, photographs and guide books it is possible to assemble a picture of what people might have seen, or were supposed to have noticed, when they visited the Technological Museum over 40 years ago. The building that was the Museum's home from 1893 to 1980 still stands in Harris Street, Ultimo, but has been incorporated into the campus of the Sydney Institute of Technology, the successor to Sydney Technical College. Its striking design matches the style of the Technical College built two years earlier. It was no accident that the location chosen for the Museum and the Technical College was on the inner city's industrial fringe, amongst factories and the small terrace houses of the people who worked in those factories. The purpose of both institutions was to provide technical and practical instruction on the 'science of everyday life' to the working classes.

The museum was (and remains) a three-storey polychrome brick edifice with many wide, arched windows. Its Romanesque facades were decorated with large panels of patterned terracotta tiles and rows of sandstone carvings that featured Australian flora and fauna. A central wing abutted directly onto Harris Street, and on either side of this wing matching flights of sandstone stairs led to twin entrances. Inside, wide staircases with wooden balusters and carved newel posts led to the upper floors. A long transverse corridor on each floor separated two rows of bays or 'courts' accommodating themed displays. Floor space on each level amounted to about 1,000 square metres. When the museum first opened, its crowded exhibits were arranged in an orderly system of classification in which each of the three floors was allocated to one kingdom of exploitable resources and commercial products - animal, vegetable or mineral.

By the mid-1930s the museum sought to attract a broader audience than the original 'working man' but remained free and was open every afternoon of the week. Its purpose was to investigate the economics of the natural products of Australia, illustrate the industrial advance of civilization, and promote craftsmanship and artistic taste. The guide book of the day indicates that the original stratification of exhibits was still in place. The *Ground Floor* contained 'the products of the Mineral Kingdom and also the collections of Applied Art'. Mineral specimens were displayed as building materials and other economic products. X-ray machines, silverware, pottery and porcelain, plastics, paint and 'primitive agricultural appliances' all occupied their own bays. In the *Engineering* area, several sectioned 6-cylinder motor car chassis were connected to the electric light circuit and turned over to demonstrate the operation of the internal combustion engine. There were numerous static engineering models as well as working models of all sorts, from motor bikes to marine engines that could be activated by the visitor. A steam locomotive and a massive Boulton and Watt beam engine from 1785 were housed in separate structures out the back.

*Economic Botany* occupied the *First Floor*. Wood specimens and an obstacle course of timber furniture shared that level with essential oils, dyes and tans, fungi, and a collection of decorative ware demonstrating the use of Australian flora in applied art.

*Economic Zoology* was relegated to the *Second Floor* along with *Miscellaneous*. Up there the largest exhibition space was occupied by a mounted fat lamb and thousands of specimens of wool and woollen clothing. Other *Animal Product* bays housed edible fishes, ambergris and, curiously, human anatomical models. The many *Miscellaneous* included ship and aeroplane models, needlework, musical instruments, printing processes and a collection of weapons ancient and modern. However, according to the guide book, 'amongst the miscellaneous exhibits the most popular [was] undoubtedly the working model of the famous Strasburg Astronomical Clock' (Penfold, 1935:17). Standing some four metres high, this fantastically ornate wooden timepiece boasted (and still does) many mechanized features, including a time dial, an orrery, chiming cherubs, heathen deities and, on the hour, a procession of the Apostles.

By 1947 the museum's name had been changed to the Museum of Technology and Applied Science and some exhibits had been modernized with fluorescent lighting. The guide book no longer mentioned the three 'kingdoms' but the same stratification and general arrangement of exhibits remained. Displays must have become more crowded because the number of 'specimens' had grown from 200,000 to 500,000. New exhibits on the ground floor included synthetic fibres such as Nylon and another 'marvel of the modern age', fibre glass. The working models now included a sectioned refrigerator that could be operated by turning on an electric switch. The manufacture of producer gas, nationally important as a substitute for petrol, was demonstrated in a didactic display. On the second floor, a recently installed exhibit on colour printing augmented the printing bay, while a figure of the Queen in replica coronation robes was 'conspicuous in Bay 1' (Penfold, 1947: 6,19). The furniture on the first floor had been rearranged.

Another ten years on, the stated purposes of the Museum were the same but it had acquired yet another new name, the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences. The greatest number of changes appear to have occurred on the first floor where at least some of the furniture, timber and commercial crops had been displaced. In their stead the 'enormous strides in the field of electronics' were exemplified by a proximity ammunition shell, a scale model of a television station (with daily television demonstrations upstairs on the second floor), and an 'Electronic Brain' where visitors could test their skill at noughts and crosses. The relocated X-ray exhibit had become interactive and visitors could now X-ray their handbags. It was necessary to pay to enter the first planetarium to be installed in Australia, which provided 'the only satisfactory method of imparting knowledge of elementary astronomy to a lay audience'. In a separate theatre on the same floor was 'one of the Museum's most spectacular exhibits ... the Transparent Plastic Woman' (Morrison, 1957:16).

The 1966 guide is almost identical to the 1957 version. Perhaps there were more ceramics and decorative wares on the ground floor, fewer electronics on the first floor, and more textiles on the second floor, where a wide range of period costumes had replaced the printing presses and most of the musical exhibits. But overall the Museum remained as it had begun, a showcase crammed with unnatural wonders arranged with a zealous logic that insisted the public should admire, appreciate and emulate the industriousness of the modern industrial world.

## Methodology

Since the 1980s there have been new approaches to understanding visitor experiences, with researchers contrasting the museum professional's perception of museums with that of visitors (see for example Silverman, 1995; Falk and Dierking, 1992). Studies of people's long and short-term memories of museum experiences have been reported by a small number of researchers, notably Falk (1988), Falk and Dierking (1992, 1995), Stevenson (1991), McManus (1993), Radley (1994), and Kavanagh (2000). In some of these studies a framework has been proposed for making sense of the complexities of the visitor experience. In his pilot study, for example, Falk (1988) found several consistent themes running through interviewees' recollections: the social, geographical and temporal *context* of their visit; the length of *time* they spent in the museum and their mood; a few of the *exhibits* they had seen; and some aspect of the museum's *architecture* or 'feel'. Falk and Dierking (1992) subsequently put forward a model that

conceptualized the visit as an interaction between personal context, social context and physical context. In her study of the impact of museum visits, McManus (1993) sorted the recollections of respondents into four 'memory categories'- memories related to objects or things, episodic events, feelings, and 'summary memories'.

The intention of the present study was to subject people's long-term memories to deeper analysis, in order to capture the very essence of the visitor experience. Hermeneutic phenomenology formed a methodological framework for this analysis.

Phenomenology is one of several traditions of qualitative enquiry. Like other qualitative methods it differs from quantitative enquiry in that it relies on working with only a few cases but many variables. As explained by Creswell (1998: 15-18), the qualitative researcher explores a topic by building a complex, holistic picture based on the detailed reports of informants and an analysis of their words, approaching the study as an active learner who wants to tell the story from the participants' view. Researchers who choose to undertake a phenomenological study focus on the meaning of experiences. In such a study the researcher examines accounts by several individuals of their lived experiences of a particular concept or phenomenon, with the aim of reducing the experiences to a shared meaning. In this way the researcher brings to the reader a better understanding of the essential structure – or the 'essence' - of the experience (Creswell, 1998: 51-5, 236). 'Hermeneutics' is a term that is frequently used in conjunction with the term 'phenomenology'. In this context hermeneutics means the interpretation of texts to expose hidden meanings, where the texts are often (but not always) the transcripts of interviews (Byrne, 2001b). An example of contemporary use of this method of enquiry is nursing research, where many studies have taken a hermeneutic phenomenological approach as a way of coming to understand patients' experiences of illness and hospitalization (Byrne, 2001a).

Conventional studies of museum visitors have often take a quantitative approach but, as Kelly *et al* (2002: 22) point out in their investigation into family visits to museums, there is an increasing emphasis on qualitative research that gives voice to the visitors themselves. Nevertheless, I am not aware of any previous studies that have used a phenomenological approach to investigate visitors' experiences in museums, although the setting for recent work by Hayllar and Griffin (2005) is to some extent comparable. In a departure from the methods used to date for researching urban tourism, these authors took a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to shed light on the tourist experience in a historic precinct in Sydney. Although tourists interviewed for that study were describing recent experiences, a similar approach, with its goal of revealing unarticulated meanings, seemed appropriate for analyzing long-term memories of museum visitors. By using phenomenological techniques I hoped to develop an understanding of the museum experience from the young visitor's perspective.

According to Riemen (1986) the phenomenological approach is primarily an attempt to understand empirical matters from the perspective of those being studied. The essential structure of an experience (or phenomenon) can be extracted from people's verbal descriptions of this experience. As explained at length by Hayllar and Griffin (2005), phenomenological analysis of these verbal descriptions involves the researcher in a symbiotic process of writing and reflection. The researcher must 'bracket' prior experience in order to come to terms with his or her assumptions and bring fresh insight to the subject at hand. Nevertheless, the interpretive process of writing and reflection puts the researcher as well as the subject at the centre of the research process (Van Manen, 1990; Denzin, 1989).

In general, the researcher's reflective process initially produces a set of themes that show the structure of the experience being investigated. Through further writing and reflection on these themes the researcher arrives at the essential characteristics (the essence) of the experience. There are no objective outcomes. A flash of recognition tells the researcher that he or she has finally described that essence. This eureka moment has been described by F.J.J. Buytendijk (in Van Manen, 1990) as the 'phenomenological nod'.

### Data collection

Interviewees for the qualitative study were found by a convenience sampling method. Over a period of a few weeks I asked everyone that I encountered in my daily dealings if they had ever visited the old museum in Harris Street. From those who remembered doing so, my only

selection criteria were that they must be over the age of 45, must have visited the museum as a young person no later than the mid-1960s, and must never have had an association with that museum or the Powerhouse either as a staff member, contractor, volunteer or board member. With those who agreed I made an arrangement to interview them at a later date, even when they protested that they 'hardly remembered anything'. All participants had at least two days' notice of the interview (but usually longer), during which time I asked them to think about their early visit or visits, but not discuss them with anyone.

The twelve people I eventually interviewed included neighbours, acquaintances, relatives and members of the public who had rung the Powerhouse on other business. There were seven men and five women, ranging in age from 46 to 86 years. Their visits to the museum had taken place between around 1935 and 1969. The ages of most of them at the time ranged from around seven to twelve years, but one estimated he had first visited when he was four, and three recalled making subsequent visits in their teens. Another two had made their first and only visit when they were aged around 17 years (see Appendix).<sup>4</sup>

The in-depth interviews were informal and conversational. The initial four were conducted in person and subsequent interviews were made over the phone. In preliminary chat I reassured participants that this was not a test of their memories and that I was simply interested in what 'stuck in people's minds'. I accepted their descriptions as recalled and was careful not to convey any suggestion that they were 'correct' or 'incorrect'. Even when participants asked, I did not prompt recollections by, for example, showing photographs or mentioning features of the museum that I believe existed during the period in question.

Each interview began with the question 'Tell me what you remember about visiting the old museum in Harris Street'. When these recollections seemed exhausted I asked a series of questions, even when the substance of the question seemed to have already been covered in the interviewee's unprompted recollections. The intention of the questions was to flesh out the reminiscences by establishing the remembered circumstances of their visits (what age they were, when that would have been, who accompanied them, how often they visited, and by what name they knew the museum); eliciting reflections on the visit (why they visited, whether they had ever thought about the visits since, whether they considered that the visits had made any difference to them, and what they now felt about museums); and drawing out any further recollections (whether they could recall anything *particularly* memorable; what a typical visit would have involved; and whether they could think of one word to describe their response back then to their museum visit).

Interviews were taped and transcribed. Using the hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the text of the transcriptions was subjected to analysis through a series of stages that would eventually reveal the essential nature of the museum experience from a young visitor's perspective.

## Data analysis

As if to confirm my proposition about the inaudibility of the visitor's voice, one participant (himself a historian) exclaimed at the conclusion of the interview 'I've always wanted to say that, and no-one's ever asked me!' His had been a joyous and detailed account of repeated outings to the Technological Museum as a child.<sup>5</sup> While some participants had strong and prolific memories like his, others struggled to marshal a few fragments. Yet even the fragmentary accounts contained vivid memories. As another participant remarked about the only exhibit she could recall, 'It must have made an impression on me!'

That, of course, is the point. In most cases it can be presumed that people who have long-term memories of a museum visit will have been strongly impressed by some aspect of it at the time. It is those strong impressions that I have attempted to record and analyze in this project.

Multiple visits generally made for stronger memories although the anecdotes of one participant, who been taken repeatedly with her sister during school holidays, were mainly restricted to recollections of the strictness of her grandmother. This same participant suggested I should interview her sister because 'she has a better memory for things than me', but when asked, the sister had no recollection of the museum visits at all.

Participants' age at the time of either the visit(s) or the interview, and the length of time

since the visit did not necessarily affect the extent of their recollections. For instance, both the oldest interviewee (Dave, 86) and the youngest (Janice, 46) could barely remember more than their own reaction to one particular exhibit.

Participants generally constructed their initial, unprompted account of their museum visits as a narrative. Most set the scene by explaining the circumstances or context – periodic visits while on holidays from the country, for example, or a regular outing with a parent, or a single visit with a school or Cub Scout group. Others began by recalling the emotions they felt on learning a visit was planned, or by describing what the building looked like as they approached.

As people's reminiscences unfolded, remembered mental states and affective responses to what they had encountered suffused their stories. While physical and temporal aspects of the visit provided a self-imposed framework for their narratives, value judgments and anecdotes about their experiences and reactions ran through the accounts of all elements of their museum visits.

As a preliminary step leading towards a phenomenological reflection on this rich data, I found it useful to organise the content of the interviews into an arbitrary set of categories. These were intended merely to act as a tool that would assist in collating and comparing the different participants' memories. I was able to divide participants' accounts into four categories that seemed to fit both their unprompted narratives and their answers to my questions. These were:

- *Context* – the social and temporal circumstances surrounding visits
- *Ambience* – the museum building and its external and internal environment
- *Exhibits* – accounts of particular exhibits or displays
- *Commentaries* – participants' opinions, reflections and comparisons generated at the time of the interview

These categories resemble in part Falk's (1988) four recollection 'themes' and McManus's (1993) 'memory categories', but do not coincide exactly with either set. My 'commentaries', for example, are somewhat similar to McManus's 'summary memories', which she described as 'fresh' memory accounts which the person generated after reflecting on older memories of the visit' (McManus 1993: 377). On the other hand, unlike McManus, I was not able to separate out 'feelings' as a separate category. Instead, I found that remembered mental states were inextricably entwined with accounts of all other aspects of the visit.

### *Context*

Participants generally described the circumstances of their visits, placing them in temporal, spatial or social contexts. Related events, dates, how they got there and who they went with (or attempts to remember these details even before being asked) formed part of most participants' recollections. Several of them remembered visits to the museum as being an expected feature of school holidays spent in Sydney. Others knew them as a regular day's outing from their suburban homes. George had come on an excursion with the Cub Scouts. Janice and Ian thought they had probably been on a school excursion. The train journey to the city and the walk from Central Station down Harris Street were often mentioned.

Recollections of mental states enlivened most accounts and feelings of pleasure, excitement and fascination were frequently expressed. For Les, the museum was 'a pretty favourite place' for the whole family on wet weekends. Ken came with his parents and for him the museum was 'one of the big treats ... on a visit to Sydney ... a magical experience'. Frank was brought by his parents and later by his older brother and found it 'a wonderful experience'. Repeat visitors Annette and Barry remembered feelings of 'excitement' and 'anticipation' when an outing to the museum was in the offing.

Social relations were an important part of the context of the visit for some participants. Annette had visited frequently with her father who was mechanically-minded, and the trips to the museum were part of a father-daughter bond that saw her 'pad around him' at home while he was 'fixing the Morris Minor or doing plumbing repairs'. She could not remember whether her mother and sister had ever come to the museum, as they were only interested in 'girly' things.

Barry's memories were also closely associated with strong feelings for his father, a toolmaker. Elaine, a 17-year-old from the country, had asked to visit 'a museum' when she came to Sydney to spend a 'sophisticated' weekend with a recently-married friend in 1957. Squeezed between a post-Christmas shopping excursion and a visit to the theatre, the Technological Museum was 'a really big deal ... the first museum I had ever visited'.

Carol was the only participant who did not remember visits with pleasure. Sent to stay in Sydney each school holidays, she and her sister did not enjoy their grandmother's 'educational activities' such as museum outings, where they had to wear starched dresses and shoes and socks and be 'the best behaved kids in creation'.

### *Ambience*

There is no doubt that the museum environment and its ambience were important elements of the young visitor's experience. The building itself was unlike anything most of them encountered in their daily lives. Annette said 'it was a really nice building ... very impressive ... I'd come from the outer suburbs which was little houses on gardens ... it all seemed terribly city to me'. Others remembered thinking it was 'old' or 'ancient'. Almost all of them mentioned walking up the entrance stairs which Ian described as 'sandstone stairs looming up in a red brick building'.

Some thought the place was 'large' while others found it 'quite small', which might have to do with the look of the interior which was 'cluttered', 'crowded', 'jumbly', 'overfilled' and 'chaotic'. Some remembered the smell which Les described as 'musty' and Janice can still bring to mind as 'pungent'. The wooden floors were mentioned and several were impressed by the staircases to other floors. Les said 'there were plenty of stairs to go up and down', Barry remembered that 'you walked up a wooden stair to get to the second level and there was more of whatever there was there before', and Ken thought 'on the top floor ... you'd never see anybody up there, they wouldn't bother walking up the stairs'.

Ken's sense of being the only one who knew about the model aeroplanes on the top floor seems to be associated with feelings of familiarity or ownership which Annette, another regular and avid visitor, described as 'having a very familiar feeling ... it was sort of like home'. This sense of ownership was also apparent in participants' remembered nostalgic feelings years later when they heard the museum was closing down and moving to the Powerhouse. Several mentioned being 'concerned' or 'sad' and Barry said that 'one doesn't always like to see one's belongings as it were shifted from one place to another'.

The presence of the uniformed museum attendants emerged in several reminiscences. Les said 'they were there to shoosh you but then again they were there to help you'. Frank remembered that 'there was always people supervising on different floors' and added that 'kids didn't run amok but they allowed kids to go wherever they want and just keep an eye on them and allowed them to interact with some of the exhibits'.

Another participant who specifically mentioned being allowed to go wherever she wanted was Annette, who recalled, 'Once I liked something I remember on each visit going back. I would just leave Dad at the door and I'd run around and look at my things'.

Annette was one of those whose descriptions identify the museum as a gendered place. For her the museum was where 'Dad and I did nice interesting boy things'. Barry said 'it wasn't a girly type of thing' and still believes that 'mechanical sorts of things [such as the exhibits he enjoyed] are not in general female things'. Carol remembered that 'it didn't seem to be a girl's sort of place but we had to go anyway'.

### *Exhibits*

There was no clear-cut separation between participants' recollections of the museum's environment and of its exhibits. Nevertheless, most made a point of mentioning particular exhibits and the strong effect these had on them.

Given the gender roles prevailing during the period in question when, as Carol put it, 'girls played with dolls and boys played with other stuff', it is not surprising that the museum might have seemed like a masculine place. As the guide books show, mechanical and engineering exhibits predominated on the ground floor and in later years began to colonize the other floors

as well. It was the mechanical exhibits and models, and especially those that could be operated by visitors, that were mentioned by the men over and over again as being what had 'fascinated' them the most. Les recalled that 'we used to look forward to the museum because there were lots of things as kids we could press and watch spin round'. Ken told about how 'you twisted a knob and the beam engine would pump away or the locomotive would start, its wheels would start turning, and they were absolutely fascinating, inspirational I would say almost to me'.

But girls had found exhibits that made a lasting impression on them as well. Amongst Helen's few memories of exhibits there were 'porcelain and china and lace or fabric' which she specifically sought out years later when she visited the new Powerhouse Museum. Elaine was 'gobsmacked' by a 'place setting from a dinner service from the White House'. This had been a revelatory experience for her as a 17-year-old because until that moment she 'couldn't imagine that somewhere like that would give part of their china, their history, to a remote museum' in Australia. Janice was 'fascinated' and 'excited' by the planetarium, which left her with a lasting interest in 'the planets and the stars'. Even Annette, who enjoyed visiting the Museum to do 'nice interesting boy things' with her father, 'always' went off by herself to check on her favourites. These included a 'huge slice of log' showing the rings of growth which she liked to feel, and a pair of 'little foot-bound Chinese slippers'.

There were several other specific exhibits mentioned by some of the participants. Ken, the most prolific rememberer, was able to reel off a list of both 'fascinating' and 'boring' exhibits, from model planes to 'the bionic woman type of thing where the various organs lit up'. For others, apart from the mechanical things and interactive models, the most frequently recalled exhibit was the Strasburg clock model. Indeed it was the only thing remembered by Dave, who described it as 'a big clock that was in there that fascinated me; it used to chime on the hour every hour and I think some figures used to appear and disappear'. He went on to describe it as 'a very decorative clock [with] a lot of carved woodwork on it' and he was 'intrigued' by 'the work that must have gone into it, the detailed work that was in it'.

Workmanship was also mentioned by others. Remembering the engines and the 'mechanical things [that] worked' Frank said 'it was fascinating in the way that it was constructed and the people that built it must have been master craftsmen'. Ken used to 'admire' the ship models in glass cases and was 'intrigued ... by the workmanship of it, that people could make these things'.

Reminiscences about specific exhibits seldom included mention of the people who went with participants to the museum. Even when accompanying adults were referred to with great fondness in descriptions of the context of the visit, they almost disappeared from accounts of participants' engagement with exhibits. The most striking example of this came during Ken's interview. For Ken the 'highlight' of frequent holiday trips to Sydney was being taken to the museum by both parents or, more usually, by his mother when his father was away in the army. After a long recitation on the exhibits that had interested him, he began speculating about the possibility that his mother might not have enjoyed the museum as much as he did, and was then stunned to realize that he couldn't actually remember her being there with him. On this topic he could not progress beyond 'wondering if she took me there and left me at the front door and whizzed off and did something else, went shopping up to Grace Brothers or something like that'.

Dave, who had been so enthralled with the Strasburg Clock that he remembered details about it after possibly 70 years, could not recall who accompanied him to the museum. When I asked if he had any sense of there being someone there with him looking at the clock he could not conjure up anyone at all.

The only participants who specifically mentioned interacting (or not interacting) with someone else were Annette, Les and Carol. Annette 'would sometimes walk around with Dad who would explain things about the machinery he understood, but then I'd whip around to [the pieces I always looked at]'. Les's father 'knew the area so well that it would be an experience to walk down from Central Station to the museum [when] we were already being inculcated with historical points before we got there'. Trying to remember why he had been impressed by a display of 'the original pole from the first electric tram that ran in Sydney', he concluded that 'I'm sure it was my father that told me it was there, I don't think it was any attendant at the museum'.

With their grandmother, who was a 'great stickler for the right thing', Carol and her sister 'would have walked in very quietly and not have anything to say because ... we would never have



been allowed to have a big loud conversation about anything we were looking at, let alone touch anything'.

### *Commentaries*

Recollections of their childhood experiences were relayed by participants through a filter of subsequently acquired knowledge and experience, and the interview situation inspired participants to reflect on their recollections. Consequently, most of them punctuated their accounts with commentary, comparisons and opinions, either spontaneously or in answer to my questions. For instance a number of them, unprompted, contrasted the Technological Museum either with the Powerhouse or with other museums they had visited in their adult travels. For the project at hand, these commentaries were useful for the further light they shed on participants' childhood impressions of their visits to the Technological Museum.

Annette repeatedly referred to the 'great sense of discovery' she had felt when visiting the Technological Museum, and she likened it to a museum she had recently visited with her son in Holland, which 'was a complete clutter of Victoriana ... where you discovered the gems yourself ... finding stuff and getting thrills, surprise thrills'. She much preferred this type of museum to 'overly instructive museums' where 'there's too many boards to read and not enough stuff' and it is 'all geared to the school excursion and you being told what to look at'. Ken and Helen expressed similar opinions, Helen stating that 'when I go to a museum [now] ... I don't like to be preached at ... I don't like the over-didactic museum'.

To draw out further reflection on their childhood experience, I had asked participants if they thought going to the Technological Museum had changed them in any way or had made any difference to them. Elaine, who had been 'struck' by the dinner service from the White House, was quite clear that 'it really broadened my outlook a lot'. Other responses were less assured. Several of the men concluded like Frank that 'it gave me an appreciation of mechanical things', or like Ken that it hadn't made any difference because 'they were nurturing a latent interest I [already] had in mechanical things'. Others thought that 'it enlarged my knowledge' or that 'probably my [current] interest in museums goes back that far'.

If the answers were unsatisfying it is no doubt because the question was unsatisfactory. In retrospect it is evident that such a baldly direct query, asked during a single taped interview, was unlikely to have encouraged introspection. However, throughout other sections of the interviews there was ample evidence of the influence of visits and of change and insight gained by the participants' younger selves. For instance, Janice, whose visit to the planetarium was 'the thing that stuck out in her mind', related that she 'always thought that that would have been something I would have liked to have done ... and now if people say to me "What would you like to come back as?" ... I've always said an astronaut'. Ken confessed, 'my ambition was to be a research scientist [but] I was hopeless at all science subjects, so my career took a different direction, but I always retained my interest in mechanical things'.

Organized into the arbitrary 'categories', *Context, Ambience, Exhibits and Commentaries*, participants' accounts had already yielded a great deal of interesting information about young people's impressions of museum visits. But uncovering the essence of their experience meant going on to analyze this data more deeply using phenomenological techniques.

### **Phenomenological approach to the data**

Taking a hermeneutic phenomenological approach involved a process of further writing, reflection and sometimes discussion with colleagues as I mined the interview transcripts for insights into the lived experience of those early museum visits. Dividing participants' accounts into the four categories had been a useful but superficial analysis. It had assisted me to write the coherent, organised report above, but it was now necessary to reflect on what was really being conveyed in the participants' recollections.

Moustakas (1994) has advised that in phenomenological analysis the use of textual description is a useful way of identifying meaning and clarifying ideas. With this in mind, my next stage of writing and reflecting was an exercise that involved creating a composite narrative (or 'textual description') in a child's voice based on the collective memories of the participants.

The exercise helped me to strip away some of the adult language and mature-age gloss from participants' recollections and bring some immediacy to their childhood experiences. At the same time it helped me to 'bracket' the assumptions I had brought to the project. Current thinking on bracketing, as explained by Byrne (2001a, 2001b), is that researchers should not attempt the impossible task of entirely freeing themselves of preconceived notions. Instead, researchers reflect on and acknowledge their assumptions as they bring their own experience and world view into a conversation with the text being analysed. As a museum worker, museum-goer, occasional historian, former child, and parent I had brought to this project my own expectations about what a young person's visit to the old museum might have entailed. The writing exercise assisted me to come to terms with my preconceptions and deal directly with participants' accounts. My composition read as follows:

### *Going to the museum*

It's a special day. We're going to the museum. The Technological Museum. I'm so excited. This is the best thing about school holidays. Sometimes we go on wet weekends too. Sometimes we go to other places in the city, like the museum with the stuffed animals. But today it's the Technological Museum. I love it. I don't know anywhere else like it. We'll have to wear our good things and we go into the city by train. We get out at Central and we walk down Harris Street. And there it is. I can see it down the street. It's this big, old building. We walk up the big stairs at the front and here we are inside. This is going to be good. There's lots to see and things to do. There's a man with a uniform on sitting inside the front door. He looks a bit cranky but he's alright. If you want to know where anything is he can tell you, but you'd better not get too noisy in here. But I know what I want to see. I have my favourites. Everyone that comes here has their favourites. Boys like it the best. There's all these machines, and things that work. There's a car and you can see the things moving inside the engine. You can see how the car works. And you can make the models of donkey engines and steam engines go. You push the button and they work. I could spend ages playing with the models. I like the noughts and crosses machine too but it gets a bit boring because you never win. It cheats. There's lots of models that don't work too. Model aeroplanes. And ships exactly like the real ships down in the harbour with everything on them, only little. It must have taken ages and ages to build them. I just don't know how they do it. And there's big things too. There's lots of things in this museum. It's really full of stuff. I think maybe they've got too much stuff and they don't know where to put it. You know, lots of plates and vases in glass cupboards. And a big slice of a log. And a planetarium where you can look at stars in the sky. And things from other countries. Some of it's boring and some of it's really interesting. And there's an upstairs too. I like going up and down those stairs. I think only us people who come here a lot go upstairs. You can go up there and find lots more stuff. I like finding things. I just love hunting round the whole place. It's got a bit of a funny smell but I don't mind. My father likes coming here. He likes mechanical things. He's good at making things and fixing things. I think he came to the school next door to the museum. Or maybe it was grandpa that came to that school. Dad likes to bring us to show us the things in the museum. It's nice coming with my Dad. But he doesn't mind if you go and look at things by yourself. Your favourites. I just like looking at these by myself. It doesn't really matter who else is there. But you have to get back to that really big clock when it's chiming the time. You don't want to miss this because little doors open and there are little people that come out and walk round. Whoever made that clock must have been really good at making things. They must have known a lot. I think when I grow up I might be an engineer or a scientist. You could spend all day in this place. We do. We spend all day. And then we walk back to Central and catch the train home. I want to come again.

Writing the composite experience from a child's viewpoint proved to be a refreshingly freeing exercise that allowed me to re-examine the transcripts with renewed insight. From this re-reading there emerged three strong themes that characterised the essential structure of the young person's museum experience. These themes had been more or less articulated in some participants' accounts and were implicit in the others. They were:

- *City Life*
- *Adulthood*
- *Independent Discovery.*

### *City Life*

For young people, to visit the Technological Museum was to sample an experience of *City Life*. In the city things looked different from your suburb or home town. Goings on were different there and you behaved differently. Elaine had asked her married friend to take her to a museum because that was one of the things you did in a city. The Technological Museum was housed in an unusual and impressive building that reflected the city in being old and multi-storied with grand stairs at the entrance. The journey to the museum and all that it entailed meant 'city': making special arrangements for the day, wearing best clothes, and taking the train to Central Station, the hub of city transport.

Inside the museum everything had an aura of 'city'. There were the staircases leading to those upper floors. There was the general atmosphere that called for more restrained behaviour than usual. And especially, there were the exhibits, which represented all the activities that happen on a large scale in a city – organized entertainment, industry, commerce, business, traffic, shopping, and dealings with faraway lands. The museum itself was an organized entertainment (Les as a teenager even brought girls). The working models showed industrial processes. The displays in glass showcases were like shop windows full of goods. The exotic fabrics and porcelain came from foreign countries, and the ship models showed how these things might have arrived in Sydney Harbour. Elaine's reward for going to the museum was to discover that the city of Sydney had sufficient standing in the world to be given a place setting from the White House!

### *Adulthood*

The museum was an introduction to the adult world, an intimation of what it is that adults do and experience, both the interesting things and the boring things. Adults work with big machines. They fly aeroplanes, captain ships, work in engine rooms, and drive motor cars and steam engines. They understand how these machines work. They know how to make them and they also know how to make painstakingly intricate things like models and the Strasburg Clock. Adults make beautiful textiles and eat off beautiful plates. Adults do scientific work and find out all about the universe.

Models and interactive exhibits were not simply children's toys to be played with. They were, as Ken put it, 'actually models of real things'. With these interactives children could engage with and exert control over miniature embodiments of the adult world. The Technological Museum was a place where you could draw some adult conclusions yourself about how machines work, and indeed about how the world works. It was a place where you found out esoteric adult things, and if you saw the Transparent Woman as Ken did you would see what was inside a woman's body.

### *Independent Discovery*

In its overcrowded galleries, the Technological Museum offered young visitors the opportunity to seek and find exhibits that interested them. It was 'a looking place, a searching place', as Annette described it, where she and others were allowed by parents and attendants to roam up and down the stairs and amongst the cluttered bays. 'Discovery' could mean finding fascinating new objects or gaining new insights. Coupled with the sense of discovery was the sense of

independence, both physical and intellectual. If participants could not remember adults enjoying or explaining exhibits with them, it might simply mean that the presence of parents or teachers was taken for granted. But it also means that their younger selves were so engrossed by the museum and its exhibits that they *thought* they were making discoveries for themselves.

Within the context of the young person's museum visit, the themes of *City Life*, *Adulthood* and *Independent Discovery* were not separate, but were inextricably connected. What remained within the phenomenological approach was to discover the essential element of the experience that these themes would reveal. Further discussion with colleagues and reflection on these themes led me to the conclusion that the fundamental experience for these young people was that of *Growing Up*.

### *Growing Up*

The transition from childhood to adulthood involves acquiring new skills, responsibilities and opportunities for action. It means gaining an appreciation of the complexity of the world and an understanding of one's place in it. It means becoming more self-reliant and taking some measure of control over oneself and one's environment. It means finding new and different kinds of rewards and satisfactions.

An examination of the experiential themes of *City Life*, *Adulthood* and *Independent Discovery* shows that aspects of this transition had been an integral part of the museum visit. In other words, young people for whom visits to the Technological Museum had been an enjoyable and memorable event were living through an experience of *Growing Up*. Even though they were satisfying their children's natural curiosity, wonder, sense of fun, delight in novelty and single-minded absorption, this was happening in an adult environment. On these visits they engaged physically and intellectually with adult things and experienced intimations of *Adulthood*. Their participation in *City Life* enriched their appreciation of the complexities of the adult world. They were allowed the supervised freedom to make *Independent Discoveries* about this adult world. Their learning was self-directed. They experienced the rewards that come with understanding matters that were previously esoteric. They found satisfaction in appreciating the work of others. They acknowledged the existence of a wider world but recognized intersections with their own. They found the inspiration to imagine possible futures and entertain ambitions.

During her interview, Elaine recognized that her museum visit had contributed to the growing-up of her naïve 17-year-old self. She recalled that she had already thought she was 'sophisticated and grown up' for being allowed to travel to Sydney by herself, but the sight of the White House china had provoked a conceptual leap and 'really broadened my outlook a lot'. That short museum visit had been 'stimulating' and 'opened a whole new world to me'. With other participants who had been younger than Elaine when they visited, and were therefore less perspicacious about the effects of their visits, taking a step-wise phenomenological approach has revealed the presence of the fundamental and rewarding experience of *Growing Up* hidden in their recollections.

Carol was the only participant who had not liked the museum. In her view there had been no 'girls' things' to see and no 'interactives'. Going to the museum under the strict supervision of her well-meaning grandmother had been 'a trial'. Surely her dislike was born out of powerlessness in this adult environment where, unlike other children, she had not been allowed the freedom to explore and make discoveries of her own. In these circumstances she had been made to remain childish, without the opportunity to enjoy an experience of growing up.

### **Conclusion**

Interviewing people about their memories of visits to Sydney's Technological Museum more than forty years ago has furnished rich material for study. By taking a phenomenological approach to these recollections, I have been able to penetrate beyond a merely descriptive analysis and capture an insight into the lived experience of the visits from a young person's perspective. *Growing Up* was revealed by this approach to have been the essential experience of these young museum visitors.

The Technological Museum was very different from today's modern museums. Its display techniques changed only minimally during its lifetime and it maintained its Victorian-era

sense of purpose to the last. It was not a children's museum. Its exhibits were arranged for the edification of adults and there was no special consideration given to children. Even its marvelous array of interactive engineering models had originally been installed to supplement the training of skilled tradesmen in the adjoining technical college. And yet visits there fascinated young people because it was a place where they could encounter *City Life*, participate in aspects of *Adulthood*, and enjoy making *Independent Discoveries*. In short, here they could engage with the experience of *Growing Up*.

Today's children are not like those young people who visited the Technological Museum all those years ago. Their schooling and their private lives are different. Their knowledge of the wider world and their interaction with it are vastly different thanks to increased wealth and developments in technology. Even so, for those of us now working in modern museums, perhaps there is something to be learnt from the experiences of young visitors to the Technological Museum. Today's museums still have the potential to be places where young people can gain understanding of what it means to be an adult, where they can enjoy the satisfaction of independent discovery. Today's museums can still be places that assist the journey from childhood to adulthood, places where children can experience *Growing Up*.

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### Notes

1 Davison, G., & Webber, Kimberley (eds) 2005, *Yesterday's Tomorrows: the Powerhouse Museum and its Precursors 1880-2005*, Sydney: Powerhouse Publishing in association with University of New South Wales Press Ltd.

2 Hicks, M., and Sear, Martha (2005) 'Prescribing: Salutory Instruction at the Museum' in Graeme Davison and Kimberley Webber (eds), *Yesterday's Tomorrows*, 68-81.

3 The 'museum memories' project was carried out during study for a postgraduate qualification at the University of Technology, Sydney.

4 As well as telling participants the purpose of the interviews I gave each of them a letter explaining the project. All participants signed a consent form allowing their interviews to be used in the project and published, on the understanding that their names would not be revealed. I have used pseudonyms in this report.

5 Since its establishment in 1879 the museum has undergone a number of name changes. Interview participants recalled referring to it by several different names, but the majority called it 'The Technological Museum' or 'The Technology Museum'. To avoid confusion I have referred to it as the Technological Museum in the discussion of their recollections.

**Appendix**

**Table of interview participants**

Pseudonym	Age at interview	Date of museum visit(s)	Number of visits	Age when visited
Annette	56	1955-1960	Multiple	Around 7 to12
Barry	64	1947-1956	Multiple	Between 7 and 16
Carol	64	1947-1953	Multiple	Around 7 to 12
Dave	86	Around 1930-1940	Possibly only once	Child or young adult
Elaine	65	1957	Once	17
Frank	55	1953-1957	Multiple	Around 4 to 8
George	76	Late1930s-1940s	Once	Around 11
Helen	70	1953-1956	Once	Around 17-18
Ian	57	1958-1959	Multiple	Around 10-11
Janice	46	1966-1969	Once	Around 10-11
Ken	70	1943-1950s	Multiple	9 to teens
Les	64	1946-1957	Multiple	6-7, then later as a teenager

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