

# Museums and Galleries in Heritage Buildings?

**Sometimes a heritage building seems an obvious choice for a museum or gallery. Its historic significance seems compatible with the nature of a museum or it offers much needed space for a gallery. However, it's important to consider the pros and cons before you start.**



## SUSANNAH PLACE

The ticket sales and visitor entry point to Susannah Place is in a 1920s style corner shop. The shop provides visitors with an interactive interpretation of the site and leaves other areas of the site in their existing condition, with the layers of history and use interpreted through signage rather than recreation.

Susannah Place Museum photograph Ray Joyce

## Advantages

- A heritage building has an acknowledged value in the community encouraging ongoing support and community interest.
- Many heritage buildings have great character that can be used to promote the museum to the community and visitors.
- Heritage buildings may be well located near the centre of town. This is advantageous both in attracting visitors to the site and providing ease of access to facilities such as cafes.
- Heritage buildings may provide an appropriate physical setting, history or context that can enrich the interpretation of historic collections and cultural experiences.
- While there are exceptions, many heritage buildings are solidly built and provide a stable physical and climatic environment for collections.
- The ambience and spaciousness of some heritage buildings, such as powerhouses and railway workshops, favour use as gallery and exhibition spaces.
- A heritage building may be in public ownership with possible savings on purchase and maintenance costs.
- Heritage buildings can potentially attract both local and state funding support.
- Museum/gallery use provides a life for the building (even if short term) not otherwise available.

## Disadvantages

Problems in the use of heritage buildings relate to the costs of adapting an existing building for a new purpose and the risk of downgrading the building's integrity and value in the process.

- The museum/gallery development may not suit a particular building. A contemporary art space, for instance, would be a challenging use for a small cottage, while an old schoolhouse isn't the most appropriate place to display farm machinery.
- The community may not readily accept a new use for a building with a long-established history. It may take years to change local perceptions and the venture may lose community support that means the difference between success and failure.
- Room sizes and layouts, access, circulation through the building, as well as light and climate control, may not be suitable for the envisaged museum. Some physical characteristics cannot be altered in a heritage-listed building.
- The building may be in poor structural condition and require considerable remedial work to make it weatherproof, environmentally sound and able to withstand increased visitor traffic. You need to consider whether the cost of work justifies the result or whether it



Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre photograph Tomkin Zilalkha Greer

### CASULA POWERHOUSE

The art gallery fittings of the Casula Powerhouse are designed to relate to the industrial nature of the building. Marks on the walls have been retained and new artworks incorporated, inviting visitors to reflect on the building's use as an electrical powerstation.

would be more appropriate to start from scratch with a newer or purpose-designed building.

### Critical questions

Some aspects of a building can be changed or adapted, but others, such as location, simply cannot. Before you engage consultants or carry out detailed studies, consider the following:

- Is the building appropriate for a new use, can it accommodate the public, museum staff and volunteers? Is it sufficiently robust for a new public use?
- Will the story of the building be lost, if its use is radically changed? Can the significance of the building be interpreted without impinging on the new museum use?

Is the building easy to access?

- Is the location easy to find? Is there public transport to the area? How frequently does it run and is it available on weekends?
- Is there sufficient and appropriate car or bus parking space?
- Can visitors with disabilities enter and move around the building and experience all that a more mobile visitor can?
- Can collection material, exhibitions, and office and catering supplies be delivered to and around the site with ease?

Are there environmental factors to consider?

- What are the climatic conditions of the area, what impact will this have on the building and collection? Is the area vulnerable to bushfires or flooding?
- Are there neighbouring businesses or activities which will have a negative impact on the museum?
- Is the building located in an area with appropriate zoning for the activities associated with a museum or gallery?

Many local councils have Local Environment Plans and Development Control Plans, that outline allowable building usage in different areas. Your heritage consultant or local government planning department could advise you on how to proceed.

### What does the community think?

Community consultation is highly productive in generating solutions to problems. Ideas from the community will ensure their participation in and ownership of the project that may be crucial to its success.

- Have you got the funds to sustain ongoing museum or gallery operations?
- You will require funds both to set up of the facility and maintain the historic building fabric. An historic collection will also have ongoing needs. Ensure that funding is well-secured and that you plan and budget beyond the opening date.

### Alternative uses for a heritage building

If you decide that an available heritage building is not suitable for a museum or gallery there are many optional uses for the building. In the first instance consider a use which maintains its current or original use. If the building was a post office, could it have a business which provides postal or courier services, or perhaps a business transaction centre? A house, could remain as a home, or small office environment or provide accommodation for visitors to the area. If you own the building its sale or lease could help you with more suitable accommodation.

### For further information contact:

**Museums and Galleries Foundation of NSW [www.mgfnsw.org.au](http://www.mgfnsw.org.au)  
43-51 Cowper Wharf Rd Woolloomooloo NSW 2011  
Tel 1800 114 311 (02) 9358 1760 Fax (02) 9358 1852**

- For advice and information on heritage matters in your local area contact the heritage advisor or officer attached to your local council. If you do not know who that person is, contact the NSW Heritage Office

**NSW Heritage Office [www.heritage.nsw.gov.au](http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au)  
Locked bag 5020 Parramatta NSW 2124  
Tel (02) 9873 8500 Fax (02) 9873 8599**

- Information about funding for heritage buildings is available from the NSW Heritage Office, your local council and the NSW Ministry for the Arts

**NSW Ministry for the Arts [www.arts.nsw.gov.au](http://www.arts.nsw.gov.au)  
PO Box A 226 Sydney South NSW 1235  
Tel 1800 358 594 Fax (02) 9228 4722 TTY (02) 9228 4869**