

**Guided Tour: A Study of Museums as Sites  
for Sustained Engagement**

by

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AA BGS MA

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Tasmania

September 2009

## Abstract

Museums today are faced with a number of challenges stemming, in part, from reduced funding and societal change. Consequently, museums are searching for ways to attract and retain visitors and deepen community engagement. The returning visitor is an increasingly important segment of the visiting public. This audience segment has received little attention in the research literature. This research explores the life experiences individuals have with a museum to understand how visitor/museum relationships form and develop, the ways in which returning visitors engage with a museum, the benefits that are derived from such relationships, and how these relationships are maintained over time.

As this study seeks to understand the individual's experience and meaning-making in their museum visitation and life contexts, a narrative research approach is employed. This narrative inquiry examines the life stories of seven individuals' *sustained engagement* with a single museum. Field texts were generated through interviews, observations, and researcher's notes. Data analysis consisted of crafting individual narrative accounts and identifying thematic connections within and between cases.

This dissertation extends our understanding of the museum experience by providing novel insights into the ways individuals develop and sustain a relationship with a museum. Analysis of participant narrative accounts reveals that sustained visitor/museum relationships can form for people from varied educational and socio-cultural backgrounds, and at any age. This study provides new understandings about pathways to museums; specifically, the role significant others and friends who serve as informal cultural guides play in introducing individuals to museums. The narratives also reveal important insights into returning visitors' engagement with a museum. These individuals engage in multiple ways and for

multiple purposes. Furthermore, the nature of their engagement changes over time. This study documents the numerous and significant ways sustained engagement with a museum enriches people's lives. Sustained visitor/museum relationships can meet a wide range of needs through various life stages and shape important connections to place and personal identity.

These novel insights into the ways visitor/museum relationships evolve through different life stages will inform museums as they strive to fulfill their charter to serve their local communities and to serve individual members of the community through their lifetime in that community. A better understanding of returning visitors can assist museums in facilitating experiences that meet specific needs, deepen engagement, and strengthen relationships with visitors. Such outcomes may support museums in their efforts to ensure a sustainable future.

## **Acknowledgements**

Although words cannot adequately express my gratitude, I would like to acknowledge and thank the many people who have helped me on my research journey.

To my supervisor Professor Margaret Barrett, I would not have embarked on this endeavor if not for your encouragement. I feel extremely privileged to have had the opportunity to benefit from your wisdom, talents, and guidance. I cannot think of anyone with whom I would have rather shared this experience. And to Marg, I greatly appreciate your time and insightfulness.

To my family and friends, thank you for your ongoing support. Special thanks to James for your devotion, and for sharing your intellect and expertise. You could not know how much I value your contribution. And to my parents, you serve as my inspiration.

And finally, to my participants who shared so much with me about their lives and their engagement with museums, I will carry your stories with me forever.

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