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# AUSTRALIAN FOSSIL & MINERAL MUSEUM

THYLACINE HAVE DISPLAYED THE EXUBERANT  
SOMERVILLE COLLECTION OF FOSSILS AND  
MINERALS WITHIN THE SHELL OF A VICTORIAN  
GOTHIC SCHOOL BUILDING IN BATHURST.

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Given the way that the public's fascination for all things prehistoric has been buoyed by popular films and documentaries, fossils and dinosaur bones must surely seem a windfall for new museum planners. A windfall, too, for the exhibition designers. Despite the logistical challenges of assembling and installing such objects, they often have the advantage of being sculptural as well as visually rich. So if you're lucky enough to have a *Tyrannosaurus rex* skeleton on hand, as was the case for design company Thylacine at the new Australian Fossil and Mineral Museum, it seems it would be hard to go too far wrong displaying it. Minerals, though, are a slightly different proposition. Let's face it, a collection of rocks arranged in chronological order could a *very dull museum make*. But the minerals in the Somerville collection could hardly be further from a bunch of boring rocks. With a dazzling variety of colour, form and complexity, the massed constellation of minerals in this new museum takes on exotic and other-worldly connotations.

Thylacine – there is something intriguing about the name of the design firm. The thylacine, or Tasmanian tiger, could be the quintessential museum artefact. To paraphrase the French philosopher and museophile Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy, the thylacine is an instance of museums "killing objects to write their history". Coming across a thylacine specimen in a far-flung European museum has the same piquancy as happening upon a stuffed dodo – they exist as specimens in museums both *although* and *because* they are extinct, and no longer exist as real creatures in the real world. A design firm that chooses a name that alludes to some of the richness of museum history, and some of its problems, is especially interesting if, as in this case, it is engaged with explicitly contemporary display techniques.

For the Australian Fossil and Mineral Museum, the brief from Bathurst City Council called for a temporary exhibition space, an entry foyer, shop and office spaces, and the installation and display of the permanent collection. This is all within the shell of an existing heritage-listed building, which first opened in 1876 as the Bathurst Superior School. In 1940 it became part of a suite of buildings housing the local TAFE, before refurbishment for the museum began in 2001. Thylacine have been careful to retain the integrity and fabric of the existing building – "a sense of the building existing behind the display", in designer Quentin Mitchell's words – with most of the showcases standing off from the existing walls. The refurbishment process uncovered a range of archaeological artefacts that are now displayed in an under-floor showcase, as a record of the building's history.

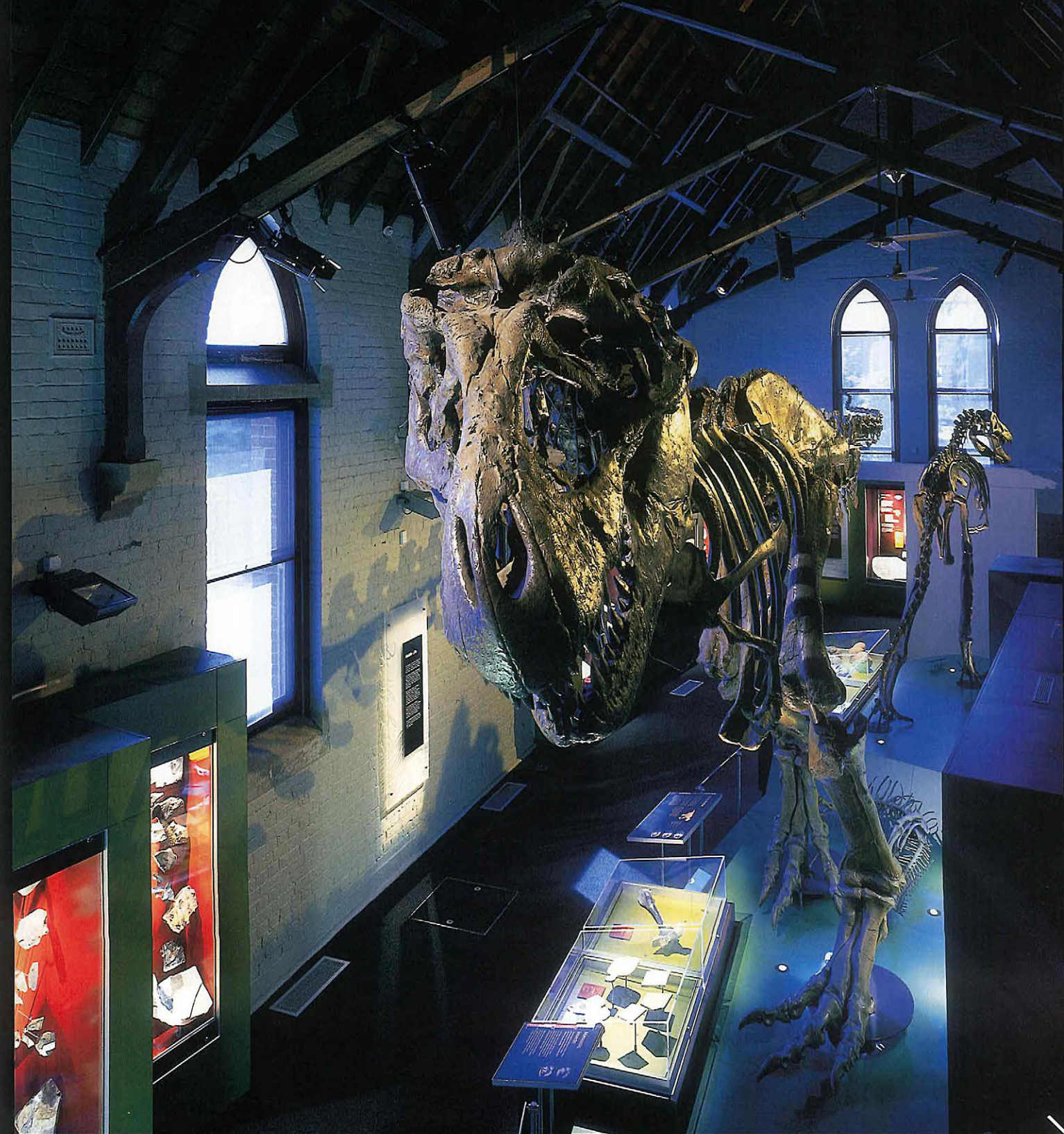
The spaces themselves are tall and gracious, with the original timber trusses and vaulted ceiling lining revealed. Within this space the smaller scale of the showcases and the minute size of the objects are carefully disposed. From the entry foyer, a series of what the designers describe as "wow objects", particularly large and spectacular specimens, are placed as "signposts" to draw the visitor into and through the space. This starts with a didactic introduction to geology and to the origins of the collection, leads through the long mineral gallery and culminates

in the fossil gallery. This is the location of the star attraction, the *Tyrannosaurus rex*, which is the only complete skeleton of its type in Australia. In this gallery the designers have made their one major intervention in the existing built fabric – a mezzanine that allows visitors to climb up and come dramatically face to face with the dinosaur's skull. Along with many other specimens, the fossil gallery also houses a fascinating and beautifully lit display of insects, flora and reptiles encased in amber. The display has an "interactive" magnifying glass that can be moved around to look more closely at individual specimens.

Thylacine is accustomed to achieving this level of detail and finish, having worked on a broad range of project types including the design and fabrication of public art, industrial design as well as museum work. The company also has an unusually collaborative approach to the design process. The singular, hero designer gives way to a kind of "collective ego", says Thylacine's project manager Caolán Mitchell. Their design work, for example, was pushed and challenged by their expertise in fabrication. In the Fossil and Mineral Museum this has also extended to a collaboration with specialist lighting designers Bluebottle 3.

The origin of the collection and the museum as the personal passion of an individual collector, Warren Somerville, infused the curation and design process. Somerville donated the collection, which is considered to be one of the most significant of its type in the world, to Sydney's Australian Museum on the condition that it would be permanently displayed in the Bathurst area. As Caolán Mitchell explains, "we always thought of Warren as [integral to] the collection", and while the specimens were collected on scientific principles, they also reveal a subjective sense of wonder and a definite eye for the aesthetic. Thylacine, in turn, have taken up this rationale very effectively in the exhibition's design and layout. While different parts of the collection are arranged according to different taxonomies – some parts are ordered chronologically, some by region, some by type – there is a consistently theatrical presentation of the most visually stunning specimens. This does not mean that there is no factual information or educational intention, just that the lure of colour and reflectivity has been used to knowing effect and that the museum "answers the scientific in an aesthetic way".

According to Bathurst Regional Council's museum planner and manager, Trish McDonald, the museum has seen more than 10,000 visitors since its opening to a packed house in July 2004. While there are limitations inherent in regional locations – generally smaller audiences and smaller budgets – regional institutions also provide unique advantages and opportunities. On a very pragmatic level, the lower volume of traffic means that objects can be spaced more closely together without crowds of people having to elbow one another out of the way to see them. On the level of community involvement, regional museums also have an advantage. Businesses and individuals in the Bathurst area were extremely generous in their financial support and engagement with the project. The determination that this would be a significant regional museum, with exhibits and design matching up to a national standard, has clearly been realized.

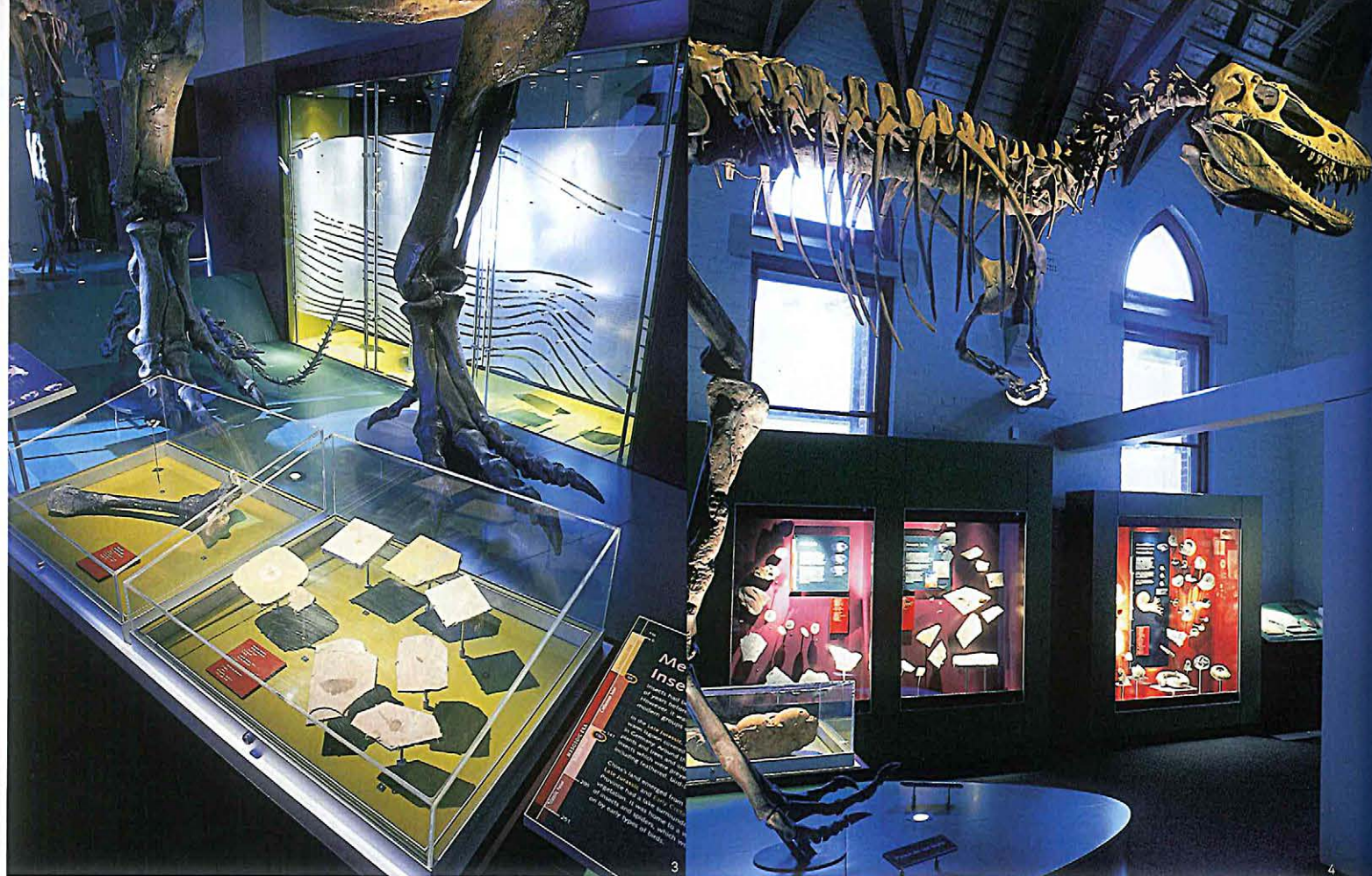


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1/ THE NEW MUSEUM SITS WITHIN THE SHELL OF A GRACIOUS HERITAGE LISTED BUILDING.

2/ A MEZZANINE ALLOWS VISITORS TO COME FACE TO FACE WITH THE TYRANNOSAURUS REX SKELETON.

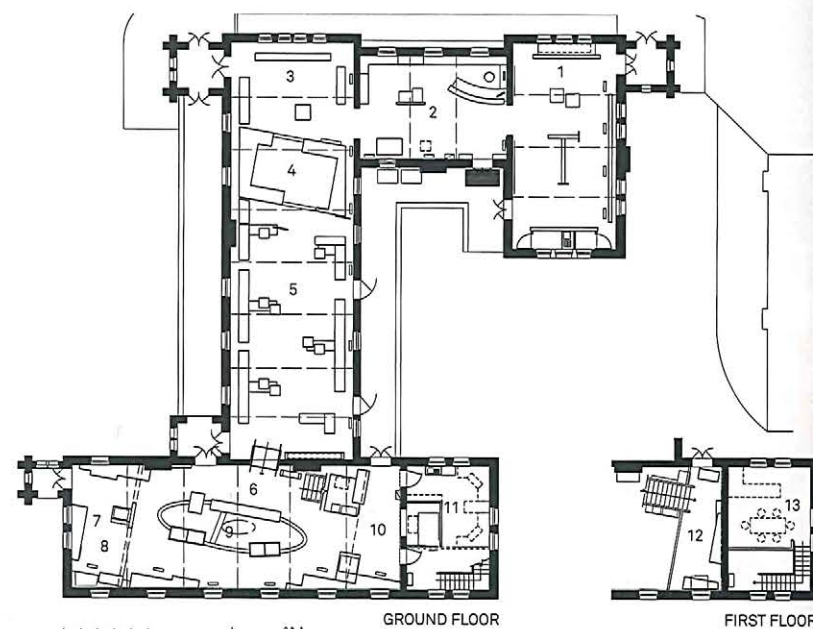




#### × design statement

This project took direction from our first view of Warren Somerville's collection store. We were confronted by an Aladdin's Cave crammed with sparkling crystals and looming prehistoric bones. The scale and intensity simply had to be translated into the museum experience. The building consists of four halls around a courtyard. The Victorian Gothic grandeur of the interiors is fully exploited for the Entry, Temporary Gallery and Mineral Halls. Natural light levels are qualified in these spaces and the exhibition furniture discretely contained well within the building form. The furthest gallery, Fossils, is darkened for theatrical effect, with exhibition furniture against the walls to accommodate the enormous *Tyrannosaurus rex* and *Albertosaurus* skeletons. In both major galleries the exhibition cases are ranged fairly formally, but the contents are laid out in a free-form way to acknowledge the collection's baroque exuberance. Some spectacular mineral specimens are housed individually in floating acrylic cubes along the central corridor of the Mineral Gallery. The initial effect in Minerals is of a quiet orderliness – until the showcases are seen straight on, revealing dense cosmic whorls of flash and colour. This style is somewhat reversed for the Fossil Gallery, with dinosaurs towering over the introductory showcases. As the *Tyrannosaurus rex* is so large, we introduced a viewing mezzanine at one end for an eyeball-to-eyeball experience. The mezzanine also provides a space to display opalized fossils under ultraviolet light. Lighting design was promoted as integral to the overall design strategy.

THYLACINE



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GROUND FLOOR

FIRST FLOOR

- key
- 1 Temporary exhibition space
  - 2 Reception/shop
  - 3 Introduction
  - 4 Minerals: localities
  - 5 Minerals: formations
  - 6 Fossils: introduction
  - 7 Fossils: amber
  - 8 Fossils: later life
  - 9 Fossils: middle life
  - 10 Fossils: earliest life
  - 11 Demonstration/office
  - 12 Mezzanine: middle life
  - 13 Office/meeting

3 / THE COLLECTION IS ARRANGED ACCORDING TO DIFFERENT TAXONOMIES.

4 / MOST OF THE SHOWCASES STAND OFF THE EXISTING WALLS.

5 / LIGHTING IS INTEGRAL TO THE DESIGN STRATEGY.

#### × project

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#### × design practice

Thylacine  
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T 02 6299 7340 F 02 6299 7341  
www.thylacine.com.au

#### × project team

Design: Quentin Mitchell, Caolán Mitchell, Tom Caddaye, Sarah Drury, Catherine Pratten, Phoebe Porter.  
Technical: Aimee Frodsham, Ugo Grasselli, Tim Moore, Rene Mure, Jack Waring-Dallwitz, Mark Worral

#### × time frame

Design and documentation:  
18 months  
Construction: 12 months

#### × museum project manager

Trish McDonald

#### × graphics

Sling Shot Design

#### × lighting

Bluebottle 3

#### × collection display & installation

Thylacine

#### × joinery fabrication

DesignCraft

#### × products

showcases  
MDF, hoop pine, ply and glass  
custom-designed exhibition  
showcases with two pack  
paint finish

#### × floors

Floating timber floor.  
Wool carpets