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Making M.A.D.E – Bringing contested histories together at Eureka



Eithne Owens

In May 2013, a new museum opened on the site of the 1854 Eureka Stockade in Ballarat, Victoria. M.A.D.E (the Museum of Australian Democracy at Eureka) represents an \$11.1 million investment by the City of Ballarat, Regional Development Victoria and the federal government.

Much of the early attention the project garnered was as a result of the inclusion of the iconic Eureka Flag – full title, *Flag of the Southern Cross (Eureka Flag)* – loaned from the Art Gallery of Ballarat to M.A.D.E. However that is just one piece of the puzzle formed in creating this new museum, which aspires to be much more than the sum of its parts.

The task presented to me, appointed project curator in July 2010, was as follows: to develop a curatorial concept for a new museum that would pay due respect to Eureka and the site, but also engage audiences with a much wider story of democracy.

In my interview, I was frank. One of those tasks would be significant; the two together presented distinct challenges. The biggest risk was that the two elements might clash: audiences looking for the Eureka story could feel short-changed; while those hoping for a contemporary take on democracy could find the Eureka content distracting.

I suspect that my outsider status went some way towards resolving the conundrum about ideal focus

when I was appointed as project curator in the ground-floor development phase of the new museum. As a non-Australian immersing myself in ‘the Eureka episode’ and other stories of democratic protest and change in Australia, my instinct was to look for the familiar comparison. *<This event reminds me of that event; issue x has parallels with issue y>*

This search led to my own personal ‘Eureka moment’. The story of Eureka, when ‘drilled down’ and deconstructed, lends itself as a multi-sided example of a popular democratic movement, with parallels between the Australian uprising and countless other groups and movements that have protested their rights against the political status quo – across time and throughout the world.

Interestingly, this approach also resonates with a book featured at M.A.D.E. *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, by Gene Sharp, an influential American academic, analyses the common traits of successful – non-violent – protests, and uses this analysis to form the basis of a kind of ‘how-to’ guide to toppling dictators. Testament, perhaps, to the success of the work is that the book has been denounced by governmental regimes in Venezuela and Myanmar – to name but two.

Working with the museum project’s advisory historians, the before- during- and aftermath of the Eureka Stockade were analysed, and a series of questions posed: Why did this uprising occur when it did and where it did? What were the incendiary incidents?



ABOVE: Eithne Owens
TOP: M.A.D.E. interior view.

LEFT, TOP: Bugle representing Commencement of Eureka Battle. Image: M.A.D.E.

LEFT, BOTTOM: Flag of the Southern Cross (Eureka Flag). Collection, Art Gallery of Ballarat.

What made these events irrevocable? Why did the uprising capture the public's imagination, then and now? What tools were employed to effect change?

This was far from the first time these questions have been asked. However our project sought to revisit the Eureka story with a view to establishing both its singularity and universality: that is, what makes Eureka distinctive to Ballarat, and what makes it relevant to a global history of democracy?

At a simple level, we established that successful movements for democratic change have typically included the following features: an easily-identified (and personally engaging) leader; the use of rousing rhetoric; strong media interest; an engaging graphic symbol and/or slogan; and the convergence of such factors to achieve a kind of critical mass of support.

This analysis provided us with themes we wanted to explore further. Taking inspiration from our opening proposition, the key themes were then titled: *The Power of Numbers*; *The Power of Influence*; *The Power of Words*; *The Power of Symbols*; and an oppositional theme: *Without Power?* (The original concept also included *The Power of Choice* and *The Power of Stories*; however space restrictions caused us to surrender the last two. I hope meanwhile that a future iteration will see the additional themes recaptured and interrogated in their turn.)

As M.A.D.E is a narrative-led museum, the stories had to take precedence in planning content. However once the curatorial framework and guiding concepts were fixed, the project team then faced the challenge of developing the physical experience.

As a starting point for displays, M.A.D.E had inherited a small but significant collection owned by the City of Ballarat, primarily relating to life on the gold-fields. It should be noted that relatively little material evidence survives from the Eureka Stockade. There is of course the Eureka Flag, supported by some documentary evidence and a range of interesting artworks, but very few three-dimensional artefacts. There are also some weapons that have traditionally been associated with the Stockade events, but their provenance is uncertain.

From an early date, the project team hoped to secure the loan of the emblematic Eureka Flag,¹ and always envisaged this object as providing an emotional climax of the visitor experience. When finally placed on display at M.A.D.E, the Flag was, without question, the most significant piece of material cultural heritage presented at the new museum.

However, when it came to the broader case histories of democracy featured as the project developed, we had to 'build the collection' from the ground up. So began a long process of contacting community organisations, universities, private collectors and NGOs. Recourse to e-Bay proved an interesting source of recent ephemera. My colleagues and I sourced some material at Occupy Melbourne. And, while on holidays in Greece during the civilian uprisings against governmental restraints arising through EU financial controls, I accosted a protester in the street and



asked if he'd consider donating his placard to the new museum where I worked in Australia. (In fact, he declined, explaining that funds were limited and that the protest placards were counted on going out and coming back in.)

Many discussions were held about our project's definition of 'democracy' for collecting and interpretation purposes. This led to our clarifying that we would work with the following boundary: we would include a group if its initial stated purpose was to advance or achieve democracy or democratic aims. We leave the final outcome judgment to our visitors, as to whether or not the represented groups achieved their aims. We also highlight how matters of historical judgment are never closed, and point to the cautionary tale of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe: once hailed as a freedom fighter; now generally reviled as a dictator.

Where we could source or borrow artefacts, these became the focus of interpretation; where artefacts were thin on the ground, we took the opportunity to commission new artworks and multimedia presentations, and explored the museum's stories in many different ways.

For example, we had hoped to borrow the famous Bakery Hill poster from Public Record Office Victoria, but the object wasn't available for loan at the time (although PROV have generously lent both the Ballarat Reform League Charter and the Coranderrk Petition to the museum). As a solution, we commissioned Renaissance Bookbinding in Melbourne to set and print a version of the original Bakery Hill poster on an antique press: not a facsimile but a reinterpretation.

1. The idea of contested history, fundamental to the questioning spirit of the new Museum of Australian Democracy at Eureka, was aired in a previous issue of *Museums Australia Magazine*, which searchingly examined the Eureka Flag and its complex history: both as a physical object (a ravaged but still emblematic weaving and beautiful textile design) and as a symbol of multi-sided interpretation of a key event in Australian social and political history. See the suite of articles: Gordon Morrison, 'Contextualising an icon'; Ron Radford, 'Rescuing the Eureka Flag'; and Andrew Simpson, 'Contesting significance: What mattered then, what matters now' - all published in *Museums Australia Magazine*, Vol. 18(1), Museums Australia, Canberra, September 2009; respectively pp.24 (GM), 19 (RR), and 20-23 (AS). [Ed.]

A new Ballarat museum dedicated to the Eureka uprising and Australian democracy



The museum footprint of M.A.D.E is not huge, and therefore all elements of the exhibition have to ‘earn their keep’. Every display, every activity, every installation is designed to surprise, amuse, delight, and provoke – all with a view to encouraging audiences to think about democracy anew.

Fast-forward to the completed project in 2013, and the opening ambitions are embodied by the Democracy Machine, the first exhibition element encountered by visitors when they come to M.A.D.E. The installation is a play on Le Corbusier’s maxim that ‘A house is a machine for living in’. We conjectured that democracy might be a machine for society to live in. The Democracy Machine has taken shape as a kinetic light sculpture that explores some of the component parts of democracy (all open to questioning), and leads to the opening proposition of the exhibition.

Given the ambivalence associated with the concept of *democracy*, we took this proposition from the roots of the word – the Greek ‘demos’ (people) and ‘kratos’ (power). This led us to the following equation as a motif for our project: $\langle \text{democracy} = \text{people} + \text{power} \rangle$. One mathematically-minded colleague pointed out to me the corollary proposition, suggesting that $\langle \text{democracy} - [\text{minus}] \text{people} = \text{power} \rangle$, which is sure to generate some controversy. Yet we’ve always known that a museum of democracy, at Eureka, had to be prepared for controversy.

We hope that people *will* challenge our definition of democracy and consider, not just alternative definitions but also alternative political systems. Not surprisingly, Winston Churchill has been quoted on numerous occasions throughout this project: *Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.*

From the Democracy Machine, visitors move

through into the main gallery at M.A.D.E, which is laid out as a series of concentric circles. At its heart is the Bird’s Eye installation: a site-based work that combines illustration, lighting and archaeological fragments, and offers visitors an opportunity to locate the main events of Eureka with reference to the museum.

Around the Bird’s Eye is the ‘ring’ dedicated to the Eureka story: a ten-screen, multi-user touchable, which places the Stockade in its immediate context and reveals where it sits within the wider story of Australian democracy. Eureka is very much presented as a contested history, and much of the narrative is told through first-person documentary evidence.^[2] Visitors are actively invited to comment on (and tweet, via @whatdoeseurekamean) what Eureka means to them.

Interspersed with the screens are object displays relating to their content – from an 1854 gold licence, to an invitation to the Federation celebrations in Melbourne in 1901.

The sophistication of the digital interface allows us to present visitors with a *virtual collection* of significant archival material, drawn from repositories across Australia and worldwide, including the State Libraries of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia; the National Library and National Gallery of Australia; the National Museum of Ireland; and the House of Lords Library in the UK.

The collation of material for this installation took two years to assemble. It offers visitors an unparalleled opportunity to interrogate documentary evidence from Eureka alongside examples from other places and other times – for example, to compare the Ballarat Reform League Charter of 1854 with the UK People’s Charter of 1838; or to contrast the Victorian Women’s Suffrage Petition of 1898 with the 1886 Coranderrk Petition presented to the Victorian Government by Wurundjeri elder, William Barak, of the distressed Coranderrk community north-east of Melbourne. Concepts like Australia as ‘the social laboratory of the world’ are explored in tandem with the White Australia policy, emphasising the point that within processes of democratic change, there’s often at least one step back for every two steps forward.

The outermost ring of the M.A.D.E gallery is where other themes (*The Power of Numbers, The Power of Influence, The Power of Words, The Power of Symbols, and Without Power?*) are explored, linking Eureka to a broader Australian and global context. This link is highlighted by the illuminated timeline wrapping around the gallery at a high level: it features some (emphasis on *some*) key moments in the expression of democratic demands, traced from 500 BCE to the present day.

Each thematic area features a mix of objects, AV and installation. The interpretive design is very much focused on encouraging people to look – and look again. So, for example, *The Power of Numbers* includes a large vitrine showcase dotted with seemingly

RIGHT: Barack Obama t-shirt, Power of Influence. This t-shirt became very popular around the time of Obama’s first presidential campaign. We include him in our ‘Power of Influence’ story because he’s a very charismatic person and it speaks to the role that charisma and a talent for oratory can play in bringing someone to the public’s attention. Image: M.A.D.E.

2. See Andrew Simpson’s article on ‘contested significance’ and the Eureka flag’s enduring importance, *Museums Australia Magazine* 18(1), 2009, op.cit.

random 3D numbers: 1, 2, 8, 10000, 30000, 70000, 95000000. This relates back to the tagline for the theme and raises the question: How many people does it take to start a revolution?

The numbers correspond to artefacts that tell the stories of different groups working for democratic change. The figure '2', for example, references the story of Australian women who nursed in the Spanish Civil War. The object display is bookended by two very different multimedia installations.

The first is called Tools of Change, and offers a range of 'how-to' videos: Bob Brown of the Greens explains how to set up a political party; Sam McLean of GetUp gives tips on successful campaigning; and an MP's staffer provides guidance for those who want to ensure their letters get the political attention they deserve. The other installation is a music-based piece that uses the metaphor of music (in particular choral music) to invite visitors to reflect on the collaborative energy and power of people working together.

Some of the stories collected within the museum are inspiring; others are confronting. The range of narratives in type and scale creates some very interesting adjacencies. Within the *Power of Words* theme is a display called 'the Incendiary Library'. This was first conceived as a counterpoint to the Bebelplatz *Night of Shame* memorial in Berlin, designed by artist Micha Ullman. That memorial recalls the 1933 Nazi book-burnings by presenting an abstracted library – viewed from above through ground-inserted glass windows – its shelves bare of books.

By contrast, M.A.D.E's library shelves are full – but filled by books that, over the years, have been banned, burnt, or censored; or which, because of their content, have sparked revolutions and changed the world. Not all of these books make easy bed-fellows (and we do underline the point that a book is not 'good' or 'bad' simply because it has been banned). Some selected for display may be challenged by visitors, but their inclusion (and our inclusivity) does serve to bring us back to the *contested history* dynamics of our presenting the Eureka Stockade.

What we have aimed to do at M.A.D.E is to create a kind of 'safe space' where competing stories, difficult stories, heart-warming and heart-breaking stories, can live together. It seems a very fitting culmination to the exhibition, then, to have the imposing *Eureka Flag* (on loan from and co-curated with the Art Gallery of Ballarat) as the conclusion to the museum visit, since this resonant object speaks very powerfully to the idea of contested history and diverse stories.

Housed in its own purpose-built, temperature- and light-controlled space, the *Flag of the Southern Cross (Eureka Flag)* invites visitors to consider the price paid for change. The flag, of which approximately 40% has been 'souveniered' in snipped fragments over the years, shows its age, but is an eloquent witness to the events and conditions it has endured – perhaps not the wars, but certainly a battle.

As a symbol, the Flag has been adopted by Left and

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Right, by trade unions and bikers, by sports fans and artists. It is supposed to be the most popular tattoo design in Australia. This singular artefact holds so much meaning for so many, that the physical flag itself seems charged with the energy of cumulative attention, offering both a symbol and object lesson in contested histories. There is no one 'meaning' to the flag, however, and many of its interpretations sit uncomfortably alongside one another. Yet they all have a place in the story of the Eureka Flag.

The word 'Eureka' is now in popular speech, and of course means 'I have found it'. But what we are endeavouring to do at M.A.D.E is to ask what people are looking for – when they fight, protest, march, petition or tweet for democracy. It's a discussion we hope our visitors will join.

Ultimately, the test of how successful M.A.D.E is as a museum of democracy, and how well it honours the contested story of Eureka, will be in demonstrating how far it can go towards creating that 'safe space' for civil debate – a democratic space where all stories can have their say. **■**

Eithne Owens, Curator, led the project development for the Museum of Australian Democracy at Eureka in its start-up phase. The Museum opened on 4 May 2013.

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