

FROM THE CHAIR

The future struggles that it may not become the past.
Publilius Syrus, *Moral Sayings* (1st century BC)

I believe the future is only the past again, entered through another gate.
Sir Arthur Wing Pinero, *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* (1883)

There was a shortage of material for this issue of the journal, so I thought I would write an extended Chair's column - highlighting some of the efforts and achievements of the past six months, delving into the past and reflecting on the future.

Recent Achievements

- **ARLIS/ANZ aims and objectives 2002-2004.** In the absence of an endorsed business or strategic plan, interim aims and objectives have been published in this issue of the journal and on the website.
- **Australian Visual Arts Information Project.** As reported by Jill More in the last issue, ARLIS/ANZ has enlisted the support of the National Library of Australia in reviewing Australian visual arts information resources. Many of you would have completed the survey distributed by the National Library a few months ago. Jill will provide the results of the survey and explain the next step early in the new year.
- **New Zealand Visual Arts Indexes.** Catherine Hammond is conducting a survey of NZ members on indexing the visual arts, modelled on Jill More's 1991 survey of Australian members. The purpose of the survey is to provide members with up-to-date data on indexing practices and to look at the potential for sharing and possible cooperative indexing. Catherine expects to send a questionnaire to NZ Chapter members early in the new year.
- **Australian Libraries Gateway.** Jill More instigated a review of entries on visual art collections registered in the Australian Libraries Gateway and its potential as a directory for arts libraries. Comments were forwarded to and gratefully received by the National Library of Australia. Further action may flow from the Australian Visual Art Information Project
- **ARLIS/ANZ Journal.** The National Library of Australia has been selectively indexing our journal articles in Australian Public Affairs Information Service for a number of years. The 38 articles currently in the database cover the period 1983-2003. Seventeen are available as full text in *Australian Public Affairs - Full Text (APA-FT)*. To formalise the arrangement, ARLIS/ANZ has become a member of Copyright Agency Limited and has endorsed the creation of full text versions of future articles selected for APA-FT. ARLIS/ANZ has also received a proposal from RMIT regarding possible inclusion of the full journal in the new RMIT service, Informit Library (<http://www.informit.com.au/library>). A decision on the proposal has been deferred until the next AGM.

- **ARLIS/ANZ website.** Joye Volker has been busy developing a new website, which is expected to be available in the new year.
- **ARLIS/ANZ conference 2004.** The conference committee (Jill More, Susan Schmocker, Barbara Rendall and Michele Burton) has been busy developing plans for the next conference at the Art Gallery of NSW, 8-11 September 2004. The call for papers appears in this issue of the journal.
- **Membership fees.** The Australian Taxation Office confirmed that ARLIS/ANZ, a non-profit organisation meeting a number of conditions, is no longer obliged to charge GST or complete business activity statements. The executive has therefore decided that, from 1 January 2004, the fees will remain unchanged: ARLIS/ANZ will retain the GST component that we previously charged to offset the GST component that we are charged when we spend money. The new membership form is published on the last page of the journal.
- **Changes in office bearers.** Jin Whittington, after serving us well as treasurer for a year, has stepped down as treasurer to take long service. On behalf of members, I would like to thank Susan Schmocker for stepped into the breach while juggling other ARLIS/ANZ commitments. Andrea McKey Manager, Arts & Culture Library, Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory, has taken on the role of NT Chair, giving ARLIS/ANZ a presence that it hasn't had in the top end for some time. Erin Fraser has taken on the chair's role in Western Australia.

The Past

Influenced by WS Inge's assertion in *Assessments and Anticipations* that the past guides the future, I've been spending a few interesting hours trawling back issues of the journal and its predecessor, *ARLIS/ANZ News*. This archaeological expedition has just begun, so the following comments are tentative observations that may change with deeper digging and in the light of comments by members.

The first phase of the ARLIS/ANZ story began when it was formally established under Joyce McGrath's leadership on 5 December 1975. Despite early struggle, feet finding and experimentation that is typical of organisations in their infancy, it grew fairly rapidly from an initial membership of 15 to around 66 members within the next five years.

In 1980, ARLIS/ANZ merged with the Sydney-based Museums Arts and Humanities Group (MAHG) and accommodated a subtle name change. The Art Libraries Society became the Arts Libraries Society. MAHG, with the participation of ARLIS/ANZ, had organised the 1977 national seminar of Arts Information in Australia, held in conjunction with the Library of Association of Australia Conference in Hobart. Sue Boaden, who was a member of both groups, presented a paper on visual arts

information resources in Australia, based on a survey of 41 institutions. The main issues to emerge from her analysis were staffing levels and qualifications, standards and cooperative ventures. The list is in indication of the extent to which things have changed (or haven't change) in the past thirty years.

Following the founding efforts of Melbourne and Sydney executive committees and after a year of uncertainty in 1981 – 'a year that wasn't' – the baton passed to a new executive committee in New Zealand.

In their hands, ARLIS/ANZ News No 11 marked the beginning of the next phase – a noticeable improvement in the quality of ARLIS/ANZ News and steady growth in membership – encouraged further by succeeding executive committees in the Canberra, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane and regular conferences in all Australian states and territories and in New Zealand. By 1999, membership had risen to 155.

The journal, conferences and occasional seminars on art library practice were complemented by other significant outputs in the form of directories, indexes and databases, usually published by member institutions and other organisations rather than by ARLIS/ANZ, but all hinging on the initiative of individual members. These include *A Directory of Arts Libraries and Resources Collections*, *AustArt*, *Ariadne*, *Artex* and *Australian Art Index*, among others. As a voluntary organisation, ARLIS/ANZ and its members can take great pride in these achievements.

The recent Senate Inquiry report on libraries in the online environment concludes by saying: "Perhaps the most striking impression the Committee has formed in this inquiry is that Australia is well served by its current library services. Constrained for space and funds and beset by technological problems though some of them may be, their representatives ... have given considerable thought to the issues confronting libraries in the online environment and have already taken many practical steps not only to survive but to prosper and better service their communities into the future. They are strongly committed to serving users and their propensity to band together and to share resources as an object lesson in what can be achieved by cooperation across jurisdictional boundaries." The story of ARLIS/ANZ, on the evidence of information in the annual reports, minutes, feature articles and profiles published in the Journal, is an example of this commitment and resourcefulness.

The Future

We are now at the beginning of a third phase for ARLIS/ANZ.

This is marked by the evolving impact of the PC and the Internet. And it is marked by a significant decline in our membership. Since 1999, our overall membership has declined by 27%. In some states – such as New South Wales – it has declined by as much as 35%.

What are the reasons for the decline and what do we do about it?

Declining membership of this order has also been experienced by other Australian associations including the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA). Some of the reasons for the decline and possible solutions are ventured in sources like Mark Lyons' *Third Sector: the Contribution of Non-Profit and Cooperative Enterprises in Australia* (2001). Other causes can be attributed to changes in government policy, the information industry and higher education, the heavily subsidised nature of most library services, and the fact that librarians have limited influence over their destiny.

We are also in a period when members who have made a considerable contribution to ARLIS/ANZ are contemplating retirement. The loss of their energy and knowledge will have an undoubted impact. It is not a dilemma unique to ARLIS/ANZ. In fact, the Institute of Museum and Library Services in the United States has just awarded nearly US\$10 million to offset an anticipated significant shortage of professional librarians due to retirement.

We need a plan articulating these dynamics to inform our decisions on the future.

The need for a plan has been a constant theme of previous annual reports, minutes and journal articles. The 1982 conference consisted of four separate groups brainstorming to identify gaps in the provision of reference material for the arts in Australia and support projects of interest to ARLIS/ANZ. Chair Ray Choate, in 1985, said "There are still unresolved problems facing the association ...[it] should also be taking a more active role in the area of subject rationalisation and other cooperative activities." Michael Watson, in his article *An Economic Rationalist View of the Libraries of Melbourne* (ARLIS/ANZ News no 45), in the middle of the churn of the 1990s, said 'arts librarians should plan ahead to minimise disasters...[we need] a greater plan' and Jill More, in the 1999 AGM, commented that "membership of visual arts librarians were shrinking" and that the appeal of ARLIS/ANZ "had to be broadened to keep up the membership."

The constitution is an essential if somewhat passive call to action. We have wrestled with draft strategic plans for almost a decade. Our *Aims and Objectives 2002-2004* relied on reflex than on more informed judgement.

There's a need for two plans, not one. The Australian visual arts information project will serve one highly significant strategic area. A separate plan is needed to guide the future of ARLIS/ANZ itself.

Business plans are more effective management tools than strategic plans. As Michael Conveney and others note in *Finding the Strategy Gaps* (Darwin, June 2003): 'To get to where your business is to where it wants to go, you have to mind the missing steps'. And, as the blurb of a recent Special Libraries Association (SLA) workshop on

business planning proclaims: “Contrary to popular belief, they are not just for entrepreneurial or start-up ventures...In today’s competitive environment, a documented business plan is critical for information enterprises of any size and in any sector to clarify their distinctive position, market, strategies, offerings and operating capabilities”. The lack of a business plan or the existence of a poor business plan are considered to be the main reasons for small business failure. The absence of a business plan has caused larger library associations to navigate new currents like rudderless boats.

What sort of things can we expect in an ARLIS/ANZ business plan?

Contexts

You are all aware of the fact that ARLIS/ANZ occupies a changing landscape shaped by the anarchy of the Internet, a landscape farmed in Australia by government agencies such as the Australia Council and Australian Research Council, government departments such as DCITA, NOIE, DITR and DEST, by higher education authorities such as the new Australian Research Information Infrastructure Committee, and by institutions of central importance like the National Library of Australia.

The changing landscape is partly assessed in recent high-level reports like the Senate Inquiry on Libraries in the Online Environment (October 2003) and the National Collections Advisory Forum feasibility study (due for release February 2004). Numerous overseas reports are instructive. The survey of Australian visual arts information resources and the workings of sister organisations – eg *The Library and Information Plan for the Visual Arts* completed by ARLIS/UK & Ireland in 1991 – warrant special scrutiny in relation to the visual arts.

The contexts include expanding and changing information resources and delivery systems, converging information disciplines, changing user expectations, new specialisations and the over-riding importance of subject knowledge and repositories, particularly in the arts and humanities.

Member culture needs and interests.

To guide ARLIS/ANZ relevancy, we need a clearer picture of the membership.

At the beginning of the year, we captured information on the organisational affiliations of personal members. This has enabled us to integrate institutional and personal records to clarify and, to some extent simply confirm, the sectoral composition - tertiary libraries (38%, including 27 university and 16 training schools), public libraries (19%, including 22 national and state library memberships), museums and galleries (19% including 8 museum and 14 gallery memberships), and other members (12%). These figures, though, hide inbuilt distortions.

How much extra time should we spend gathering more information by changing the membership forms or conducting a survey?

I submitted a proposal for a member survey in 1999 (See *Scratching the Surface* ARLIS/ANZ Journal no 49). The proposal was not adopted and I've modified my views on the specifics anyway. The survey of Australian visual arts information resources conducted by the National Library of Australia this year focuses more on library management than on association management issues.

Much can be assumed from surveys by other associations. In 1994, the NSW Branch of Museums Australia conducted a member survey which concluded that people joined the association mainly to be kept informed and to become part of a network. In 1999-2000, a survey of ALIA Information Specialists members found that a large proportion of members valued exposure to information on specialist issues and opportunities for professional networking.

We can safely assume, I think, that ARLIS/ANZ members are influenced by similar motivations. With so much else going on, it is doubtful that a member survey on their interests and needs – at least one conducted over the next six months – will produce data of sufficient differentiated importance to justify the effort. There may be grounds for conducting surveys in the future.

Prospects: competition, partnerships, relationships and promotion

To what extent has the territory changed, to what extent has other professional groups encroached on our territory and to what extent have we failed to capitalise on opportunity?

The association has had a cautious attitude on affiliations with other bodies in the past. Conferences in the early days were held in conjunction with ALIA and Art Association of Australia conferences. Affiliations with umbrella organisations like International Federation of Library Associations, ALIA and the Council of Australian Museums Association (CAMA) have been deferred or rejected. Suggestions to merge or develop more effective collaboration with kindred groups have not been adopted – although conferences have sometimes included presentations on performing arts and music information resources in Australia and New Zealand.

New networks and forums have emerged in recent times to attract the attention of prospective ARLIS/ANZ members. Approaches by overseas bodies, including professional arts information associations, deserve scrutiny as lessons for management of arts interests in the antipodes. Collaborative management of arts information is much stronger in the UK and USA – in large part driven by higher education interests.

Mapping territory and tribes is sound business practice. It is an essential step in stabilising - and even turning around - the decline in membership.

Governance & operations

If you read past reports and minutes published in the journal and talk to ARLIS/ANZ members, factors that affect the capacity of the association to pursue its objectives become evident, factors that are common to many voluntary and even non-voluntary organisations. They include uncertainties about the scope of the association, frustrations over communication, difficulties in enlisting membership participation in the workings of the association, office bearers who are subject to workplace pressures and pro bono burn-out, the constant struggle of generating content for the journal, a small and ageing membership and limited funds. A lack of critical mass.

New governance standards, service guidelines, legislation and tax regimes have emerged in recent times. What are they and how do they affect the operation of the society? How do we ensure an easier transfer of knowledge and experience to succeeding executive committees? How do we handle our finances in a more productive way? Are there inexpensive systems we can use to minimise problems in information handling – systems that produce less fragmentation, less duplication of effort, less troublesome information transfer, and more meaningful readily available information about the members?

Is a professional association a dying concept anyway and, if so, what are the alternatives?

Strategies and success factors

Future strategies will undoubtedly revolve around existing products and services like the conference, journal, website and e-list. But we may find reasons to change their production and distribution in the manner of other associations. Some strategies are likely to emerge from the Australian visual arts information project and from macro strategies relevant to jurisdictions and subject domains not covered by that project. New ones may emerge from the process of examining new information and from the light bulb moments that sometimes occur when a group of people bounce their half-formed ideas off one another.

What's the best way of completing an ARLIS/ANZ business plan?

The previously mentioned SLA blurb on business plans observes, to paraphrase it slightly, that 'a plan without buy-in from the membership isn't worth the paper it is written on'. There's obvious wisdom in this statement, although business planning often produces outputs that serve associations well irrespective of decisions on strategy.

Typically, the process involves a member of the organisation or a consultant gathering information from research and surveys and refining apparent findings in consultation with small or large group before decisions are made. A business plan is never complete.

Taking into account the limited timeframe, the focus on the visual arts information project and the unpredictability of people's availability, my inclination is to forget about a survey. It is important for people attending the AGM to be given sufficient time to absorb the material and make up their mind on options or recommendations. I'm therefore proposing to distribute draft sections of the business plan for comment via arlisanz-l and/or the website over the next 6 months, before providing recommendations a month before the next conference.

To mitigate the expected impact of the knowledge drain over the next few years, the process is likely to lead to subsidiary documents to be distributed for refinement as they become available.

Finalising strategies, based on the new body of information that has been assembled, is likely to be the job of the new executive to be elected in September 2004.

If anyone is interested in becoming more involved in the research and analytical aspects of the project, please get in touch. I would very much welcome your input and participation in the process.

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