

**ASTEN Conference
Newcastle Museum
December 2014**

Fellowship Report

Peter Smith

Education Manager of the National Science-Technology Roadshow and Manager of the Sir Paul Callaghan Science Academy

In December 2014 I was fortunate to have the opportunity to attend the Asten Conference held at Newcastle Museum under Asten's Fellowship scheme. I found the whole experience highly worthwhile and a good fit for the types of activities I am involved in within New Zealand.

In my role as Education Manager I am continually seeking ways of improving the 'service' we deliver to schools throughout New Zealand, so ASTEN offered an opportunity to gain insight into other outreach programmes, how they have fared over the years and what new developments exist that might be worth further investigation. It also offered the chance to see examples of hands-on exhibits and display approaches that might suit our 'outreach' style of delivery. Similarly, I was interested in whole exhibition design that integrates conventional museum exhibit styles with interactive, hands-on exhibits.

Another of my aims was to see how New Zealand's limited 'science centre' scene compares with the more established and extensive science centre movement in Australia — what works, what has fallen by the wayside and what new developments and ideas are on the horizon. During my time at Asten I gained appreciation of most, if not all of these areas.

Tour of Supernova

Paul Dear gave us all an interesting tour of the main 'Supernova' exhibition space at Newcastle Museum. The scale of the smaller interactive exhibits in this space was not dissimilar to those toured by the Science Roadshow and it was enlightening to see how these were displayed in a modularised format, while retaining a robust, permanent appearance and feel. The lighting used was impressive and added to the WOW experience. Needless to say, there were ideas that we will be able to use, and it was also gratifying to see how well our own approach and 'mobile' design compares with these.

Presentations

It is always refreshing and inspiring to listen to and see quality presenters in action, and the ASTEN presenters were no exception. All had ideas, activities and ways of 'seeing' that were interesting and of potential value. I note in particular Michael

Bennett's 'evolution of the light bulb' demonstration and the use of the 'Q-Lab' space, Emma Best's ideas relating to working with preschools, the challenges Derek Williamson faces in his Museum of Human Disease exhibition at the University of New South Wales, Dr Gary Ellem's wonderful work on electric vehicles, Dr Tim Robert's journey in establishing the Newcastle Museum and Alex Jordans 'Show, Don't Tell' session that captivated us with his style of presentation. And finally, having a skilled drama presenter like Ian Colm gave us insights into how to integrate drama and science. Some of the ideas were new to me, while others demonstrated refreshing new approaches, and all were presented imaginatively and triggered new thoughts and ideas that I was able to take back to New Zealand.

How I have benefitted

New Zealand's science centre movement began with huge fanfare in the 1990s. Since then however, several centres have failed or been merged with museums. The only two real science 'centres' remaining are *Science Alive!* (which is currently awaiting a rebuild after the Christchurch earthquakes) and the Science Roadshow, an extensive country-wide mobile outreach programme. Thus, over time we have tended to become more insular, with less opportunities to interact with professionals who share our line of work. Above all then, the ASTEN conference was a great opportunity to engage with others involved in the same industry. It is very beneficial and heartening to know that what we are doing compares favourably with approaches taken by our neighbours in Australia. Ideas and approaches to demonstrations are similar, the use of drama to enhance the experience is similar, the way we use interactive exhibits is similar, and, the way we run our institutions is similar. Most of all, I have returned to New Zealand with new ideas that will help us tune and tweak our programme, but knowing that any changes do not need to be dramatic, as we are doing a good job already.

It was a privilege to meet colleagues who are in the science centre movement. The shared ideas and comfort in knowing we are on the right track was indeed useful. Thank you to all those who were willing to engage with me and so willingly share their knowledge and experience, in particular Karl Meyer and Stuart Creal who I had the opportunity to have extended conversations with. Thank you to ASTEN, New Castle Museum and the National Science Technology Roadshow Trust for giving me this opportunity.

Finally, I would like to make a special thanks to Vera Gin for her wonderful, timely correspondence and willingness to go the extra mile in assisting me with this fellowship.

Peter Smith

Dec 2014