

Tony was formerly Chief Education Officer at the National Gallery, Victoria (Australia's oldest). Originally from Adelaide, he has a BA in Fine Arts and English and postgraduate diplomas in Education and Museum Studies. Tony is a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, London. In 1985 he was awarded a J. Paul Getty Trust Scholarship and was selected as one of three overseas participants for the Museum Management Institute, Berkeley University. He is a keen sailor and has travelled extensively throughout America, Africa, Asia and Europe.



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Part 1: People in glass houses

An interview with new Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu director Tony Preston

CS News: what was the process that led to creating a new gallery in the city away from the McDougall site?

The McDougall was acknowledged as early as 1940 as being inadequate. When the design was chosen the importance of education, facilities for exhibition changeover, lectures, any kind of extensive storage was not incorporated. What we effectively had was a charming pavilion in the park with no provisions other than for a permanent hang. The debate waxed and waned. In 1969 there was a recommendation by an overseas consultant that there be a new building as a matter of urgency. When I was interviewed in April 1995 there appeared to be real political will for a new building; that is what brought me across from the national gallery in Melbourne where I was chief education officer.

Do you mean a central or regional political will?

A municipal will to progress.

Did you make the need to take plans forward as something of a rider for your appointment?

I came because I'd stayed too long in an agreeable position; I required a new challenge, a new chapter after a protracted stay. That opportunities were developing for a new building, not just extensions or renovations, was a rare international opportunity. I had been negotiating with the national gallery in Singapore when the call came.

What was the most difficult single obstacle or encumbrance during the whole process for you?

I can turn that into a plus. I was aware there were insufficient funds to



One of several designs utilising abstract permutations of the specially designed Christchurch Gallery font. These street posters were plastered copiously city-wide.

correct the constraints under which the public collection of Christchurch had operated. I needed to go to the Canterbury community to seek their support to make it happen, and this is a spectacular new resource for the whole region. The end result has been an extraordinary degree of support from throughout Canterbury and the greatest proof of that is the level of private sponsorship achieved.

How will the culture of 'Waiwhetu' differ from the culture of the old McDougall gallery?

The scale and quality of the operation, the facilities and resources resulting, the opportunity to tell the whole story of the collection under one roof. It's great to have a fully integrated story about Canterbury art.

Also, that this facility can now be a focus for a range of community activities, not simply people coming to view the collection. They can come in and shop, lunch with friends, the complementary commercial nature of Form gallery, a 180-seat auditorium with changing rooms, a 200-car parking space. For years visitors to the McDougall were



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Reasons for Voyaging

is the name of the monumental entrance sculptures at Te Puna o Waiwhetu designed as welcoming totems to people arriving at the gallery. The seven poles, up to 18 metres high, are a collaboration between local sculptor Graham Bennett and Gallery architect David Cole. The large curved pieces atop the poles are made of stainless steel. The shapes echo Maori and Polynesian canoes and reference ancient navigation systems (hulls and sails) and will be operated by motors and digital controls, rotating at certain times of the day.

bedevilled by weather and parking spaces, being forced to run an unseemly gauntlet in the teeth of a raging sou'wester. Now they can park underneath.

What is your vision for the new gallery and people of Christchurch as director?

We have one of the foremost collections in the country which we are now able to show. We're not posturing in any international sense, we are a regional gallery but we're doing a job to the highest international standards. Christchurch will become part of Trans-Tasman/Asian travelling exhibitions. What we've achieved reinforces the South Island too. Dunedin and ourselves can now be seriously considered for any touring programmes, which was not the case before. Auckland was perhaps seen as a one-stop-shop, simply because of population size. Now, we've got the finest art gallery in the country.

In international terms we're small, but 'choice.'

What are your personal art interests?

I recognise a responsibility as director to be diplomatic and that I am making purchases for a public collection, but my personal interests are in the decorative arts. I have an interest in 18th century English glass, and I've brought with me my collection of early 20th century Australian paintings with a focus on the impact of Australian artists' first encounter with Europe. If I was ever to have a momento of my time in Canterbury, it would be one of Bill Sutton's plantation series.

A personal single highlight from the whole process of change. Perhaps a defining

moment or anecdote that emerged, a person, comment, or occurrence...?

November 1995, when we were given approval at the last [Christchurch City Council] Projects & Property Committee to pursue negotiations for the purchase of this site. It came at the very last hour by a very tight vote. The story looks like it has been a dream one, but it's been a gruelling, nail-biting process, with victory snatched from the jaws of defeat on a number of occasions. There is no point in pretending....wait for my memoirs, or a TV soap version called "Gallery."

The moment the sculpture wall began to be glazed was significant to me.

Also, the realisation there were insufficient funds to secure the site - any of the sites. We investigated having a 'white knight,' a friendly partner to do a joint development on the site, because we didn't have even half the money. We had eleven days to convince then Trust Bank Canterbury Community Trust that they should join with us in a joint venture outlined by Sir Miles Warren. The idea was for two opposing arcs, the art gallery and an appropriate commercial enterprise (corporate offices, apartments, etc). We waited with baited breath. Our prospective partners were unable to do that, but they took off their entrepreneurial cap and put on their philanthropic bonnet, and gave us the shortfall to purchase the site outright.

It was remarkable the site had remained under-developed for so long, like it was waiting for the most appropriate use.

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