The article, “Collections for the Future” is the result of an exhausted 18 month investigation into the state of collections, collecting policies and the management strategies and attitudes of museums across the United Kingdom. This article sought to discover and document the ways in which museums and gallery collections could best attend the needs and interests of future museum users. However, before continuing, it may be beneficial to explain what exactly a collection is. Lee (2000) expounded the ambiguity of the word “collections” by stating, “the term “collections” has many meanings, depending on the context of its use,” but he goes on to assert the opinion that a collection should be seen as “an accumulation of information resources developed by information professionals intended for a user community or a set of communities”. It is then with that definition in mind that I will articulate a few issues generated by the article at hand, mainly that of unused collections, disposal, staffing policies, and lastly the idea of digitization in a museum context.

An important issue that the inquiry found facing museums was the overwhelming consensus that too many museum collections were underused, not displayed, unpublished, not used for research or even well understood by the institutions that looked after them. Most museums are publicly funded by taxpayers and therefore have a responsibility to the public as well as their own museum board. I would tend to agree with this assertion because, if a collection is not available to the public and is not published or made available digitally – can the museum be realizing its responsibilities towards the collection and the public? Another issue of collection building is the idea of collection hoarding. Ultimately, museum collections (collectively or otherwise) can never be able to reflect all aspects of society, our world culture, and the natural world. It would be simply impossible to be able to collect everything relevant in the world; therefore, museums have to be realistic about this. Museums have to be prudent in their selection of collection as well as implementing a sound approach to the disposal of collections. A local example of this would be The National Museum of Australia’s (2005a) overall collection management strategy that focuses on three broad research areas of Aboriginal culture, Australia’s historical
society since the European settlement and lastly, the interaction of people with the environment. These concepts represent the museum’s content framework and ultimately shape each of the Museum’s five galleries. Besides the overall management strategy, The National Museum of Australia also has clearly defined criteria for acceptance into the Museums’ collection. The idea of a sound collection policy is echoed by the Australian Standard in Records Management (AS ISO 15489.2 2002) which argues that it is critical for “organizations to define and document policies for records management”, and this can broadly be applied to a museum’s collection of records or artifacts which I whole-heartedly agree with.

Related tangentially to collection building is the notion of disposal. There is a great hesitation with museum curators of disposing of collections as it runs counter-intuitively to their sense of collection building. However, I believe that disposal should be part of a responsible collections management strategy, not only for museums but also applied to all organizations that collect documents. This is despite the fact that disposal can be a costly and time consuming affair when carried out appropriately. Sensible museums cannot continue to spend public resources on collecting for collections that will more than likely end up in storage; never used or enjoyed by the public. Not only do collections consume public resources to maintain and care for, the increasingly expensive storage space needed to house unused collections can devour a large proportion of a museum’s budget. The National Museum of Australia (2005a) naturally also has a policy relating to deaccessioning and the disposal of collections material as part of its overall collections management strategy. Nevertheless, the Inquiry noted that disposal need not necessarily mean the destruction of a collection but instead cross-transfers between museums where the collection remains within the public sphere can be preferential as a form of disposal. Only when collections are unused in their current institution and are unwanted in any other museums should they be then disposed of and even then, disposal should always be prioritized towards the kinds of collections that will never be useful because they are uncontextualised, in irreversible physical decline or simply unprovenanced. The National Museum of Australia also hints to provenance as a key criterion to collecting objects for a museum’s collection.

Another issue raised by the inquiry relates to staffing in museums. The inquiry found that there are too few training posts in which junior staff could work alongside
more experienced staff to build on knowledge and expertise, not to mention the endemic issue of low pay in the industry. A recent case mirrors the inquiry’s report, as the British Museum axed 150 staff members in 2002 due to a chronic budget deficit (Kennedy, 2002). There also seems to be a general consensus on the lack of expertise and knowledge in collections as well as the knowledge to purchase collections correctly in the market place which ultimately severely hinders the exposure the public has to the collection. This will result in collections which are under-researched and poorly understood in museums and thus unfortunately relegated to storage. This could partly be due to a broader perception of museums as being “boring, irrelevant and of no interest” to today’s youth (Pontin, 2002).

The subject of digitization is also a modern pressing issue for museums in today’s rapid technological advances. By digitizing collections, the possibility for polysemic interpretations hold great potential in engaging with the public and museums are increasingly beginning to realize this potential by the use of handheld electronic devices. The Internet offers remote access to collections and a wealth of information on the collections, allowing the engagement of a greater number of people that could possibly be imagined if it were limited only to physical accessibility. In a digital environment, the ideas and research surrounding collections can be just as valuable a resource as the collections themselves. By engaging with the public, this yields valuable information in a two-way reciprocal relationship as evidenced by The Australian Museum Online’s (2005) initiative to foster greater ties between the museum and Australia’s indigenous communities resulting in communities having greater access to their own cultural heritage, and the Museum’s benefiting from specialized knowledge about its own collections. Throughout the inquiry, the notion of engagement as opposed to accessibility runs strong and this idea reflects the commitment of The National Museum of Australia and The Australian Museum Online – with the former highlighting the ideas of engaging national audiences, and enhancing staffing and workplace development as two of its key strategic priorities from 2004 – 2007 (National Museum of Australia 2005b). The adoption of digitization poses concerns of tangibility and ownership, two points that Lee (2000) raise in his article. He believes that the physical tangibility of objects associated with libraries has led to a fixation in this idea and has thus “made imagining virtual collections difficult”, which can similarly be representative of a
museum’s collection. Secondly, because digital collections are ultimately remotely stored and accessed, this creates a dilemma as to whether they are part of an organization’s collection. For example, by participating in inter-museum loans and co and joint acquisitions, collections are thus shared between different museums and this throws into question the traditional notion of the ownership of a collection.

To conclude, while preservation is an essential part of the role of museums, they must also ultimately take greater steps to ensure more of their collections are used because collections are at the heart of museums. Solid collection building and disposal policies, positive staffing development and most importantly, an active engagement with the public sphere in the creation and sharing of knowledge and information are all central to the successful growth of collections in museums if they are to remain relevant in our society.
References:


