

Heritage building joins the twenty-first century

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research centre project team

The research centre at the Australian War Memorial is currently undergoing major redesign and reconstruction as part of the Memorial's gallery re-development project.

What is the research centre?

The research centre's collections document Australia's military heritage from the nineteenth-century to the present day. More than 10 000 visitors use research centre records each year. The collections include photographs (180 000 images and captions available as a digital database) film, sound, books, serials, maps and an archival collection of more than four shelf kilometres containing official and private records. Research centre staff answer approximately 15 000 client requests each year received by telephone, letter, fax and e-mail. They also assist visitors who manage to find the entrance to the research centre, which is currently located at the rear of the Memorial. In a 1997 visitor survey, sixty-six per cent of visitors to the research centre defined the purpose of their visit as family history/personal interest, twenty-six per cent were writing a book, article or unit regiment history while another six per cent were conducting research for official or media purposes.

Why a new research centre?

The gallery redevelopment project includes a total revamp of the Memorial's orientation and circulation system. As a result, the research centre will be much more visible and accessible from the galleries, thus making it an integral part of the Memorial experience. The Memorial's advocacy and evaluation officer estimates that of the Memorial's more than 800 000 annual visitors, up to 180 000 (approximately 500 per day) will seek first-level information in the new research centre. The design takes into account this predicted increase.

The refurbishment will also address occupational health and safety issues for both the staff and collection storage areas of the research centre and will provide public areas to more-effectively serve client needs of the twenty-first century.

The design

The architects, Mitchell Giurgola and Thorp, have achieved the requirements of the design brief within the constraints of a heritage building and have suggested some innovative and exciting concepts for the information users of tomorrow.

The plan for the new research centre allows for a large, central space to accommodate twenty terminals (with room for expansion). This area will handle the first level of enquiry (for example some of the sixty-six per cent of visitors who identified family history as the reason for their visit). The area will be largely self-help with online databases and volunteers



Deirdre McKeown and Margaret Thomson examine the blueprints of the new Australian War Memorial research centre

assisting clients. Staffing details are still to be finalised as additional staff resources are not being funded. This first-level enquiry area will be accessible during Memorial opening hours, 364 days a year. After using the resources in this area clients can then proceed to the reading room where they may browse a reference collection, seek assistance at the information desk, place orders and consult original documents.

The process

Memorial staff have been seconded to the gallery development section where teams are responsible for the management of the design and development of individual galleries or functional areas. Peter Root and Associates are the project managers. The first phase of the gallery development project, with a budget of \$20 million, runs from 1996 to 2000 and is on schedule. A number of contractors including multi-media, signage and exhibition design experts are working with the research centre project team and research centre staff on the research centre refurbishment.

The future

The Memorial is creating a new and exciting 'information experience'. Overall demand is likely to increase as many more visitors are made aware of the richness and diversity of the unique collections available in the research centre. The research centre project will contribute to the Memorial's ambition to renew the 1918 vision of C E W Bean, official war historian and founder of the Australian War Memorial: 'We are out to make our war museum, our war gallery, and our war library, if possible, not merely fine museums for Australia, but the finest that the world contains'.

Closure of AWM research centre reading room

The reading room at the Australian War Memorial will be closed from 25 March 1998 until the end of October 1998. During this time research centre services will be restricted. ■