

AUCKLAND SUCCESS STORIES

Revamped museum draws thousands

Upgrades costing scores of millions have expanded an institution with a fine history

by Bernard Orsman

The Auckland War Memorial Museum, to give it its full name, is more than a much loved neo-classical building overlooking Waitemata Harbour. It is a cultural icon and a popular one at that.

It was opened on November 28, 1929, when the Governor-General, Sir Charles Fergusson, knocked with a carved wooden mere and two great panelled doors slid open.

Since that day, millions of New Zealanders and tourists have visited the museum in Auckland Domain with its Maori court and wide collections of natural history, Polynesian treasures, Auckland's 1866 Centennial St, Egyptian mummy and the sombre World War I Sanctuary and World War II Hall of Memory.

Work updating the museum building began in 1994 and stage one, the restoration of the original building and replacement of exhibits, was completed in 1999 for \$43 million.

The latest upgrade, filling in the central courtyard at the rear of the museum with a huge four-storey bowl clad in rough-sawn Fijian kauri, began in 2003 and was completed in December 2006 at a cost of \$64.5 million.

The bowl, suspended from four pillars serving as lifts, houses a learning centre, 200-seat theatre and an events centre with seating for 450, providing an almost 360-degree view of the city and harbour. Inside the new rear entrance, a generous lobby leads to an exhibition hall the size of five tennis courts.

Since the completion of the grand atrium project there have been four significant shows in the exhibition hall — *Vaka Moana*, telling the story of the last migration of humans down through the Pacific; *Egypt: Beyond the Tomb*; *Darwin*; and *Secrets*, a look at the museum's hidden mysteries and



FRESH ATTRACTIONS: Vanda Vitali is seeking ways to draw people into the life of the museum.

PICTURE / BRETT PHIBBS

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the first show under new director Vanda Vitali.

More than 100,000 people visited *Secrets*, including a record-breaking 30,000 in the first month.

The museum is one of the country's most popular venues and biggest tourist attraction, drawing about 500,000 visitors a year. About half of these are

Aucklanders, including 76,000 school children making educational visits. They now have classrooms in the atrium bowl.

Last year, more than 35,000 people made use of the rooftop events centre, and the dome has been opened at selected weekends for the public. The theatre has also hosted many events, including the popular Fazioli Concert Series.

Dr Vitali said the atrium space has given the museum a beautiful stage from which it could interact more closely with Auckland.

"It is a unique interior landscape — dazzling in its design but really coming

to life when it fills up with people and colour and spectacle. It's the kind of space you might see in other first-class museums around the world, and Auckland deserves a place like this."

Dr Vitali, who aims to widen the appeal of the museum with interactive displays and suchlike, has shown a restored Gallipoli film projected on to the front of the museum building. This month, more than 2000 people turned out to see the stomach of a great white shark opened outside the museum loading dock.

Next month, on Waitangi Eve, the museum kicks off its first LATE at the museum event. This will be an after-

hours bash, starting with some provocative discussion with media columnist Finlay Macdonald about the Maori-Pakeha dynamic, followed by food, drinks and music from Little Bushman and DJ Submariner. Tickets are \$15.

The idea comes from when Dr Vitali worked in Los Angeles and Canada where she created "Friday nights at the museum" to entice people aged 18 to 20 to try museum culture.

The idea attracted the thinking youth of Toronto in their hundreds.

» ON THE WEB
www.aucklandmuseum.com

DIRECTOR WHO RUFFLED KIWI FEATHERS

Auckland Museum not only has a new look from the outside, but a shifting focus on the inside under new director Vanda Vitali.

The Canadian has ruffled more than a few Kiwi feathers introducing new ideas to enhance the museum's connection with the city.

A big restructuring last year left 46 staff members, including many long-serving and senior staff, without jobs.

Then disgruntled World War II Bomber Command veterans accused Dr Vitali of having little knowledge of Anzac tradition, after they were refused space for a memorial inside the museum. The stand-off has now been resolved.

Throughout these difficulties, the Canadian has enjoyed strong backing from the board.

The showing of a restored Gallipoli film projected on to the front of the museum building and the first major exhibition under her watch, *Secrets*, have shown a taste of where she wants to take the museum.

That is, innovative and attractive exhibitions and public programmes, bringing in new audiences.

She also has plans for redevelopment of exhibition areas on three levels to bring greater logic to visitor flows and coherence to displays.

THE SERIES

- Monday: Vector Arena
- Tuesday: New regional parks
- Wednesday: Re-sanding beaches
- Thursday: Britomart
- Friday: Free swimming lessons
- Today: The museum