Figure 1. Photo courtesy: https://www.cairnsmuseum.org.au/tune-in-to-a-milestone-in-cairns-museum-history/

CAIRNS MUSEUM AND THE RADICAL POSSIBILITIES OF PUBLIC HISTORY

The Cairns Museum, situated within the heritage-listed School of Arts building on Lake Street, offers an ideal case study of how regional museums can operate as radical sites of public history. To be radical in this context is to actively displace the traditional museum model, an institution historically founded on top-down authority, colonial narratives, and the passive consumption of a single, official story. Its exhibitions, governance, and curatorial character collectively challenge the boundaries between institutional authority and community participation. The objective of this essay is to ask to what extent the Cairns Museum can function as a

radical site of public history through participatory governance, decolonial storytelling, and community-centred curation. Through its participatory curation, multilingual interpretation, and locally grounded storytelling, the museum exemplifies Anna Clark's general argument that the work of "doing history" is shared between professional historians and the wider public, and with the understanding that museums are sites of shared custodianship of the past.[1] Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Clark, Ashton and Trapeznik, Cauvin, Gardner, Gregory, and Byrne and Goodall, the essay argues that the museum's power lies not in scale but in its capacity to decentralise narrative authority, embed Indigenous and migrant perspectives, and reframe northern Queensland's past within global and decolonial contexts. This approach resonates with what Asche, Döring and Sternfeld describe as the 'radical democratic museum',[2] one that redistributes curatorial power through participatory governance and shared authorship.

The radical adjustment of narrative authority begins straightaway upon ascending to the second floor, where visitors are greeted by a Yidinji-language welcome, beside a portrait of Ye-i-nie, the Gimuy Walubara Yidinji leader twice recognised by the Queensland Government as "King of Cairns" in 1895 and 1905.

[1] Anna Clark, *Private Lives, Public History* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2016), Ch. 1 and Ch. 8.
[2] Farina Asche, Daniela Döring and Nora Sternfeld, '"The Radical Democratic Museum" – A Conversation about the Potentials of a New Museum Definition', *Museological Review*, vol. 24, 2020, pp.34–41.

Figure 2. Welcome display, Gimuy Walubara Yidinji people, entrance to second-floor gallery, Cairns Museum. Author photograph, 2025.

The Welcome asserts Country, sovereignty, and belonging through Indigenous voice and representation. The entire second floor, curated with local Aboriginal communities, amplifies this ethos. Exhibitions such as *King Billy Jagar: Aboriginal Reserves and Town Camps in Cairns* and *The Fight for Civil Rights* honour activists like Joe McGinness and Gladys O'Shane, showing how regional activism fed into national change.

Figure 3. King Billy Jagar and Town Camps, second-floor gallery, Cairns Museum. Author photograph, 2025.

The *Gimuy Walubara: Honouring Our Elders* section extends this through oral history, ancestral photography, and community life, creating continuity from past dispossession to present resilience. These displays exemplify Clark's concept of public history as emerging through social practices of remembering, thereby granting interpretive authority to the communities themselves." [3]

[3] Clark, *Private Lives, Public History* (2016), pp. 7–10.

Figure 4. The fight for civil rights and shared experience of struggle, Cairns Museum. Author photograph, 2025.

This decentralisation of authority is reflected in the museum's curation of environmental and social activism**,** creating a smooth pathway from Indigenous sovereignty to community-led conservation.

Figure 5. CAFNEC: Save Our Shores Campaign display, Cairns Museum, 2025. Author photograph, 2025.

A strong example of this is The *Save Our Shores* display which links activism and heritage, documenting how citizens defends Cairns' mudflats and surrounds under

the aegis of the Cairns and Far North Environment Centre (CAFNEC).[4] This intersection of social justice, ecology, and public participation reinforces the work of the Cairns and Far North Environment Centre (CAFNEC) with banners, photos, and ephemera illustrating environmental heritage as a form of community custodianship. Adjacent to this is a digital research area, maintained by the Cairns Historical Society, that demonstrates radical transparency. Rows of computers and digitisation stations allow public access to archives, enacting Cauvin's "co-production of knowledge" and enabling residents to become custodians of their own histories.[5]

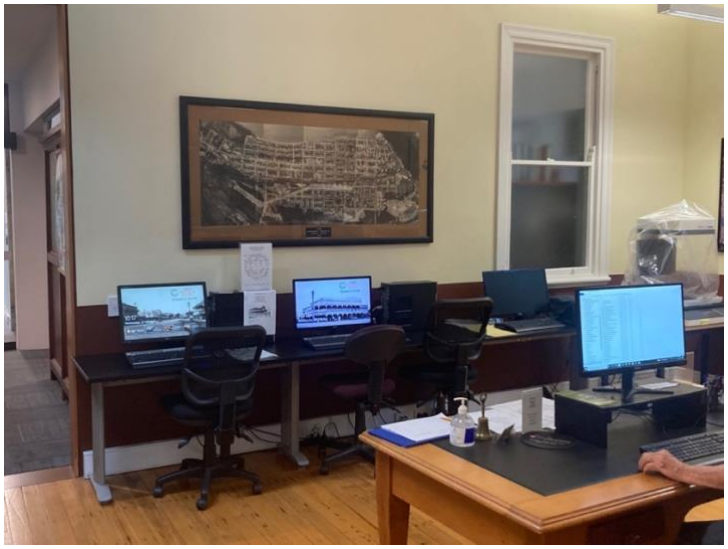

Figure 6. Digital Research Area, Cairns Historical Society reading room, Cairns Museum, 2025. Author photograph, 2025.

The Cairns Museum operates under the Cairns Historical Society (CHS), a community-based organisation founded in 1958 to preserve regional heritage. This shows that Its governance privileges local custodianship over bureaucracy. Clark's notion that public history emerges through social practices of remembering [6] again

[4] Cairns and Far North Environment Centre (CAFNEC), "Who We Are," https://cafnec.org.au/who-we-are/ [Accessed 23 Oct 2025].
[5] Thomas Cauvin, 'New Field, Old Practices: Promises and Challenges of Public History', *magazén: International Journal for Digital and Public Humanities*, 2, no. 1 (2021), pp. 25-26.
[6] Clark, *Private Lives, Public History*, pp. 41-45.

fits the CHS model, where a volunteer base drives both collection and interpretation. This participatory structure exemplifies museology: history owned and enacted rather than being curated for them. The early twentieth-century School of Arts building symbolises civic learning and democratic access with its timber verandahs and colonial façade acting as living artefacts contextualising the exhibitions. This form of architecture bridges colonial aspiration and inequality, while its preservation underscores continuity and change. On first entry, visitors encounter a blend of books, Indigenous art, and local souvenirs, signalling the museum's dual role as educational space and cultural marketplace. This hybridity of intentions aligns with Denis Byrne and Heather Goodall's notion of transnational placemaking, where local and global identities intersect.[7] The Cairns Museum then, on first impression, may then give the appearance of a site of negotiation between past and present, with its walls performing history surrounded by a tropical city shaped by colonialism, migration, and environment.

The commitment to layered, inclusive storytelling can be further appreciated on the first-floor exhibition, *Old Cairns: A Tropical Town Takes Shape*, which questions settlement and urbanisation through inclusive storytelling. Rather than a triumphalist colonial narrative, it integrates Indigenous, Chinese, and South Sea Islander perspectives. By placing archival photographs alongside material artefacts, the display draws out the layered complexities of the frontier. In doing so, it exemplifies Ashton and Trapeznik's claim that "the past is frequently invoked by public

[7] Denis Byrne and Heather Goodall, "Placemaking and Transnationalism: Recent Migrants and a National Park in Sydney, Australia," *PARKS*, vol.19, no.1, 2013, pp.63-70.

institutions for the lessons it teaches." [8] Naming donors and storytellers transforms object labels into acts of communal authorship, reinforcing Clark's citation of Ricouer who asserts that regarding our historicity, and an implied community involvement, it is a "fundamental and radical fact that we make history, that we are immersed in history, that we are historical beings" [9] It also offers what Gardner asserts: "it also offers the potential for revaluing collections, for peeling back the layers to expose the complexity hidden by the simple."[10] Material design strengthens this message. Diving helmets, domestic glassware, and Indigenous fishing implements sit side-by-side, collapsing distinctions between colonial and precolonial labour.

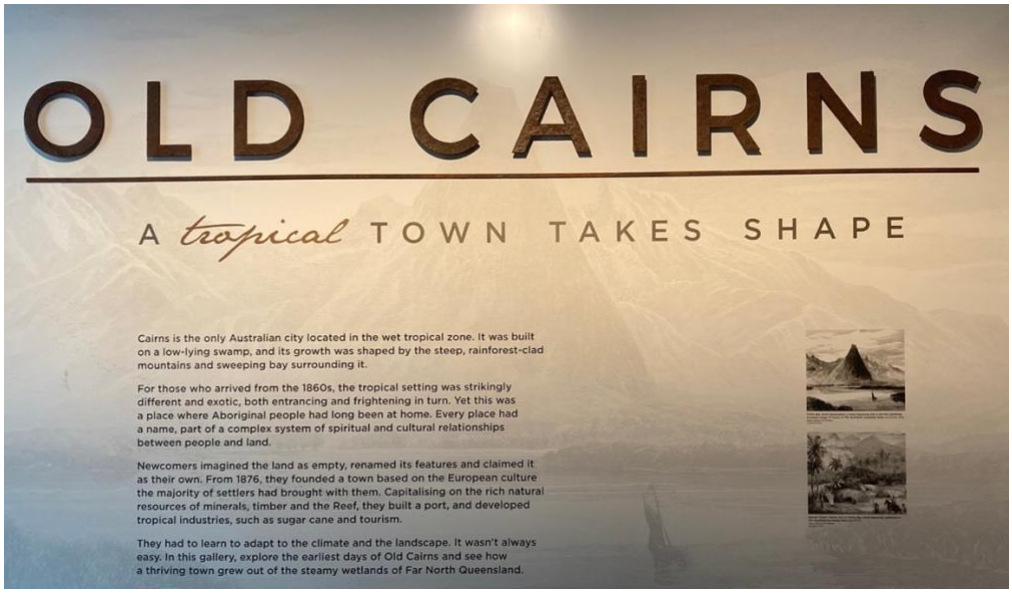

Figure 7. Old Cairns: A Tropical Town Takes Shape gallery display, Cairns Museum, Photograph by author, 2025.

Gardner's notion of museums operating within *transnational frames* also illuminates how Cairns is positioned not as a provincial outpost but as a globally networked site

[8] Paul Ashton and Alex Trapeznik, *What is Public History Globally?: Working with the Past in the Present*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, p.11.
[9] Clark, *Private Lives, Public History*, p.41.
[10] James B. Gardner, "Public History, National Museums and Transnational History," *Public History Review*, vol.30, 2023, p.58.

shaped by histories of trade, migration, and culture. [11] Soundscapes and oral recordings add to this effort by also creating a sensory dialogue between past and place, demonstrating how local history can destabilise colonial hierarchies without erasing them.

Perhaps the best example of this progressive ideology is found on the ground-floor, Han Mak Belong Tumbuna ("The Work of the Ancestors"), which extends decolonial practice through co-curation with Pacific Islander communities. Bilingual text panels in English and Tok Pisin, and recorded voices reflect what Cauvin describes as participatory and collaborative public history, in which museums create a collaborative approach and how "public interaction and public engagement can help visitors to become actors of knowledge production," rather than passive observers of displays.[12] Equal presentation of both languages grants epistemic parity to Indigenous and Oceanic voices. The circular cabinet layout evokes ceremonial gathering, while children's drawing stations symbolise intergenerational continuity. In this sense, the exhibition aligns with Gregory's observation that public spaces increasingly function as arenas where collective memory is contested and renegotiated.[13] Bilingualism here is political as well as educational; an act of poetic justice in an Australian context still marked by colonial erasure. The inclusion of Tok Pisin validates Pacific voices and invites cross-cultural listening.

[11] Ibid. pp.55-57.
[12] Cauvin, 'New Field, Old Practices', p.26.
[13] Jenny Gregory, "Statue Wars: Collective Memory Reshaping the Past," *History Australia*, vol.18, no.3, 2021, pp.567-582.

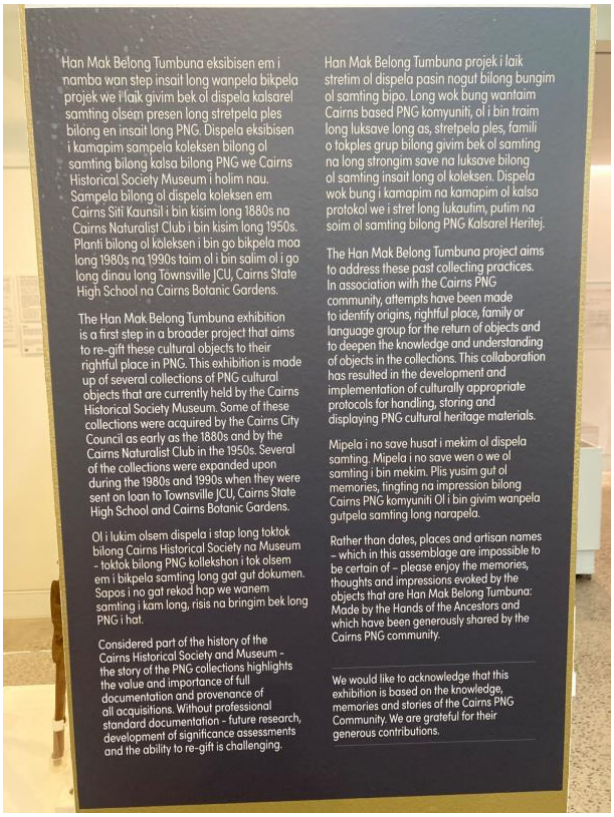

Figure 8. Han Mak Belong Tumbuna bilingual text panel, ground-floor gallery, Cairns Museum. Author photograph, 2025.

The exhibition's co-design workshops and shared authorship embody the ethics articulated by Cauvin and Clark. Meringolo similarly argues that radical public history is sustained not by spectacle but by the slow, steady work of social justice embedded in local institutions. Her emphasis on the "small interactions between interpreters and audiences that allow dialogue to flourish" underscores how everyday encounters, rather than singular interventions, anchor long-term transformative practice.[14]

[14] Denise Meringolo, *Radical Roots: Public History and a Tradition of Social Justice Activism*, Amherst, MA: Amherst College Press, 2021, p.15.

Figure 9. Ancestral carvings, masks, and adornments, Han Mak Belong Tumbuna exhibition, Cairns Museum, Author photograph, 2025.

The pursuit of radical public history necessitates a careful negotiation of the tension between multiple perspectives and narrative cohesion. As Cauvin cautions, participatory projects do not automatically guarantee equity, and "working with multiple partners and public groups could lead to the fragmentation of the narratives of the past, resulting in plural memories rather than a single history".[15] The Cairns Museum consciously navigates this risk by establishing an inclusive unity, a shared framework of social justice and decolonisation that allows diverse stories to resonate without collapsing into incoherence. This is exemplified in the Han Mak Belong Tumbuna exhibition, where the collaborative process itself becomes a unifying

[15] Cauvin, 'New Field, Old Practices', p.35.

thread. For instance, a primary source label for a *kapkap* (shell valuable) in the collection does not simply list its material and age but explicitly credits its loan from a specific Tolai family and includes a short quote from a community elder on its ceremonial significance. [16] This practice, repeated across the exhibition, transforms individual objects into nodes of shared authorship, directly answering Cauvin's concern by showing how plural memories can be woven into a cohesive, polyvocal tapestry rather than a fragmented one.

This structural reflexivity is intrinsically linked to sustainability challenges. The museum's reliance on volunteers exposes systemic vulnerabilities common to regional institutions. This is a critical concern when considering the never-ending amount of labour, both logistically and emotionally, required to facilitate co-curation, organising workshops, ensuring bilingual translation, and managing consensus across community groups; it is resource intensive. A potential fragmentation of support could put this model at risk. However, the museum's ongoing digitisation project, aligned with the Cairns Regional Council's "Digitise FNQ" initiative, offers a pathway towards both preservation and capacity-building. By embedding principles of Indigenous data sovereignty within the metadata of these digital archives, the museum ensures that this technological shift reinforces, rather than undermines, its ethical commitments. This aligns with Gardner's argument that institutions must "yield authority in a more fluid global context," [17] and the Cairns Museum's collaborative model demonstrates how this rebalancing of interpretive power can

[16] *Kapkap* (shell valuable), exhibited in the *Han Mak Belong Tumbuna* exhibition, Cairns Museum, Cairns, object label text, viewed 23 October 2025. On loan from the Naviator Family Collection, quote from elder Toloman Biong.
[17] Gardner, "Public History, National Museums and Transnational History," p. 58.

occur at the local level. Financially, grant dependency and volunteer fatigue remain challenges to address; yet partnerships with universities, tourism operators, and First Nations organisations offer pathways to convert inclusive rhetoric into genuine structural reform. This aligns with Gregory's observation that contested monuments also can generate social conflict, and with her acknowledgement that museums may offer spaces for the kind of intellectual dialogue needed to confront uncomfortable historical truths, rather than operate as an isolated gesture.[18] In this sense, the Cairns Museum's emerging collaborations, gestures toward the kind of accompanied structural change that Gregory argues is necessary for public history institutions to reckon with "with the power associated with representing history in public; historical understanding; inclusion; complexity; and justice."[19]

Situated between reef and rainforest, Cairns embodies ecological and cultural interconnection. Environmental displays link maritime, agricultural, and Indigenous ecological knowledge. Exhibits on architecture, pearling, and coral-reef conservation demonstrate layered adaptation and exploitation. By displaying pearling helmets beside trade ceramics and ledgers, the museum situates Cairns within global systems of migration and commerce, replacing nationalist isolation with transnational complexity. Environmental storytelling deepens this radicalism. Oral testimonies from Traditional Owners on sea, country and climate change ground sustainability in moral responsibility. Comparative examples such as the Ration Shed Museum in Cherbourg and the Migration Museum in Adelaide demonstrate what Trinca identifies

[18] Jenny Gregory, "Statue Wars: Collective Memory Reshaping the Past," *History Australia*, vol.18, no.3, 2021, p.564.
[19] Ibid. p.586.

in the wider sector as “the empowering of community interests within the walls of the museum, and on re-imagining collections and people’s relationships to them”.[20]

Radical public history depends upon reflexivity: the ability to critique its own authority. The Cairns Museum’s wall texts identify information sources, inviting visitors to question interpretation. Murray and Dunn emphasise that Australian public history is marked by a persistent tension between community participation and professional practice, requiring continuous negotiation over interpretation but positively stating that “it also creates a fertile field for new scholarship, and exposes new sources and methodologies that can be utilized by others.”[21] Exemplifying this, the Cairns Museum has layered interpretive labels and Quick Response (QR) linked oral histories that enable democratic access to knowledge. Drawing on Cauvin’s emphasis on small-scale interaction and the negotiated nature of public-history work, radical public history can often be understood as privileging dialogue and adaptability. Gardner also argues that institutions can “re-value and re-contextualize” their collections, this can generate significant interpretive innovation. However, this expanded reach can also carry the risk of “drowning out the local voice,” emphasising the need for careful, community-attuned practice.[22] To remain transformative, the museum should institutionalise reflexivity, rotating curatorship, community councils, and shared authorship, to embed collaboration into governance. Regarding these considerations, Gregory similarly argues that resolving these conflicts requires "wide consultation" and "honest, respectful, open dialogue," a

[20] Matthew Trinca, ‘History in Museums’, in Anna Clark and Paul Ashton (eds), *Australian History Now*, NewSouth, Sydney, 2013, p.112.
[21] Lisa Murray and Mark Dunn, ‘Public History in Australia: History in Place’, in Paul Ashton and Alex Trapeznik (eds), *What Is Public History Globally? Working with the Past in the Present*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2019, p.18.
[22] Gardner, “Public History, National Museums and Transnational History,” p. 58.

process she recognises as essential for "confronting uncomfortable truths." [23] Through participatory curatorship and transparent dialogue, the Cairns Museum performs precisely that function, demonstrating that radicalism resides in ethical process as much as outcome.

The Cairns Museum demonstrates that regional museums can operate as genuinely radical sites of public history. By changing the traditional museum model through rearranging curatorial authority, embedding participatory governance, and emphasising Indigenous and migrant voices, it answers the central question of to what extent a museum can become a radical democratic space grounded in shared custodianship and community-centred curation. Through multilingual exhibitions, ethical digitisation, and collaborative authorship, the museum shifts authority away from institutionalisation and toward civic engagement, enacting the very principles articulated by Clark, Cauvin, Ashton and Trapeznik, Gardner, and Gregory. Its practice shows that radicalism is not defined by institutional scale but by ethical method, by reshaping how history is produced, arranged, and governed. As Asche, Döring and Sternfeld suggest, the radical democratic museum reimagines public history as a participatory civic project, and the Cairns Museum exemplifies this through everyday, sustained engagement with the communities whose histories it holds. In a region still shaped by colonial legacies, its model of co-creation, multilingual storytelling, and transparent governance demonstrates how museums can move beyond inclusion to transformation, positioning public history as an organic practice grounded in justice, cooperation, and collective leadership.

[23] Gregory, ‘Statue Wars: Collective Memory Reshaping the Past’, pp.581-586.

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List of Figures