

## What's Up Elsewhere

### Creating Imperial War Museum North

#### The vision, the consultants and the reality

Imperial War Museum North, an entirely new branch of the Imperial War Museum, opened in Manchester in July 2002. The architectural concept for the building was powerful: a shining, aluminium-clad emblem of war in the 20th century, with the three 'shards' representing conflict on land, in the air and at sea. Our challenge was not just to realise this architectural vision, but to create an innovative and stimulating museum where the exhibitions complemented and drew strength from the architecture.

We entered the project with some trepidation; it was going to be a tall order to get the exhibition teams to devise exhibition concepts with sufficient strength and clarity to complement the powerful architecture. Indeed, it was going to be a challenge for everyone, from the core project team to the many consultants who ranged from exhibition and audio-visual designers to cost consultants and fund-raisers. However, three key factors worked to turn this challenge to our advantage.

Firstly, the Museum's subject matter was, and is, extremely powerful and moving: the Museum covers not only the First and Second World Wars but any war in which Commonwealth forces have been involved from 1914 to the present day – and not just the experience of war but the impact of war on society. It was a huge and compelling subject.

Secondly, the project captured people's imagination and they became passionate about creating the new Museum, a passion which was not only able to over-ride traditional boundaries between professions, but to spur people on to work to realise new ideas. Daniel Libeskind was inspirational and profoundly interested in the whole project – perhaps to an unusual degree for an architect. He and his team worked collaboratively with the exhibition designers and audio-visual consultants to create architectural components within the exhibitions, and to accommodate the exhibitions as an integral part of the building. Everyone worked hard not just to agree concepts but to get the detailing right.

Thirdly, as we communicated this vision to each successive wave of consultants, so the vision was honed further and its application developed in each different sphere of activity - from exhibitions to operations, fundraising and corporate identity. This is an important point since 'vision' suggests a moment of enlightenment, which becomes the beacon for all to follow. In practice, however, it is a much slower, iterative process that involves consulting widely, listening, and working to accommodate people's ideas and suggestions whilst ensuring that the 'vision' is being continually strengthened and developed.

Imperial War Museum North is certainly unique, reflecting a great deal of creativity by many talented and committed individuals. However, this could not have happened (and the project be delivered on time and on budget) without being underpinned by sound financial, people and project management skills. As Project Director, some of the key lessons I learnt are as follows:

- 1 Clear briefs with specific scopes of services, sign-offs and outputs are essential to provide a clear framework in which people can work. This must all be underpinned by rigorous financial management, possibly with specialist cost consultants for the different parts of the project.
- 2 Selecting the right team is vital, and with consultants particularly it is worth doing thorough research on their all-round performance right through a project. You also need to weigh up whether you want a consultant from a large practice who will be juggling several clients simultaneously, or to employ a project manager directly to focus exclusively on your project. You also need to consider whether one person has the skills you require for the whole duration of a project, especially main contract as well as fit-out and exhibitions.
- 3 People management on projects is particularly challenging. There are often too few people, too many impossible deadlines and not enough time. But there are also unusual opportunities for people to shine, to contribute and to make a difference. The hardest part is to encourage individuals to take risks and inject their ideas into the project whilst retaining momentum and ensuring that all the different creative contributions fit the overall vision. But without involving people, and letting them take ownership of the vision and ideas, projects cannot fulfill their full potential.

For many the IWMN was the project of a lifetime. Its success is a testament, not only to the Director and staff now running it, but to the many, many committed people involved in its creation.

Vivienne Bennett BA AMA MBE  
was Project Director of Imperial War Museum North.

"There are two ways to design: One way is to make it so simple that there are obviously no deficiencies. The other way is to make it so complicated that there are no obvious deficiencies. The first is far more difficult."

*-C.A.R. Hoare*