

En-visioning ASAP

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Tim Sherratt, speech at the Australian Science Archives Project's 10th birthday celebration, 15 June 1995

On behalf of ASAP I'd like to welcome you all here to help celebrate our 10th birthday. This is a milestone that, at times, it seemed we might never reach, but here we are, stronger than ever. If you haven't already guessed, this is a night of rampant self-congratulation, mixed with some myth-making, and perhaps also a little reflection - just how did we make it this far? I believe it had a lot to do with the 'V' word - vision.

These days no self-respecting organisation ventures into the public arena without a clearly articulated vision (or at least a mission - ASAP has both). But contrary to current business practice, a vision should be more than just a description, in the vaguest possible terms, of what it is that you do . A vision is an imagining of something beyond what is; it's a hope, a dream, an ambition. Vision is not born in public relations departments, but in the minds of creative and committed people. ASAP's vision lies not in slogans, nor leaflets, nor strategic plans, but in its people.

ASAP has been very lucky with its people. With the inspired casting of Gavan McCarthy in the lead role, backed up by many talented supporting players, we have created an ensemble that has made ASAP more than just a place to work. Oust a place to work. Of course, the original vision was Rod Home's. He saw that an organisation like ASAP should and could exist, and he used his considerable entrepreneurial skills to make it happen.

But, shifting into myth making mode, for me it all began ten years ago with an electric typewriter. The real history of ASAP will be told soon-to-be-published volume, but my version starts here, with an electric typewriter, a filing cabinet and a cheery archivist with a beard. I was a research assistant in the History and Philosophy of Science Department, when Gavan McCarthy moved into one corner of the office I was sharing. The electric typewriter was the cause of some tension as my co-research assistant and I had to contend with a clunky, cast-off, manual machine. We watched with interest and envy as Gavan used this wonder of modern technology to type up neat labels for a series of (mostly empty) files. This man was truly an archivist, we murmured darkly.

In this mood of all-knowing nostalgia, I can see the electric typewriter as a sign of what was to come. ASAP was already pushing at the boundaries; it was a project with an attitude. Who cares if the electric typewriter was really necessary, it was a case of looking beyond current circumstances to the future, of looking beyond what was necessary, towards what was possible.

Was it necessary for ASAP to develop the Register of the Archives of Science in Australia (RASA)? No, but it has become a resource of great national significance. Was it necessary for ASAP to devise its own archival processing system and software? No, but ASAP ADS is now an extremely powerful processing tool, that generates much of ASAP's income. Was it necessary for ASAP to establish its own WWW site? No, but ASAP now maintains one of the main Internet sites in the world for information on the history of science, technology and medicine. It is this capacity to move beyond what is expected, to take advantage of opportunities as they arise, and to have confidence in our own initiative and enthusiasm that feeds the ASAP vision.

Several generations of office technology have come and gone, but ASAP survives. No, ASAP flourishes. From one member of staff and an electric typewriter to over 20 staff, offices in Melbourne and Canberra, and lots and lots of computers. It is tempting to say that we could never have imagined this, but the truth is we could have, and we did. Not the details perhaps, but certainly the outlines. ASAP's original charter to preserve at-risk archival collections was never the limit of our vision. We wanted to do more, and we wanted to find better ways of doing it.

One day the ASAP Melbourne Office had an unannounced visit from the Director of the Contemporary Scientific Archives Centres Centre in Oxford, the project on which ASAP was originally modelled. At this stage we were just beginning to explore the ways in which we could use databases to streamline our archival processing work, so I described to him how computers had become crucial to our work. He looked quite bemused by my enthusiastic ravings and said, 'All my archivist ever asks me for is a big table'. It made me realise how different ASAP was.

It also makes you wonder whether ASAP has achieved all that it has because, or in spite of our lack of permanent funding. Certainly, dire financial circumstances have forced us to review what we do and how we do it. We have had to look at ways in which we can generate income from our skills and resources. But while impending joblessness can encourage a certain amount of creativity, you still have to have people with ideas and enthusiasm. Desperation is no substitute for vision. It is significant that the turning point for ASAP came when we achieved substantial funding from DEET. Over this three year period the Canberra Office was established, and much of the groundwork was laid for ASAP ADS. The DEET funds gave us the space to turn some of our dreams into reality. Who knows what we could achieve if we had a permanent source of funding? Well, actually, we know, and if you have the money, we'd like to tell you all about it.

I've come this far in describing the ASAP vision with barely a mention of science, history or archives. This is no accident. I think it would be fair to say that, ultimately, it is our commitment to ASAP, to the organisation, to each other, that keeps us going. Within that commitment we have many aims and ambitions, some shared, some not. I joined ASAP as a historian, and I believe that ASAP has an important role to play in raising awareness of the history of Australian science. But this, to me, is not an end in itself. Australia's scientific heritage is not a playground for uncritical nostalgia. It is a resource that we can draw upon to understand ourselves and our society. It is both a fund of exciting and inspiring stories and a political tool. As I wrote in ASAP's submission to the Centenary of Federation Advisory Committee:

Just as Australia has looked overseas for advice and expertise, so ordinary Australians have tended to see science as an external source of authority rather than as a constituent part of their own culture. They are expected to adapt to technological change, but are given little opportunity to participate in the processes by which such change is implemented. But Australia's scientific heritage provides a ready antidote to the mystification of science and technology. Scientists become people with the same sorts of ambitions, loves, hopes and fears that we all harbour. Technology is robbed of its omnipotence, and is recast as the fruit of human ingenuity and endeavour.

I believe that ASAP can help open up the world of science and technology to public understanding, participation, celebration and criticism.

It is in this breaking down of barriers that I think the ASAP vision lies - barriers between what is necessary and what is possible, between the expected and the achievable, between archives, museums and historians, between science and society. ASAP has important links with the archives profession, the scientific community, the academic world and government organisations, but we are beholden to none. We exist in a realm of our own making. ASAP is ASAP. ASAP is what ASAP does. Our vision, the same one that motivated Rod Home a decade ago, is that an organisation like ASAP can and should exist. With your help we must sustain that vision.

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