

**Submission
No 19**

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

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Inquiry into Museums & Galleries, General Purpose Standing Committee No 4

Regarding proposals to relocate the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS or Powerhouse)
This submission draws upon the experiences gained during my career 1987-2016 with the Australian National Maritime Museum (ANMM), the other large museum in the Darling Harbour-Pyrmont-Ultimo precinct, where I worked on its initial development, opening to the public and first decades of operations, variously as a research consultant, publisher & editor, public affairs manager and since retirement in 2014 as honorary research associate.

I must join the many who so rightly deplore the misguided proposal to remove one of Sydney's primary cultural attractions – the Powerhouse Museum – from our harbourside city's vibrant inner-urban centre. Every major city is defined by and trades heavily upon the cultural capital of its most notable public arts institutions, by virtue of their architecture, location as well as their function or content. In Sydney the 'crown jewels' – the unarguable pinnacles of its arts institutions – are The Opera House, The Art Gallery of NSW, Museum of Contemporary Art, The Australian Museum, the Powerhouse Museum and The Australian National Maritime Museum.

To wrench out any one of these numerically few but deeply treasured institutions, no matter if or where it were transplanted, is to grievously diminish Sydney's urban centre, along with its reputation for sophistication, cosmopolitanism and cultural vibrancy.

To then sell off its heritage building, the Powerhouse that's an integral part of Sydney's Victorian industrial history, for up-market apartments – many of which will be investment vehicles that contribute little to the vibrancy of inner-city residential life – is to compound cultural vandalism with crass commercialism of the most misguided sort. Driven, one suspects, by an ideological commitment to privatising / selling off public assets that is, at this moment, coming under increasing criticism even from its former advocates (most recently ACCC chief Rod Simms).

On figures published to date, the revenue gained comes nowhere near covering the estimated costs of relocation of MAAS. Furthermore, the estimates can be confidently predicted to blow out not just by fractions but by whole-number factors, based on historical trends of government projects and on my long career familiarity with the real costs of complex museum establishment projects.

The most obvious analogy is to contemplate uprooting London's Victoria and Albert Museum from Kensington and relocating it in Wembley. Then demolishing its heritage building and putting up expensive apartments, many of which will be unoccupied by absentee owners investing in extravagant property. Or, in terms closer to the Powerhouse's heritage building fabric, doing the same with London's Tate Modern occupying its Thames-side, former power station.

The proposal to relocate MAAS has been bolstered by projected visitation figures for its new location that are clearly based on wishful thinking and not upon an understanding of the realities of urban museum visitation.

While Federally funded, my employer the Australian National Maritime Museum drew upon essentially the same audience as MAAS: domestic museum-goers (including school groups) from Sydney, out-of-town domestic tourists and international tourists. We understood very well that the latter – inbound tourists not resident in Sydney – always comprised a substantial proportion of our museum's visitation, at times as high as 30 percent.

This is why the figures reported as 'estimates' of increased visitation of MAAS in Parramatta are simply not going to happen. The vast majority of inbound tourists of a mind to add to their understanding of their destination by sampling Sydney's cultural / arts / historical attractions will always give priority to the venues within easy reach of the city's urban, harbourside centre and its major tourist precinct Darling Harbour. In downtown Sydney, they can visit several in one day. Very, very few will trek out to Parramatta just to see MAAS's fine but rather specialised collection of industrial, consumer and fashion arts.

Having observed for many years the visitation trends of Sydney's big museums I can predict with certainty that the major beneficiary of removing the Powerhouse from the Darling Harbour precinct will be ANMM, followed to a lesser extent by the Australian Museum across the other side of the

CBD. MAAS attendances in Parramatta will plummet from their Powerhouse levels, and plummet even further after initial visits of western-Sydney families enjoying the novelty of closer access.

And let's be frank: the Sydney-based repeat visitors of the Powerhouse from the North Shore, Inner and Eastern Suburbs who historically comprise a substantial proportion of Sydney's regular museum attenders are simply not going to go all the way to Parramatta to maintain their traditional support of MAAS.

The laudable aims of making museum collections more accessible to people of Sydney's geographical centre and west can be realised, in the case of NSW government-funded cultural institutions, by directing more resources towards the existing off-site Discovery Centre at Castle Hill, or developing a new MAAS annex in Parramatta as an offshoot of the present Powerhouse Museum.

To achieve this by the zero-sum expedient of moving MAAS from the city's urban heart altogether will not only fail in the terms outlined in this submission, but leave this State Government with a legacy of misguided cultural vandalism that down-grades a great city's cultural assets, for insufficient return.

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