

**Submission
No 93**

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

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The Director
Standing Committee no. 4
Inquiry into Museums and Galleries
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear members of the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4

Submission to the Inquiry into Museums and Galleries

I am writing this submission as a museum professional of some twenty years' standing, and a former staff member of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (Powerhouse Museum).

I hold qualifications in music, museum studies, and Australian studies. My PhD was on a museum topic. I was curator of music and musical instruments at the Powerhouse from 1993 to 1998. I have worked with other museums and cultural collections and heritage places, including five years as collections manager of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) and seven years as coordinator of cultural collections at the University of Melbourne. I was also collection manager at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, an administrator with Art Exhibitions Australia, worked at Museum Victoria, and have been a freelance heritage and museums consultant. I have been a member of the National Council of Museums Australia, and on various advisory and policy committees, including for Heritage Victoria.

I was astonished to read that the NSW government is planning to move MAAS from Ultimo to Parramatta.

The relationship between the collections, exhibitions and programs of MAAS and the Ultimo site is extremely important. Relocating and redeveloping MAAS on the Powerhouse site in the 1980s was an inspired idea. The re-use of an obsolete industrial/transport site for a museum for all the people of NSW, as well as interstate and international visitors, is ideal, made explicit for instance by the decision to put the historic steam engines in the Boiler House. Along with the Darling Harbour redevelopment, it brought new vibrancy to the western side of the city.

A central location is best for the major museums of any state or large city. Of course people who live further out must travel further to museums, as they do to many government and private facilities, but 'moving' MAAS to Parramatta will not solve that problem – merely shift it. Sydney's public transport network makes it much easier for people across the outer suburbs to come to the city than to travel to another outer area. Any location is by definition a compromise, but the tried and true formula for such cultural treasures is the central city. This is the case across the globe. Would the English move their National Gallery to Birmingham? Would the French move the Louvre to Boulogne or some outer suburb of Paris?

And believe me, the Victorian Government would never dream of relocating Melbourne Museum, or the National Gallery of Victoria, out of the city! When Museum Victoria was expanding in the 1980s–90s, it took on an additional site: the former Spotswood Pumping Station in Melbourne's industrial west, and turned it into a fantastic museum of science and technology. NGV now has two major inner-city sites, and is lobbying for a third. Another comparison is Berlin – one of Europe's greatest cultural capitals. Although a much smaller city than either Sydney or Melbourne, its conglomerate of museums on the Museum Island is

astonishing. After they suffered decades of neglect under the East German regime, Germany is spending billions of Euros on bringing these museums up to modern standards.

Very few tourists will go to Parramatta. At the moment the inner-city museums — Powerhouse, Australian Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Museum of Sydney, and other smaller ones and heritage sites such as Hyde Park Barracks — have a synergistic effect. They are part of the critical mass of cultural infrastructure that helps make Sydney a great city. Dispersing these facilities geographically will weaken the attraction.

The people of Parramatta and all of Sydney deserve excellent museums too. It is the role of government to serve all its people, not to play one group off against another. If it is truly too difficult for people of Sydney's further suburbs to reach the city, then the government should be building additional museums in those areas. I would suggest that they could draw upon the collections of the city museums – at any given time, only a small proportion of the collection of any great museum is on public display – as well as forming their own collections that reflect their local concerns. Expertise could also be shared – cooperative staffing arrangements could make the skills of the excellent staff in the city available to these other places, as long as they are properly funded.

I have worked on several collection relocation projects, small and large, so I know the scale of cost of documenting, packing, moving and unpacking a collection the size of the Powerhouse's. Its hundreds of thousands of objects range in size from steam trains and aeroplanes to postage stamps and lace bobbins. Building or re-fitting a new building and then designing, building and installing new exhibitions are also hugely expensive. To waste the investment already made at the Ultimo site would be a profligate squandering of public funds. To duplicate these costs at Parramatta would be even worse. I am sure that whatever money the government raises from selling the Ultimo site to property developers will be swamped by the cost of relocating the museum.

When the Powerhouse opened in the 1980s it was the first of Australia's major museums to become a truly modern museum, in line with what was then known as 'the new museology' – a philosophy that included making museums more relevant to their communities. It succeeded brilliantly, and attracted significant international attention in museum circles. It was influential in many places, including New Zealand, where it helped inspire the wonderful Te Papa museum in Wellington. Perhaps the Powerhouse has been slightly neglected in the past few years – that is no excuse to close it. It attracted excellent staff and its exhibitions were, and are, wonderful. It should be prized, and properly resourced. Recently the plans to downsize and close have caused the loss of many highly regarded curators and other staff from the Powerhouse. A real shame.

I predict that if MAAS is moved to Parramatta, it will close entirely within twenty years, through lack of visitation and community support. Please, as part of your deliberations on museums and galleries in New South Wales, recommend that the government reverse this ill-thought-out decision.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Yours sincerely

Belinda Nemec