

**Submission  
No 96**

## **INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES**

**Name:** Dr Grace Cochrane

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## **Expectations of Audiences: constituents must be considered**

Grace Cochrane AM, August 2016

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### **Standing Committee 4: Museums and Galleries**

#### **Terms of reference:**

- e) The sale of the Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo and its proposed move to Parramatta; whether there are alternative strategies to support museum development
- f) The development and transparency of advice to the government on priorities for NSW museums and galleries.

#### **Background:**

I am an independent curator, writer, consultant and educator in the field of decorative arts, crafts and design. I have worked in this field for over 40 years, nearly 20 of them at the Powerhouse Museum as a former senior curator (see attached summary CV). I maintain personal contact with over 1000 people in Australia and overseas, who are relevant to this review, and am also part of a small professional group identified as the Powerhouse Museum Alliance. <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/> This group has been consulting widely with a range of state and national professional interest groups, including those in Parramatta. It has also been developing an archive of well-researched papers on the subject of the proposed relocation of the Museum to Western Sydney, in a broad context. These can be found on the website.

#### **Issues:**

- It is hard to believe that any government would want to be remembered as the one responsible for destroying so many things we all believe to be important. And yet, this is what the current NSW government is doing.
- We are living through its irresponsible destruction of the irreplaceable: iconic trees, public spaces, and significant buildings and institutions.
- The proposed total transplantation of the Powerhouse Museum is part of this destruction. It has been dumped on Parramatta in the guise of 'equity'.
- But apart from the vast under-estimates of the cost of relocation and the vulnerability of the collection, the government has completely underestimated the opinions and preferences of a wide range of informed audiences who consider themselves stakeholders in these decisions.
- The government and its planning agencies have not consulted adequately with experts associated with either the Powerhouse Museum or the potential opportunities in Parramatta. Nor have they adequately released reports.
- As well, in the current proposal it is not at all clear what the budget plans are for future funding: whether the State Government or the Parramatta Council will:
  - a) own the site, b) maintain it, c) fund its continuing cultural programs.
- *This Inquiry now offers the opportunity for review, but the research should have happened at the outset, before ill-informed, irretrievable and costly decisions were made.*

#### **Observations and Recommendations:**

1. **Powerhouse and the city centre: audience access**
2. **Regional centres: what does Parramatta really need?**
3. **Evidence and experience: knowledge of experts**
4. **Questioning the Government's process of decision-making:**
5. **Other options: the Powerhouse Museum**
6. **Other options: Parramatta**

## **1. Powerhouse and the city centre: audience access**

Audiences are essential to the reputation and continuing viability of any cultural institution through the way they identify with it as relevant to their interests; their willingness to pay entrance fees (if necessary); their enthusiasm in recommending others to visit; and their potential as donors and benefactors.

These important audiences, critical to the Museum's continuing significance as a cultural point of reference as well as an engaging experience, are most unlikely to make an extra trip out of the CBD to visit it. This is reality, not snobbery. And it is a significant economic factor in cultural tourism as well as cultural and educational value.

Audiences, whether from suburban or regional NSW, other Australian states or countries overseas, expect major state museums to be where they perceive the centre of the city to be. This is in a capital city cultural centre (eg. Sydney CBD), and not necessarily the largest population centre (Parramatta). All major state museums are currently in the CBD where they have been for over a century, and have firmly established roots – both physically and conceptually.

No-one recommends completely transplanting the Australian Museum or the Art Gallery of NSW. Such a transfer is not happening in any other major museum in the world.

- *Check what audiences say:* <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/open-letter/>

## **2. Regional centres: what does Parramatta really need?**

At the same time, other population centres such as city suburbs and regional towns and cities, establish cultural institutions with programs that meet the needs of their immediate audiences, and support local histories through museums and contemporary arts practitioners through their own galleries

It is noticeable that of all the Sydney outer city centres (Manly, Fairfield, Hazelhurst, Penrith, Campbelltown, Casula...) and regional centres (Lake Macquarie, Gosford, Wollongong, Newcastle, Maitland, Cowra, Bathurst and beyond...) Parramatta is the only one that has no contemporary gallery to meet these local needs, and (in building high-rise apartments through its 1820s buildings) is not making the best decisions about its historic attributes.

This oversight on Parramatta's needs must be rectified through more democratic consultation and collaboration, which could lead to establishing its own cultural centre. Audiences are making it clear that while they want equity, they prefer their own institutions rather than a transplanted state museum whose key context and audience is elsewhere. Such a centre can, of course, receive touring exhibitions from the state museums and perhaps include branches of aspects of their collections.

- *Why was this not addressed? Not for the best interests of Parramatta, but because the government wanted the Powerhouse city site for development!*

## **3. Evidence and experience: knowledge of experts**

There are many concerned and very active professional people who know the Museum well; many have previously worked in it and dedicated most of their careers to it. They are from a huge range of professional backgrounds and in their various capacities know well the extent of the collection, what it represents and how it needs to be managed and exhibited. Those still working in the Museum are barred from commenting. However, I know that both inside and out, these people maintain connections that spread out from contacts in the local precinct, to networks of professional colleagues in museums, galleries, educational institutions and specialist organisations right across wider Sydney, throughout NSW and the rest of Australia – and in many countries overseas.

This means that they know who they are working with: apart from audiences with general interests, and students of all ages, they know those audiences with specialist concerns for science, technology, social history, decorative arts, crafts and design. These contacts include museum professionals like themselves, as well as collectors, donors, benefactors, researchers and writers – and contemporary designers, makers, scientists and engineers. We know from our experience that these audiences expect to find such a

major state museum in the central location where it has been active for so long. They expect the Powerhouse Museum to be alongside other major state institutions.

Everyone understands that while museums can share aspects of their collection, they definitely can't be totally picked up like a pawn in a game of monopoly, or a tree without roots, to be dumped completely out of context in a new location – especially into communities like Parramatta that need museums and galleries to tell their own stories and serve their own constituents.

#### **4. Questioning the Government's process of decision-making:**

It has been made very clear from personal meetings with the Premier and his adviser (in August 2015), and from now discovering through FOI papers the inadequacies of planning and reporting, that government's managers have not involved professional people who know the museum field and its audience expectations, including those experienced in planning, costing and management.

In the Premier and his adviser's own words they looked at no other options – either to enhance the Powerhouse Museum in its long-established context, or look for alternatives for Parramatta.

It is clear from information on FOI retrieved documents that they have paid lip-service to ideas of culture and society and collaboration, and have focused on ill-informed 'infrastructure planning' through what are proving to be devious and even secret property deals, and wildly misinformed and inaccurate establishment and maintenance costings.

#### **5. Other options: the Powerhouse Museum**

- The Museum must stay in the city centre, in its long-established cultural and educational precinct. Moving will not only cost millions more than cited; the Museum will shrink in size, and lose critical audiences including benefactors.
- Options need to be considered for expanding aspects of the Museum on-site, or adjacent to it while still linked to the whole, to allow a broader physical representation of the extensive collection, as well as its on-line access.
- It must also receive adequate continuing funding to run its exhibition and public programs. Despite good attendances in recent years there have been substantial cuts in staff and program funding which severely limit its scope and reach.
- These programs can include a continuation of its record of outreach to other centres, including Parramatta.

#### **6. Other options: Parramatta**

- Parramatta has a large multicultural population, and a very significant, but undervalued, local history represented in precincts of early 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings. As well, its limited contemporary cultural centre does not include a regional gallery/museum as do other regional city centres; this should be a consideration for local residents.
- One much-cited option is for a Cultural Centre that serves local creative talent and histories, but also has the facility to mount temporary projects and house aspects of collections from state institutions in the Sydney CBD.
- Many Parramatta residents are seeking a collaborative review of current controversial plans for residential building in heritage areas.
- One proposal is the comprehensive 'Fleet Street Heritage Precinct'. Free of residential development, this cultural precinct could include: a Heritage & Museum zone; an Arts & Theatre zone; an Indigenous Arts & Technology Hub; a riverside dining precinct surrounded by a Sculpture Park; and be the starting point for a Cultural Ribbon linking Parramatta to the CBD via Sydney's waterway with the opportunity to incorporate smaller cultural precincts in future urban renewal. (Proposed by North Parramatta Residents Action Group.)

**Recommendation: There needs to be more consideration of these potentially much more viable and effective options.**