

**Supplementary  
Submission  
No 137a**

## **INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES**

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This submission addresses the following term of reference:

e) the sale of the Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo and its proposed move to Parramatta, and whether there are alternative strategies to support museum development

#### Submission

This is an amazing building that must not be demolished. It must continue to provide variety of streetscape and serve as a cultural icon in an area that is quickly becoming a mass of high-rise residential and commercial buildings. This submission discusses the building as such, and another submission relates to the heritage values of the museum as an institution.

#### Supportive material:

Booklet Heritage aspects of the Powerhouse Museum: .pdf copy appended; also online at <http://lockoweb.com/heritagephm/00finalthis.pdf>. This is the outcome of the input of many people with a wide range of qualifications and experience in relevant fields, and the facts stated are supported by material on [www.lockoweb.com/phm](http://www.lockoweb.com/phm)

#### Background

On November 8, 1897, work began on the construction of the Ultimo Power House, the first large power generation plant in Australia, and the first action in providing a major electric train service from Pyrmont via Central Station to Circular Quay. Twenty-five months later, 46 trams took part in the first day of service of the completed project, carrying over 50 000 people. This efficiency puts modern efforts to shame. Total cost was less than the equivalent of one billion dollars in modern money.

In terms of buildings, this involved the construction of the first stage of the powerhouse, (boiler room, turbine room, pump house with pipeline to the bay), administrative offices, a tram shed (the present Harwood Building) and rail connections leading directly into the generating areas.

One would expect that the project would have been done as cheaply as possible, and that the speedy construction would have entailed shoddy building. Not so. From the outset the buildings were made to last, and were decorated with special architectural features. Walls were of interlocking English bond brickwork, absolutely solid, with a minimum width of around two feet (60 cm). Engaged pillars and other strengthening in various areas means that some wall sections are over 6 feet wide. Millions of bricks were specially made for specific applications, and decorative brickwork patterns, corbelling and sandstone features are common, even in purely utilitarian areas such as the tram shed.

Remaining vestiges of the original fittings include two huge overhead cranes in the original 1899 engine room, probably unique in the world. Original wall treatments and the basic functional structure of the buildings are still visible. The magnificent galleries provide a spectacular museum environment that will be far too costly to replicate elsewhere.

The 1899 office building at the north of the complex is largely obscured by the 1965 William Henry Street bridge, but the lintel, for example, can still clearly be seen. It is a

beautiful example of sandstone carving, typical of the care that was lavished on the building process. This degree of care was carried on in later additions: eg in 1926 a new switch house was inaugurated. Despite its mundane function it is a striking example of Art Deco architecture with meticulous attention to brickwork. Additions and improvements continued into the 1940s, and the station closed in 1963.

In 1978 it was decided to convert the derelict powerhouse into the present museum, as a key part of the development of the Darling Harbour area, at the time a disused railway yard. The high-quality powerhouse buildings were refurbished to 'better than new' condition, preserving all practicable features of the original building. A new purpose built building replaced some buildings of lesser quality along Harris Street. The Harwood building was converted to a state-of-the-art museum storage area and curatorial work area, with a library and offices. The heritage-listed Ultimo Post Office became part of the museum. The award-winning process reflected the tradition of excellence that began in 1897 and was deservedly awarded the Sulman award for architecture.

Now the Darling Harbour precinct and the adjacent Barangaroo area are being re-developed. Many 25-year-old buildings have been demolished, to be replaced by new buildings in the international style exemplified by, for example, buildings in Dubai. Various commercial and residential buildings of about 40 storeys are dominated by the Crown Casino, a 75-storey tower designed to attract wealthy overseas visitors, being erected by multimillionaire Mr Packer on what is certainly one of the best waterfront sites available in the world, a publicly owned former port area. As part of this process the Powerhouse Museum buildings are to be demolished to make way for yet another modern residential tower.

The process was actually announced as a fait accompli on 24 November 2014, even before it was suggested as something to be investigated in the policy document Create in NSW: NSW Arts and Cultural Policy Framework was released on 26 February 2015. There was no consultation with any relevant stakeholder group. This is a complete denial of due process.

The current inquiry is the first opportunity for such input, but the government's response has been simply to announce that the museum will be 'moved' as planned. So far there has been no physical action in this process, so it is reasonable to expect that the just possibly the relevant authorities may yet be persuaded to spare this iconic building, if only as a streetscape feature that breaks the monotony of these glitzy new buildings.