

**Submission
No 106**

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

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Legislative Council of NSW
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Inquiry into Museums and Galleries

Submission by John August

Terms of Reference:

- a. NSW government policy, funding and support for museums and galleries, museum and gallery buildings and heritage collections, including volunteer managed museums and museums managed by councils

My general comment would be that Museums should be properly funded, and that the Powerhouse Museum should stay substantially as it is within the Sydney CBD.

I recognise the financial difficulties in doing this properly, but also note that there are financial advantages to business in having such sites in proximity. Jane Jacobs in "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" writes of this synergy.

While it may be hard to fund, and problematic if things slide down the incline to "user pays", I am confident a good deal of economic activity - and the related taxation - could be put down the synergy of commerce with Government provided facilities such as museums. In notional terms, I'm sure this could readily justify the funding of museums by the state Government, particularly the Power House Museum in Ultimo.

It is my understanding that the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences has more exhibits than it can currently conveniently display. Some of this excess is shown at the Castle Hill Discovery Centre, but without shutting down the Powerhouse Museum, it would certainly be possible to have additional displays provided at Parramatta. It would also be possible to, for example, move the design and less "technological" aspects of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta.

- b. potential funding impacts on museums and galleries affected by council amalgamations

The question is how much "spare cash" amalgamated councils have to spend on their associated museums and galleries. If the claim is in indeed realised that we will all share in a magnificent bounty, then, well, the promise would have been realised. It is outside the scope of this document, but I do have my reasons for believing that this promise will not be delivered.

- c. Opportunities to revitalise the structure, reach, and impact of museums and their research and collecting priorities

While we should naturally not be complacent, I do not see that museums are in any sort of crisis in terms of the support and appreciation for them by the community. I will listen to an argument if someone has the numbers, but while museums may have been squeezed financially, I can't see that the relationship of the public to museums has been diminished by anything in the heads of the public. If people are less engaged with museums, my suspicion is that this would be the result of them being squeezed for funding and less able to provide what they did in the past.

- d. Access to the collections of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, the Australian Museum and any other state collections held in trust

Certainly, as noted earlier, the provision of additional space at Parramatta - without reducing existing space elsewhere - would improve the access to the collections of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences. Such additional space at Parramatta might also provide additional access to other collections.

- 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

To remove the Powerhouse Museum from Ultimo is to undermine the CBD as a tourist destination and hub of the city. Many tourists would not be in a position to travel to Parramatta, and so the city would be denied this economic synergy.

The Powerhouse is itself a historic building with links to the development of technology in Sydney. It would be a tragic thing to lose the connection with this wonderful building.

The alternative to moving the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta would be to have an additional site of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences at Parramatta. The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences would then become an umbrella encapsulating sites at Ultimo, Castle Hill and Parramatta.

- f. The development and transparency of advice to the government on priorities for NSW museums and galleries

Certainly, there is a great deal of cynicism from the public about so-called "consultation", where is clearly some sort of "tick-the-box" scam; in particular in the past people living close to a development have not been consulted. Rather than so-called "consultation" we should in fact be seeking "engagement" which covers rather different ground. And genuine concerns can easily be buried in bureaucratic waffle within a report.

It seems that Government policy is about privatisation and asset sales to maximise their value, without any consideration of other issues. Mr. Simms of the ACCC feels privatisation has been conducted to maximise value to the Government, but when the entity is in private hands it is provided with a monopoly and the public finds they are charged more for services than when the entity was in public hands - in spite of the supposed efficiency improvements resulting from private ownership which were to be passed onto the public.

In a similar way, the public's interest in heritage and their appreciation for walking through a wonderful, lively, dynamic city is being ignored in pursuit of the bottom line through asset sales.

Certainly, I would rather my tax dollars not be wasted. However, I'd even more prefer that the Government not trash the city in which I live for supposed economic benefits.

- g. The impact of the efficiency dividend on the budgets of museums and galleries over the last 10 years, and funding levels compared to other states

By applying a single metric - the efficiency dividend - in pursuit of improved outcomes, the Government has in fact promoted an overall worse outcome. The point is that what was previously delivered has been eroded along the way, with the result that the entity no longer performs

its original purpose.

While at times this approach might well be pursued with naive good intentions, it can also be seen in a more sinister way. While it might be impossible to sell outright, privatise or whatever some entity, after being squeezed for a number of decades the Government can then say "well it does not work anymore - so we'd better get rid of it". But, in fact it no longer works because of the past cumulative effect of Government policy. The Government has managed to shut something down by stealth, while they could never have gotten away with doing it outright at the start as a stated goal.

Needless to say, along with the so-called "efficiency dividend", we also need to look at whether an institution is delivering on its stated purpose as well as it was previously. We cannot naively rely on a single metric such as the "efficiency dividend".

h. The economic impact of museums and galleries on cultural tourism, and their role in supporting the visitor economy

Within the CBD, the Powerhouse Museum is important in capturing the attention of those who travel to Sydney, including in particular passenger on cruise liners.

Outside of Sydney, I can personally testify to the worth of visiting museums and other locations through the NSW countryside. My eyes have only been opened up to this in the last few years, and I have been preparing maps and other information to promote this further.

Too often unplanned trips mean you visit places of interest just after they have closed, or entirely miss locations of interest. Better support for this sort of travel would be a good thing to support as a part of cultural tourism, pointing out to people that this is a possibility when they travel.

i. Any other related matter.

The support of culture through museums is an important thing for Government to do. I do not mind my taxes being used to support it. Government needs to embrace this support, and tell the story of how they are supporting it in a way which resonates with the Australian public. We all benefit from Sydney, NSW and the Powerhouse museum being dynamic and lively; we need to all share in this and own it.

John August

10/8/16