

**Submission
No 128**

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

Name: Ms Irma Havlicek

Date received: 14 August 2016

SYDNEY WOULD BE DIMINISHED BY THE LOSS OF THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM

There are many reasons why the Powerhouse Museum should remain where it is, in Ultimo, Sydney. Here are the four reasons I consider most important.

POWERHOUSE AN INTEGRAL PART OF SYDNEY'S CULTURAL MIX

A state with a rich and supported cultural life flourishes. The cultural fabric of a capital city helps to define the state and the nation.

Sydney's major museums provide visitors with a fine balance of subject areas that, together, reflect a balanced, thoughtful society: Powerhouse Museum (applied arts and sciences), Art Gallery of NSW (fine art), Australian Museum (natural history), Museum of Contemporary Art (contemporary art), Sydney Living Museums (social history).

The loss of any of these museums to Sydney would diminish Sydney. However the exponential and unprecedented rise of technologies in our era argues strongly for the need of a forum to display, demystify and discuss the artefacts that are changing our lives.

No institution in Sydney addresses that need as the Powerhouse Museum does, showcasing human ingenuity past, present and looking to the future in this age of innovation.

LOSS OF ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARK AND IMMENSE RESOURCE INVESTMENT

The Powerhouse Museum opened to the public in 1988 as a Bicentennial Project. It was visionary in ideals and scope, and in its awe-inspiring, award-winning building. It sensitively repurposed the buildings that had powered Sydney trams, incorporating their design into the aesthetic, and added modern, lofty, airy spaces into which you could look up and out at the diverse objects, large and small, which have affected the development of our society.

The entrance experience was unforgettable, with gorgeous pink marble floors and soaring ceilings; a truly great and wonderful interior. You knew you could anticipate something special from your first entry to the building.

This creation was a huge investment of NSW taxpayer money and the time, effort and care of a large number of committed professionals.

It is folly to squander that investment only some 30 years after its inception. The building should continue to be part of the identity of Sydney far into the future. As time goes by, the building will gain importance as one of the few remaining pieces of great architecture from the 1980s.

ASTRONOMICAL COST OF THE PROPOSED MOVE

Much has been said elsewhere on this point. Obviously, governments need to raise revenue. But there is only so much you can sell off, and then what? However even on the basis of potential income from the sale of the Powerhouse site, the cost of building a world-class museum of the same size with the same storage capacity at Parramatta, and safely moving and storing hundreds of thousands of objects there (some the size of locomotives, steam engines, helicopters, space satellites) - how can this not cost at least as much as the sum raised from the sale of the Ultimo site?

LIKELY TO CAUSE DEPLETION OF TRACTS OF THE POWERHOUSE COLLECTION

Like every other person I have spoken with on the subject of the planned move of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta, I believe there should be cultural institutions in cities and towns outside of Sydney. The plans for improved infrastructure for Parramatta argues that Parramatta should be a priority for provision of cultural facilities. But not at the expense of the Powerhouse where it is.

And however improved infrastructure for Parramatta may become, it will never be as easy for most people to get there as it is for them to get to Sydney. (I live on the Central Coast and make trips by train to Sydney to visit the Powerhouse; I would be unlikely to visit the museum in Parramatta. I imagine

this would equally be the case for people from Newcastle and Wollongong.) And if there are fewer visitors, government funding is likely to be cut, so staffing, exhibitions and education programs will be reduced, and the museum and its support will begin to deplete.

However the catastrophe I envisage if the Powerhouse Museum is moved to Parramatta relates to the ultimate erosion and dismantling of the collection if it is moved.

The amazing and wondrous thing about the Powerhouse collection is its diversity. That is what makes the Powerhouse special but also difficult to easily conceptualise or comprehend: a collection that includes bionic ear implants, dolls houses, sea planes, guns, coins, furniture, space technology, musical instruments, steam engines, clothing and computers, to name but a few. There are about 400,000 objects, some of which are phenomenal masterpieces on a world scale: the Boulton and Watt steam engine, the Enigma cipher machine, the Babbage difference engine, the first elastic-sided boots in the world (made for Queen Victoria), penicillin mould from Howard Florey's laboratory, and many, many more.

The move of the collection from the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo (and there is much that is in storage there, out of sight) would be an unbelievably massive undertaking.

Moving a museum is not like shifting house. It is not only the scale that is different - vastly different. There are also professional requirements to protect the collection that make moving each object much more time consuming and complex. Every move of every object must be documented so its whereabouts is known at all times.

The museum professionals who work at the Powerhouse Museum have a deeply held personal conviction that the work they do is for the public good, and they must care for the objects which are held in trust for the people of New South Wales. I know this. I worked there for 22 years. The commitment of Powerhouse staff is personal and emotional as well as professional.

So here is my point of greatest fear. That after the move is planned and started, there are political changes. Money is needed elsewhere. The plan for an excellent museum building in Parramatta is suddenly truncated because of a crisis in health/education/power.... name your crisis. Suddenly the money is no longer available to complete the building as planned. Costs must be cut. Space is reduced so that there isn't the space for the entire collection. If the money and/or space is no longer available, the trustees are in a bind.

A science-focussed trustee may wonder why the Powerhouse needs so many shoes, or any shoes at all. A craft-expert trustee may wonder why the Powerhouse needs so many steam engines. Or they may wonder about the need for a collection philately - and yet what a story stamps can tell about communication, transport and design. And so it could begin. Someone may wonder why the Powerhouse collects musical instruments (fine examples of both applied arts and sciences). It may be thought that to protect one area of the collection, another could be deaccessioned, sold off, housed elsewhere. This may not happen in the next few years, but perhaps in 10 or 20. If hived off, those parts of the collection could never be replaced to the same standard. They would be lost forever. And if one area of the collection were to be depleted or lost, that could set a sorry precedent for removing other areas of the collection. A lopsided collection would cease to be able to tell a comprehensive story of human ingenuity from its own collection. I fear this may put the very existence of the museum at risk in the future.

The huge and fundamental strength of the Powerhouse Museum is its diversity. The human narratives that can be told from its collection are infinite. It is vital not to weaken any part of the collection. Its diversity is its strength.

The best way of protecting the Powerhouse Museum and its outstanding collection, is to leave it where it is, and to resource it adequately where it is, so that it can do its vital job of educating and enlightening visitors.

By all means, build a brilliant museum in Parramatta, and lend objects to it from all of Sydney's state museums. Why should Parramatta be deprived of exhibitions from the Art Gallery of NSW, Australian Museum and Sydney Living Museums?

Be a brave government; one that builds but doesn't dismantle. Support the legacy of those who have gone before and perhaps you can help set precedents so that your legacy is preserved in the future. Most objects from previous centuries and even decades are now in landfill, their stories lost. The Powerhouse Museum protects such objects for us and for future generations. And however brilliant our online collection is, nothing can replicate the experience of standing in front of an authentic object, with a story to tell.

Please don't diminish Sydney, and leave the Powerhouse Museum where it is.