

**Submission
No 61**

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

Organisation: Professional Historians Association NSW & ACT

Date received: 14 August 2016



The Director
Standing Committee 4: Inquiry into Museums and Galleries
Parliament House, Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

The Professional Historians Association NSW & ACT (PHA NSW & ACT) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Museums and Galleries. The PHA NSW & ACT represents practicing and professional historians across NSW and the ACT, many of whom work in the museums and galleries sector. As an attachment to this submission, we have included the response from one of our members.

This submission offers broad comments on the identified submission areas, and particular emphasis on;

1 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

The Powerhouse Museum, located in the remaining buildings of the former Ultimo Powerhouse, was opened in 1988 as the new home of the former Technological Museum which has been located nearby in the Technical College on Harris Street since 1893. The strength of the Powerhouse in telling the story of Sydney and NSW's technological and scientific history lies in a large part to its location in the former powerhouse buildings and in its proximity to its original home and the industrial landscape of the Ultimo area.

As part of the Powerhouse Museum's broader role it was also host to the Migration Heritage Centre (MHC), established in 1998 and located at the Powerhouse from 2003. This important centre was tasked with collecting and telling the story of NSW's rich migrant history and was a first step toward a museum in NSW to tell the broader history of the state.

NSW remains the only state in the country without a museum responsible for its history. NSW has no museum responsible for the collection, documentation and interpretation of migration heritage and has no museum dedicated to Indigenous history. For the foundation state of Australia, which has a rich and fascinating history of migration, mining, industry and innovation the absence of a museum to tell this story represents both a significant gap as well presenting an exciting opportunity to deliver one.

The Powerhouse Museum, which once had an acclaimed social history program, has in more recent years shifted its focus away from the social history of NSW and the migration history of the state. The loss of the Migration Heritage Centre in 2013-14, meant the end of programs that had worked



closely with over 60 different ethnic groups across the state. Many professional historians have worked with the centre and found it an important part of the museum sector that related to NSW communities.

The shift away from this role for collecting, researching and interpreting NSW social history has had many consequences for the practice and standing of history in NSW. It has affected education, general knowledge, the collection of historic objects, and local historical societies and museums have not had the expertise of a state museum to call upon.

Most importantly for the PHA NSW & ACT the lack of a dedicated NSW social history museum affects the employment of professional historians and their critical role in historical research, writing, documentary production and exhibitions in many sectors and communities across the state.

The PHA NSW & ACT believes the Powerhouse site must remain a dedicated museum, preferably one focused on the technological, mining and industrial history of NSW or public heritage location. The PHA NSW & ACT strongly urges that the opportunity to develop a dedicated social history museum for NSW be taken up in Western Sydney.

We also urge that a museum dedicated to the history of migration in NSW become part of a broader, coherent strategy for museums and history in the state.

A representative of the PHA NSW & ACT is willing to be a witness at any later hearing.

Yours Sincerely

Dr Mark Dunn
Chair PHA NSW & ACT

Attachment A: Member submission



Submission to General Purpose Standing Committee No.4

Inquiry into museums and galleries

From the Professional Historians Association (NSW)

This submission responds to selected issues to be considered by the Committee as listed in the Legislative Council Terms of Reference, 1 a) – i)

Preamble:

Australian Museums are world leaders with regards curatorial excellence and conservation expertise. Australian Museums have managed to balance sophisticated interpretation with audience appeal. The *Australians and the Past* National Survey conducted through University of Technology, Sydney, in 2002-2003 found that Museums were ranked as the most trustworthy source of historical information by 54% of respondents – well above any other category including documentaries, academic historians, teachers and books.

Our Museums are vital repositories of the nation's collective memory. They allow Australians to understand themselves each other. In 2013, 3.5 million people visited our museums and galleries. In NSW 66% of museums and galleries sit outside the metropolitan area where they serve local communities and tourism well.

Our museums – particularly those in the capital cities - also present Australia to the world. In 2012, 48% of overseas visitors participated in cultural and heritage events, including museum visitation. This could, and should, be much higher.

The following comments respond to both

1 d) access to the collections of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, the Australian Museum and any other state collections held in trust for the people of New South Wales, and programs that promote physical and online access

1 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

Together with the Australian Museum, the State Library of NSW, and the Art Gallery of NSW, the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences [MAAS] is one of NSW's four premier repositories of material culture – those objects that embody our history and culture. The collection dates to the late 19th century. Its extraordinary diversity reflects the various



collecting briefs and functions that have been attached to the institution since it was named the Industrial, Technological and Sanitary Museum in 1883.

Unfortunately underfunding, an increasingly complex brief and sense of identity, and contradictory and inadequate Directorial vision has undermined the role the MAAS should be playing in Sydney and NSW.

In its first 100 years the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences collected in the service of industry. Samples of wool, timber and essential oils, for instance, were gathered alongside examples of woodwork, ceramics and machinery to educate and encourage the local manufacturing, agricultural and commercial sectors.

By the 1980s collecting was influenced also by the 'new social history'. Examples of clothing and colonial technology were, therefore, displayed in an explicitly historical context with accompanying interpretation when the Museum was opened in its new Ultimo Powerhouse site in 1988. This approach to museology was world class at the time.

During the 1990s and early 2000s the newly rebranded 'Powerhouse Museum' conducted several audience evaluations with a view to broadening its visitor base. These surveys indicated that the Museum's audience was primarily comprised of families from the eastern and northern suburbs. It was, it appeared, much harder to attract visitors from western Sydney.

Plans to do so were undermined by mandatory contingency preparations for anticipated Y2K interruptions to computer systems in the lead up to the year 2000. As much as \$1,000,000 was spent at the Powerhouse. This burden was compounded by a series of cuts to operating budgets brought down by the Carr Government.

One response was to install blockbuster international exhibitions to boost visitation and ticket sales. It was hoped that these shows, including displays of special effects and costumes from the films Star Wars and Lord of the Rings, would attract an uninitiated western Sydney audience that might return after the first visit.

The blockbuster strategy competed with a vision which held that displaying the Museum's own collection was paramount. The big imported shows tended to occupy prime space near the Harris Street entrance at the expense of internally-generated displays.

However around 2005 the Powerhouse collection was given pride of place in a spectacular permanent Decorative Arts Gallery installed where the block busters formerly resided. It showcased Australian-made furniture, ceramics, glass and costume from colonial times to the present and demonstrated clearly that the Powerhouse might serve a function in Sydney comparable to that of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Unfortunately the Decorative Arts Gallery survived for a fraction of the time it took to develop and the space was turned over again to visiting block busters such as Narnia.

Inadequate funding is a big issue but it is not the only reason the Powerhouse Museum has difficulty establishing – or re-establishing - itself in the public mind. Since the 1980s it has



attempted to cover history, practical science, astronomy, contemporary fashion and design, technological design from the age of steam to the present. This is a legacy of the historical development of the institution from its inception as an educational and research centre to its re-emergence as the 'Powerhouse Museum' in 1988.

Such a broad-ranging brief inevitably has led to a fractured sense of identity and purpose. This confusion was epitomised by the expensive rebranding in 2001/2 of what was then widely recognised as the Powerhouse Museum as 'Ph^m Science + Design' – a strangely mathematical logo that negated the richness of the collection and the accompanying curatorial expertise that had placed that in historical context for years. The vaunted Science and Design imperative was not matched by moribund aging interactives. As the daughter of a former curator who visited the Museum many times as a young girl in the early 2000s recalled after a recent high school excursion, 'nothing has changed and the interactives don't work'.

The tragedy of this fracture is compounded by the fact that it undermines the potential of Museum's physical 'about face' as it has finally been opened up to Darling Harbour and made accessible from Central Station with the completion of the hi-line walkway along the goods rail track from George Street. That public work overturned the unfortunate legacy of a bleak journey to the Museum down Harris Street.

On the face of it the proposed move of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta will do little to resurrect this once great institution. As many critics have noted the vast amount needed to relocate the collection would be far better spent on reviving the Museum in its current location – recouping some of the curatorial and conservation expertise lost through voluntary redundancies in recent years.

But perhaps the move – which is presented as a *fait accompli* by the State Government – offers an opportunity to overcome the crisis of identity outline above. We suggest that the institution be moved in part to Parramatta to create a science centre in the geographic centre of greater Sydney. While the Australian Museum serves to educate in the natural sciences and technology, Sydney does not have an institution to compare to Questacon in Canberra. Such a place in Parramatta could be filled with the interactive exhibits that once delighted children and adults alike. The Bolton and Watt Steam engine could be used, along with the extraordinary collection of computers and transport, to provide historical context for current developments.

A smaller compact site in the city could be used to highlight the decorative arts and historical collection along the lines of the erstwhile and short-lived decorative arts gallery. That space might also host contemporary design shows where history meets the present. Sydney would have its V&A. A central location for such an important building in fact will make these parts of the collection far accessible to the people of New South Wales and Sydney southern, eastern and northern suburbs – and indeed much of the west – as well the tourists who would clearly love to understand Australian history in a more complex way than is possible by a visit to the Rocks.

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