

**Submission  
No 142**

## **INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES**

**Name:** Ms Jennifer Sanders

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The Hon Robert Borsak MLC

Committee Chair

General Purpose Standing Committee no 4

Legislative Council

Parliament House

Macquarie Street

Sydney NSW 2000

Submission from Jennifer Sanders, August 2016

Upper House Inquiry into museums and galleries No 4

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### **Summary: Mythbusting**

This paper addresses a number of the oft repeated arguments put by proponents of the proposal to move the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta. It seeks to refute the basis for these assertions, which themselves appear to have little solid, objective evidence to back up them up.

**Commentary:** Proponents of the move of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta have put forward a number of arguments to support their view that this is a good, if not excellent idea. These can be readily refuted:

1. The Deloitte report, Building Western Sydney's Cultural Arts Economy 2015 recommended that the Powerhouse Museum be relocated to Western Sydney saying that the 'full sale proceeds of the existing Powerhouse site in Eastern (?) Sydney' be quarantined to establish the new Museum in Western Sydney – with any surpluses used to fund future Powerhouse Museum programs in Western Sydney.

However, the estimated cost of a new Powerhouse Museum at Parramatta that might approach the scale, sophistication and complexity of the Powerhouse at Ultimo will be around 2 to 3 times the sale estimate of \$150-200million and that is for the museum and exhibitions only. The cost of moving and re housing the museum's collection in the new museum and, in museum standard, publicly accessible storage is likely to add \$200 – 300million to these cost estimates – well in excess of anticipated proceeds of 'the sale of site for new Museum' strategy. The total project is one that could well take 7 – 10 years.

You could not pick a more complex, site specific, heritage significant museum to move in all of Australia – indeed it would be up there in terms of degree of difficulty with similar international museums. Not only is the museum building a unique combination of heritage values and magnificent display spaces, the heritage objects within the building – such as the 1785 Boulton and Watt beam engine, powered by steam, as are the historic engines in the Steam exhibition in the Engine House - all of which are, like the Catalina flying boat 'flying 'in the Boiler Hall - 'built in' so to speak - and shown to their best awe inspiring advantage in the massive volumes and evocative interiors of the former Ultimo Power House.

The response that government can/will find the money for a new wad of capital investment ignores the fact that the expense is likely to far outstrip initial 'back of the envelope' estimates and, that there will be competing priorities for such expenditure across government, indeed taxpayers', priorities.

2. A second proponents' argument is that the Powerhouse is dysfunctional in Ultimo – that visitor numbers are down, that access is difficult with all the new development and, that the new buildings in Darling Harbour block views of the Museum.

However, the reverse is true. Located in the precinct where it has been a major player since 1893, on its site adjacent to a burgeoning Darling Harbour (the rise in tourists when completed is estimated to be 40m pa up from 26m pa); intrinsic to the Ultimo/Chippendale/Broadway creative precinct; historically linked to the Chinatown and Ultimo/Pyrmont communities; fronting Harris Street, a major pedestrian and vehicle thoroughfare; and now, with the added benefit of the pedestrianised Goods Line Walkway taking visitors seamlessly to and fro Central and Railway Square and, the Powerhouse Museum and Darling Harbour.

And as befits the Museum's leading educational role, the Museum has for decades been a destination for students of many of Australia's leading universities, as well as the State's higher education institutes, and of course primary and secondary school students, all of whom can readily and inexpensively visit the Museum using Sydney's radial transport networks. For school children especially, it is a time and cost effective trip to combine a visit to Ultimo with one or two of Sydney's CBD cultural attractions.

The notion that views to the Museum are necessary for visitors to Darling Harbour to find the Museum is quickly dispelled by the common sense realisation that if Darling Harbour is planning for an influx of an additional 10 – 14m visitors – many tourists, then signage and wayfinding will be in place as necessary guidance around and in and out of the precinct. The Museum is ideally situated at the intersection of the Goods Line and Light Rail as well as the Harris St bus routes.

3. A third argument put by proponents is that visitor numbers are down but in recent months this can no longer be argued. Numbers have been steadily climbing as a result of new exhibitions and refreshed public programs and, as the general upgrade of the Museum and its surrounds take effect. A major factor has been the improved access via the Goods Line. All these factors and strategies have improved the Museum's attractiveness after an unfortunate period of many, many months when the Museum was undergoing significant building work which reduced its appeal and amenity and restricted its exhibition program.
4. Proponents of the plan are apparently indifferent to the deleterious effect that this decision is having on the philanthropic potential of the Museum. I am well aware that several benefactors have changed their wills because of the lack of consultation and consideration of the many hundreds of individuals and organisations who have endowed the Museum over many decades. As a result of this dismissive approach, a significant number of hitherto promised bequests and donations are being redirected to interstate and national museums and galleries.

A museum's collection is only as strong and vigorous as its benefactors and supporters. Since 1984, the Powerhouse Museum has been the beneficiary of gifts of objects and sponsorships of object purchases with an estimated value totalling more than \$20 million. Over the same period, recurrent funds directed to collection acquisitions only totalled \$6 million. All museums and galleries are dependent on positive and mutually respectful relationships with donors and supporters. Benefactors need to believe in the purpose of a museum and have confidence in its trustees, leadership and curatorship.

There has to be trust in the Museum's capacity and commitment to carry out its custodial responsibilities. The Government's shock announcement has done great damage to those relationships – not only to the engagement of major donors but also to those many hundreds of individuals who generously give treasured possessions, trusting the Museum to look after their gifts on behalf of the people of New South Wales.

Announcing the sale and demolition of the Powerhouse Museum and, its removal at great expense and risk to a riverside site, less accessible to many of its audiences, has sent a message of disdain and ingratitude to the people who have built the Museum into one of the nation's leading museums – internationally renowned for the scope and quality of its collection.

5. Proponents of the move argue that this is about addressing cultural inequity – a way to put more government recurrent expenditure on culture into Western Sydney. However, this would be a short sighted strategy as it simply moves an amount of money to a different postcode. To relocate the Powerhouse Museum as an entity into a new location would be to simply ‘plonk’ the Museum onto the site – it will never be a museum that has grown out of and is reflective of and responsive to its historical and contemporary cultural context.

This approach does not build ‘a cultural beacon’ for the region which celebrates the cultural context that is distinctive to Parramatta and Western Sydney. This approach does not make the most of the region’s Indigenous heritage and contemporary culture; of the colonial heritage that was critical to the colony’s survival; of the rich tapestry of migration and settlement stories that distinguish this region of New South Wales; nor does it celebrate the contemporary character and liveliness that is Parramatta and Western Sydney. Nor does it make the most of the enormous potential Parramatta’s colonial and convict heritage in the Fleet St precinct offers if revitalised as a contemporary fusion of arts, culture and heritage.

Instead, it is a relocation of a venerable and groundbreaking Museum, its collections and its staff, out of the precinct and its central city location which has nurtured it for more than 120 years. This move will do little to build the cultural capacity of the region as it will come ready staffed – a lost opportunity to develop a museum, a cultural beacon, from foundations that are distinctive to Parramatta, with staff drawn from the region – a golden opportunity for development of skills and expertise employing and training locals who understand and are connected to Western Sydney.

In any case, the Powerhouse has been a Western Sydney cultural institution since the 1940s when it acquired a site in Castle Hill. Now the location of one of Australia’s first publicly accessible collection stores, it is about to open a new shared store in collaboration with the Australian Museum and Sydney Living Museums. As I understand there will be expanded public and education programs – so with this long planned shared service development, a significant amount of recurrent expenditure from 3 NSW cultural institutions will be focussed in Western Sydney.

6. Most puzzlingly, proponents for the holus bolus move argue against the internationally proven model of a major museum such as the Powerhouse, working in collaboration with a region and its communities to open a satellite, a branch or, if you prefer, a campus of the main central museum. The example of the Tate which has satellites at Liverpool, Margate, the Tate Modern in the former Bankside Powerhouse, St Ives; London’s Science Museum with its National Railway Museum in York, the National Media Museum in Bradford and the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester. The V&A is about to open a satellite in Dundee as part of a waterside renewal project and a branch at the former London Olympics site, as is the British Museum. Each is developing specific themes that come from the strengths of the institution’s collections and scholarship, and which serve to meet the needs of the communities they will be part of – their cultural, educational, tourism and social aspirations.

Somehow this model is seen to be inferior and some sort of insult to the people of Western Sydney. Yet for the reasons outlined above, the benefits that would flow from such a project, particularly with the acknowledged depth and scope of the Powerhouse Museum’s collection, would, from experiences elsewhere, pay dividends in so many ways without necessitating the huge and unforeseen expense of a Powerhouse Museum dislocation.

Such a project would not only allow the Powerhouse to continue to flourish in its rightful home, as one of NSW’s cultural triumvirate with the Australian Museum and the Art Gallery of New South Wales. It would also salvage and save the Powerhouse Museum’s hard won, worldwide brand earned over 30 years through its impact on the museum and tourist scene when it opened in 1988; reinforced with its innovative exhibitions especially during the Sydney 2000 Olympics; promoted overseas to several continents through its major touring exhibitions to Beijing (2008 Olympics), London, USA, South East Asia, Japan, Korea, Greece (2004 Olympics) as well as collaborative programs in Central Asia and collection loans to Musee Louvre, the V&A, The Metropolitan Museum of Art et al. For to move the Powerhouse Museum is to wipe out the Powerhouse Museum brand – its identity which is intrinsically linked to the Powerhouse building which has been so successfully renewed as a fit for purpose, 21<sup>st</sup> century museum.

Jennifer Sanders

I am willing to appear as a witness before the Inquiry.

#### Brief Resume:

Jennifer Sanders had a long and distinguished career at the Powerhouse Museum where she was Deputy Director, Collections, Content Development and Outreach from 2001 to February 2009. Appointed to the Powerhouse in 1978, Jennifer was a curator then senior curator, decorative arts and design for a decade. A key member of the team for the Powerhouse redevelopment, in 1988 Ms Sanders was appointed Assistant Director Collections responsible for the Museum's curatorial, registration, preservation and regional NSW outreach programs and, for several years, exhibitions, education, publications and library services as well. In 2001 Ms Sanders was given responsibility for the NSW Migration Heritage Centre and later also Sydney Observatory and the Powerhouse Discovery Centre. Ms Sanders regularly deputised for the Museum's Director.

Ms Sanders has an Honours degree in Anthropology from the University of Sydney. In 1981, she was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to study public access to museum collections in North America and Europe and in 1987 she attended the Museum Management Institute, Berkeley, USA. She has presented papers at Museums Australia and American Association of Museums conferences as well as presentations to local museums and historical societies.

From 1999 to 2008 Ms Sanders was a member of the National Cultural Heritage Committee and, in 2001 she was a member of the NSW Centenary of Federation Committee (archiving, cataloguing, and preservation of historical materials). From 2007 to 2012, she was a member of the External Advisory Panel, Design Research Institute, RMIT University, Melbourne and Chair, Design Archives Advisory Panel, RMIT University.

In 2011, Ms Sanders led the Heritage Interpretation and Exhibition Project to celebrate Sydney Hospital's 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. Ms Sanders has been engaged as a consultant for the restructure of the Australian National Maritime Museum (2012); completed a heritage significance assessment on Savernake Station and its Movable Heritage Collection for the Heritage Branch, NSW Dept of Environment (2009); a heritage consultancy for the Hills Shire Council on contemporary sculptural artworks (2012); and curated *Regeneration: contemporary quilt textiles* for Manly Art Gallery and Museum (2012). In 2003 Jennifer was awarded a Centenary of Federation Medal.