

**Submission
No 143**

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

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Costs and benefits of moving the Powerhouse Museum

Debbie Rudder, August 2016

Submission to Standing Committee 4 Museums and Galleries

Term of reference

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

Background

I worked as a curator at the Powerhouse Museum from 1991 to 2014. In that role I developed deep knowledge of the objects and subjects encompassed by its amazing collection and worked with talented colleagues across a range of disciplines to create exhibitions, programs and publications. I understand its workings and audiences, and I have a vision for how it could regain its status as a great museum. Practically all the people I have met over the past year (in both the west and east of the city and in other parts of Australia) have a very high regard for the Powerhouse and strongly oppose the proposed move.

Issues

- MAAS experts estimate the cost of moving to be much higher than the sale price.
- There would also be many indirect costs to the museum, its visitors and the city.
- Building a branch of MAAS at Parramatta would place it in direct competition with the nearby MAAS site at Castle Hill.
- The Powerhouse Museum needs new investment rather than a costly move.
- There are much better strategies for museum and gallery development in Western Sydney.

Recommendations

- Retain the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo and invest in new and improved galleries.
- Tap into Federal STEM funding for upgrading science and technology galleries.
- Build a new museum at Parramatta, perhaps a *Museum of NSW History*, and include a gallery capable of showing international history-themed exhibitions to draw audiences from across Sydney.
- Support the establishment of new hands-on science centres in eastern and western Sydney on the model of Wollongong's *Early Start Discovery Centre*.
- Consider building branches of other city museums and galleries in Western Sydney.

Direct costs

As revealed by an FOI request, MAAS experts have assessed the cost of the proposed move to be much greater than the realisable value of the site. This is not surprising given the size of the new building and the complexity of the task of moving objects and equipment.

Closing the Ultimo site would involve the expensive and time-consuming movement of the following large objects: 2 locomotives with tenders, 3 carriages, 4 large stationary engines, 1 turbo-generator, 2 boilers, the Botany pumping engine cylinder, railway destination board and signal box, Catalina, several smaller aeroplanes and engines, a tram, horse bus, cars, and the Saturn V rocket motor. The rocket motor would probably need to be returned to the US National Air and Space Museum at great cost. Moving each of these objects would involve a different set of challenges and risks.

In addition, many thousands of smaller objects would need to be moved, along with object files, archives, official files, workshop equipment, a substantial library, a photo library, IT and office equipment, and equipment for two large conservation laboratories, two theatres, a photography studio and teaching spaces. Much of the expensive infrastructure in the Powerhouse, some of it only a few years old and most in good condition, would be trashed and need to be replaced. In dollar costs, the move would be a very wasteful exercise for the NSW Government and its citizens.

Other costs

Reduced access for people from rural and regional NSW, who can easily reach the Powerhouse via Central Station and visit it along with other attractions.

Loss of public access to heritage buildings, and possible loss of those buildings.

Loss of the Ultimo Pedestrian Network's value as a tourism asset, as bland unit blocks rise up beside the Gehry building.

Loss of trade by local businesses established to service visitors.

Loss of valuable interaction with universities, TAFE, ABC and local innovative businesses.

Loss of volunteers, benefactors, sponsors and donors; although there would be opportunities for their replacement by a new cohort, that would cost a great deal of staff time and effort.

Loss of the potential to tap into new audiences visiting an expanded Darling Harbour precinct, including workers, conference delegates and tourists staying in new hotels.

Threat of competition between the transplanted museum and the Museums Discovery Centre, which is located a short distance away.

Diversion of staff from work that has long-term value to one-off activities such as planning, packing, unpacking and recording new object locations.

Cost of keeping a museum at Parramatta open at night, as promised to Parramatta Council.

Recommendations and strategies

Retain the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo and use some of the money saved (by not relocating it) to invest in making it great again.

The North Annex is underutilised; revive plans to install lifts and exhibition infrastructure there to provide much-needed new floor-space. Consider reviving plans to build on an adjacent unused space within the site (to the north of the Space gallery).

Establish new fully curated galleries for Design, Australian Innovation, Asian Art & Culture, Bioscience & Medicine, Music, Fashion and Making (from hand-craft to advanced manufacturing).

Based on curatorial research, revitalise the Steam, Transport, Physical Science and Information Technology exhibitions.

Audience research shows there is demand for more science and technology exhibitions and experiences at Ultimo. To help meet this demand, tap into Federal funding for public understanding of STEM subjects under the National Innovation & Science Agenda, and leverage that funding to obtain sponsorship from relevant businesses and industry groups.

Establish a program to create a new family-oriented exhibition each year in a dedicated gallery that has spaces for: interacting with museum objects, investigating, making, performing, listening to music and stories, and watching dance and drama. This would acknowledge the needs of the Powerhouse audience's major demographic segment (parents and children), build on the museum's own experience of approaches that work with that demographic, attract annual repeat visitation and build future audiences (when those children become parents). By retaining the layout while changing the theme and objects from year to year, changeover costs need not be high.

Based on the model of the *Early Start Discovery Space* established in partnership with the University of Wollongong, the State Government could facilitate the establishment of hands-on science centres by Sydney Children's Discovery Museum (which does not have a collection to maintain), at least one in the east (in conjunction with UNSW) and one in the west (in conjunction with UWS). Early Start was funded by a philanthropist and is sustained by membership and entry fees, and Federal STEM funding might be available. Involve the universities in visitor research aimed at continuously improving the experiences offered.

Build a new museum at Parramatta, after discussion with local people. As many have suggested, it would be a suitable place for a people-focused *Museum of NSW History*, as MAAS leadership has lost interest in social history and the Museum of Sydney focuses on the inner city. Ideally it would take a bold approach, encompassing the big themes of Australian history. It could start with pre-contact Indigenous history; include the rich colonial history of Parramatta; focus on the history of Western Sydney, including stories of people from its many migrant groups as well as its Indigenous people; and broaden out to the history of NSW, including such themes as people and land, the arts, science and technology, industry and innovation, domestic life, popular culture, civil society, and the evolving interaction of NSW with the world.

Acknowledging the historical and current status of Parramatta and the desire for a major museum or gallery there, the State government could make a major contribution to the capital cost from the money saved by not moving the Powerhouse. The Council could close its own heritage centre and use the savings to contribute to capital and recurrent costs. The local historical society could perhaps contribute objects and volunteers. Other objects could be loaned by MAAS and Sydney Living Museums, providing interesting opportunities for cross-promotion and joint programs.

The Parramatta museum could attract a wider audience, and fill a gap in Sydney's cultural offer, by including a gallery capable of showing excellent history-themed exhibitions sourced from interstate and overseas.

Consider funding the Art Gallery of NSW and MCA to establish branches in other parts of Western Sydney, and providing more spaces for community groups to display exhibitions.

Museums and galleries funding and advice

Debbie Rudder, August 2016

Submission to Standing Committee 4 Museums and Galleries

Terms of reference

- a) NSW government policy, funding and support for museums and galleries.
- f) Development and transparency of advice to the government on priorities for NSW museums and galleries.

Background

I worked as a curator at the Powerhouse Museum from 1991 to 2014. In that role I developed deep knowledge of the objects and subjects encompassed by its amazing collection and worked with talented colleagues across a range of disciplines to create exhibitions, programs and publications. I interviewed Australian inventors, innovators and object donors, acquired objects to judiciously extend the collection, and greatly improved the documentation, and hence the value, of many other objects.

Issues

- In recent years too many MAAS exhibitions have been devoted to popular culture and fashion, to the detriment of other parts of its very wide collection.
- The role of museums and galleries in the NSW tourism and education systems has been unrecognised, or recognised in ad hoc ways, for too long.
- The quality of advice from museum boards could be improved.
- The decision to move the Powerhouse was made in a vacuum, and reports related to it have not been made public.

Recommendations

- Organisations receiving funding should be required to adhere to basic principles of collection care and access.
- Government should actively recognise the role of museums in the State's tourism and education systems, and this should be reflected in museum funding.
- To make boards more effective, more museum and gallery professionals should be appointed, and board members should be given training.
- Reports into major proposals such as the relocation of the Powerhouse Museum should be compiled by senior staff, approved by their board, and made public.

a) NSW government policy, funding and support for museums and galleries. While government should not dictate content of exhibitions, it should tie continued funding of museums and galleries to adherence to basic principles including:

- employment of staff with appropriate knowledge and skills
- high standards of collection care, management and documentation
- a balanced approach, over time, to displaying diverse collections.

For instance, given the heavy imbalance in MAAS exhibitions in recent years in favour of fashion and popular culture at the expense of other parts of its collection, policy should require that this imbalance be redressed. It should further require that long-term galleries be regularly refreshed by changing the selection of objects on display and by exploring new themes, and it should provide funds specifically for this continual refreshment.

The fact that museums and galleries are highly significant to both tourism and education should be reflected in government funding and support. Museums and galleries should be represented on high-level planning forums for tourism and education as well as for culture and heritage.

f) Development and transparency of advice to the government on priorities for NSW museums and galleries. Museum boards have a range of roles, so it is appropriate that they bring together people with a range of skills, backgrounds and spheres of influence. However, greater representation on museum boards by experienced museum professionals would help them develop more realistic advice. Specific training for members of arts boards, as is offered in the UK, would also help to raise the standard of advice.

As for transparency of advice, it should of course be required that board members avoid conflicts of interest and step aside in situations where such conflict exists. They should not promote the interests of associates, for example by suggesting they be employed by the museum or gallery as consultants.

Ministers should demonstrate confidence in the boards and senior staff they appoint to museums and galleries by discussing proposals (such as relocating the Powerhouse) with them before making public announcements, and by asking them to report on the proposals rather than commissioning reports from outside organisations at huge public expense.

The default policy for reports such as those into the relocation of the Powerhouse should be full public disclosure, with strong reasons needed to keep any part of a report secret. 'Cabinet-in-confidence' is a fiction in this context, as such reports are commissioned from outside experts, they do not relate to significant security issues or strategic budgetary decisions, and their publication would not reveal details of cabinet deliberations.

MAAS: collection access and impact of efficiency dividend

Debbie Rudder, August 2016

Submission to Standing Committee 4 Museums and Galleries

Terms of reference

d) Access to MAAS collections.

g) Impact of the efficiency dividend on the budgets of museums and galleries over the last 10 years.

Background

I worked as a curator at the Powerhouse Museum from 1991 to 2014. In that role I developed deep knowledge of the objects and subjects encompassed by its amazing collection and worked with talented colleagues across a range of disciplines to create exhibitions, programs and publications. Given this specific knowledge, I have addressed my comments on the impact of the efficiency dividend to the situation at MAAS.

Issues

- When it reopens, the MAAS site at Castle Hill (now shared with the Australian Museum and Sydney Living Museums) will provide excellent collection access in Western Sydney.
- MAAS has one of the world's best museum websites, which provides in-depth virtual access to much of its collection.
- For MAAS, the efficiency dividend has led to substantial loss of expertise, creativity and commitment via several rounds of staff redundancy, and remaining staff are thinly spread.

Recommendations

- Members of the Standing Committee should visit the Museums Discovery Centre to experience the MAAS collection and decide for themselves whether it is wise to build a competing MAAS branch at Parramatta.
- The government should commit to continued funding to maintain and improve virtual access to the MAAS collection and support the very valuable database that sustains it.
- MAAS should be funded to increase its curatorial strength, particularly in science and technology, and change its exhibition policy to provide intellectual access as well as visual access to its collection.

d) Access to MAAS collections. It is strongly suggested that members of the Standing Committee visit the stores site at Castle Hill to see: the older stores, which hold cars, furniture, musical instruments, engines, machines, models and much more; the new store, which is shared with the Australian Museum and Sydney Living Museums; and the recently enlarged and upgraded display store, which showcases about objects from those two museums alongside about 5000 MAAS objects, the same number displayed at Ultimo.

When this store opens in September, it will provide a great museum experience for the people of Western Sydney, as well as being particularly accessible to residents of the northern suburbs, Central Coast and Hunter. Public transport access could be improved.

Volunteers will be on hand whenever the display store is open, to interact with visitors and to take groups to the other stores. Staff, volunteers and local businesses will provide extra activities for families and schools. The only aspect of a modern museum missing from the site will be a large gallery to display temporary exhibitions, although small regional touring exhibitions generated in-house or by other museums and galleries could be accommodated.

MAAS has one of the world's best collection websites. It makes available in-depth information about thousands of objects, for the benefit of all NSW students as well as for everyone interested in science, technology, design or history. It gives the museum high status within the international museum community and attracts cultural tourists to its sites (Powerhouse Museum, Sydney Observatory and Castle Hill Discovery Centre).

A commitment is needed from Government to continue providing funds to maintain and update the website and the extremely valuable collection database that sustains it. This is essential to provide access to information not just about newly acquired objects, but also about the many sparsely documented older objects that will be researched and fully documented in the future by staff and volunteers with the assistance of virtual visitors, who can contribute online.

g) Impact of the efficiency dividend on the budgets of museums and galleries over the last ten years.

For MAAS, the efficiency dividend has led to substantial loss of expertise, creativity and commitment via several rounds of staff redundancy. It has also had a negative impact on the morale of remaining staff.

The following significant areas of the collection currently have no curator dedicated to their research, development, documentation and display: musical instruments, furniture, coins and medals, printing and printed material, measurement, physical sciences and scientific instruments, mining and materials, surveying, architecture and building, engineering, industrial machinery and processes, energy technologies, and space exploration.

Remaining staff are spread very thinly. For example, one curator of transport remains from a team of five that had responsibility for a very large, diverse and important collection. She is also the museum's expert on agricultural machinery and toys. She answers enquiries about all these collections as well as (since the last round of redundancies) about stationary engines and engineering.

MAAS has moved away from serious, research-based exhibition development to 'quick and easy' mass displays, ticking the *visual access* box but not giving visitors *intellectual access* to the objects displayed. This approach is fine for experts who can identify and understand the objects, but it is neither useful nor educational for the general public, and it is well below world's best practice. It disrespects the audience, and many complaints have been received from visitors. A case in point is the display in the current 'Medical Recollect' of a set of glass eyes with different colouring. Most visitors will interpret this object as exemplifying the art of creating prosthetic eyes. In fact such sets were designed for anthropological (rather than medical) use and were appropriated by the Nazis to separate people on the basis of race and condemn many to torture and death. Much is lost by failing to present such information to visitors.