

**Submission
No 149**

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

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Legislative Council Inquiry into Museums and Galleries NSW

This submission by Kylie Winkworth addresses reference 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.*

Summary

This submission supports the development of a new museum in Parramatta, based on community engagement, cultural planning and a careful examination of all the museum options and potential sites in Parramatta and Western Sydney. These options, some outlined in 11 below, must be must be openly canvassed in a transparent process that involves communities, arts and cultural groups in Parramatta and Western Sydney.

A new museum in Parramatta **must not** and need not be built from the rubble of the Powerhouse Museum (PHM) at Ultimo. The museum has the collections to fill five great museums, including a unique and distinctive museum at Parramatta. The proposed sale of the Powerhouse Museum and its 'relocation' to Parramatta is a wasteful, costly, unnecessary and reckless idea. No government in the civilised world has ever demolished a major state museum less than 30 years after it opened in an award winning, fit for purpose, landmark building. And no government has ever moved a major state museum out of the city to a less accessible location in a smaller building. That is why seven former directors emeritus of state and national museums signed the open letter to save the Powerhouse Museum. This proposal is shrinking Sydney's cultural facilities, not expanding opportunities to reach more audiences, and share collections and important stories.

In planning the Parramatta museum in secret and without consultation, the government has broken all the long established conventions of museum planning: consultation comes first, communities are involved in deciding what the museum will be about, communities have input into the museum's facilities and location, a feasibility study pulls this information together, along with a budget, this goes on exhibition for comment, then a decision is made on the preferred option and next steps and design work can begin. None of these steps have been followed in the well-established orderly sequence of museum planning 101. The Premier announced the Powerhouse Museum would move to Parramatta without a feasibility study and with no policy or plan. Even the vision document for the new museum has been withheld as cabinet in confidence. This secrecy, lack of transparency and poor museum planning puts hundreds of millions of dollars of taxpayers' funds at risk. Poor planning and lack of consultation may well jeopardise the success of the Parramatta museum, its viability and functionality, and the degree to which the new museum will be 'owned' by the communities it must engage and represent.

A museum is a permanent institution in the service of society. It is not a property play or a political tool. A museum is an endowment, not just for this generation and the next, but in perpetuity. The NSW community makes that endowment through our taxes and generosity as donors to the collection and the foundation (myself included). The Powerhouse Museum's buildings and collections are held in trust for the people of NSW. They are not the assets and political pawns of government. Museums are built on foundations of public trust and that is what is at risk with the government's reckless proposal to sell off the Powerhouse Museum.

The arguments advanced to explain the 'relocation' of the museum are not substantiated by the evidence. Since the 'relocation' of the PHM was mooted in 2014 the reasons justifying the museum's move have shifted. As the following submission details, none of the arguments hold water or can justify the attempt to sell off and demolish a major state museum and an important part of Sydney's cultural infrastructure.

1 It's a choice between a museum at Ultimo or Parramatta. Why?

The Powerhouse Museum does not have to be sold to build a new museum in Parramatta. The government could build a new museum in Parramatta using its \$600m cultural infrastructure fund. The NSW budget is in surplus. There was an \$860m stamp duty windfall in 2015. The PHM has the collections to fill at least five great museums. Governments make policy choices and set priorities. The NSW Government found another billion dollars to add to its stadium development fund, up from \$600m to \$1.6b. This follows the massive investment in sporting facilities in the lead up to the Sydney Olympics. In the same period planning and funding for Sydney's cultural facilities not just stagnated but went backwards.¹ Other states such as Victoria and Queensland have enjoyed a cultural and tourism renaissance powered by investment in new museums. Sydney and NSW need more great museums, not museum demolition.

2 The government says this is a museum relocation plan. No this is a world first museum demolition plan.

First and foremost the government's proposal is a museum demolition plan. Whatever happens in Parramatta, the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo will be demolished, along with its international reputation built over 30 years of innovative exhibitions and museology. Also written off will be 30 years of investment in brand identity, marketing, tourism promotion and community awareness. This is a brand that is recognised around the world. MAAS has now admitted the Powerhouse Museum and its brand will be gone from Sydney with the sale of the Ultimo site. The government's museum demolition plan is unprecedented. No government in the civilised world has ever demolished a major state museum less than 30 years after it opened in an award winning, fit for purpose, landmark building, with facilities that are in good condition and high quality storage for 240,000 objects.

3 The Powerhouse Museum can be relocated to Parramatta. It can't.

A museum is not a caravan that can be towed to a site of greater political opportunity. All museums grow out of a sense of place and connection to their community, neighbourhood and context. They are rooted in place, and over time their stories are intertwined. They cannot be transplanted, any more than the 150 year old Anzac figs at Randwick can be transplanted.² The PHM's exhibits, stories, audiences and community connections are indivisible from the Ultimo Power Station building, its grand soaring spaces which are so appropriate for the power and transport collections, its supporters, volunteers and benefactors, and not least the vital neighbourhood connections, developed over 120 years. These include the museum's education partners, its links with the design industries, tourism businesses in Darling Harbour, thriving galleries in Chippendale, and innovation start-up companies in Ultimo. The PHM is an integral part of the culture, history, economy, and community life of Ultimo, Darling Harbour and Sydney. It exhibits – in the building, as a museum and in its collections - the interwoven history of power generation, transport, urbanisation, design

and the growth of Sydney as a modern city. The Powerhouse and the Tram Depot are some of the last great standing relics of Darling Harbour's industrial history. The storylines from this site extend across time and across Sydney and NSW. They still have meaning and resonance for Sydney today, as it builds a new tram network, and as Ultimo changes shape as an education, design and innovation hub.

4 The PHM has to be relocated to be renewed; it's old; it needs rethinking

This is one of the silliest reasons advanced by proponents of the 'move'. It's akin to selling the house and moving to another suburb because after thirty years the sofa needs recovering and the house needs decorating. Of course museum exhibits and programs need replacement, renewal and rethinking. The Powerhouse has recently had a \$25m refurbishment. The government's own report says the museum's infrastructure is in good condition.³ But it is a reckless waste to sell off costly, high quality museum infrastructure which is in good condition, fit for purpose, and which was built for an asset life of 100+ years, particularly when the mooted sale price of the land (\$150-250m) may be just 20% of the museum's true replacement value. Perhaps no other public museum in the world has such grand and appropriate spaces for the internationally significant power and transport collections. The impressive spaces of the turbine and boiler halls give the power and transport collections the space they need, with room for suspended planes and working steam engines powered by live steam, while the elegant modern barrel vault houses locomotive no 1, the foundation object for public transport in NSW. Then there's the magic of seeing the workings of the priceless 1785 Boulton and Watt beam engine. This internationally significant icon of the industrial revolution was acquired by the museum in 1887 and has been in Ultimo for more than half its life. It belongs in the Powerhouse Museum which is a secular cathedral of power and industrialisation.

5 The PHM is isolated and not in a cultural precinct

Successive reports by Infrastructure NSW mysteriously move the PHM from being an integral part of Sydney's cultural ribbon to a museum that is remote, isolated and which *occupies a constrained (but very valuable) site adjacent to Darling Harbour*.⁴ The comments don't recognise the Australian National Maritime Museum and Darling Harbour as a cultural precinct, along with a popular mix of commercial cultural attractions. The PHM is an integral part of the thriving cultural attractions in Darling Harbour and Ultimo. On visitor numbers alone this area is Sydney's major tourism precinct, attracting 26m visitors a year. These visitor numbers are set to rise to 40m a year. Darling Harbour will soon host Australia's largest convention and exhibition facilities, along with the largest 'red carpet' entertainment facility. The PHM has never been more accessible now the popular Goods Line walkway brings visitors from Central, and this will connect with Darling Harbour. However, at the urging of Infrastructure NSW, the PHM is set to be evicted from its allegedly constrained eight hectare site in Ultimo, to move to a small very constrained and less accessible flood prone riverbank site in Parramatta which it does not own.

6 The PHM has to be sold because it's underperforming

The government has said the museum should 'move' because of falling visitor numbers, declining school visits, and a collapse in donations and sponsorship. The last annual report and recent figures suggest these trends may be reversing, particularly with the introduction of free admission for children in school holidays. But the reasons for the museum's underperformance have nothing to do

with the museum's building or location, and won't be fixed by moving. There are grounds for concern about the museum's performance, but root causes go back to government budget cuts and the absence of a museum policy and plan for NSW, among other issues. Three directors in four years is not a good sign. In a highly unusual move the president of the trust recently resigned in mid-year. And the museum has no collection or museum expertise on the trust.⁵ If MAAS was a public company the share price would be in trouble. There are issues of leadership, governance, and exhibition renewal in MAAS. A savage redundancy program has hollowed out the skills and expertise on staff, with the loss hundreds of experienced staff, and the impact of the compounding efficiency dividend. PHM staff numbers have nearly halved in ten years. Education positions have gone from 27 ten years ago to just three in 2015, so of course school visits have fallen. None of these issues will be fixed by moving the museum. Indeed the last thing a struggling museum needs is a controversial demolition plan, further eroding community trust and support.

7 The selfish eastern suburbs elites are denying the cultural needs of the west

This is wrong. All opponents of the sale and demolition of the Powerhouse Museum support the idea of a great new museum in Parramatta, and sharing the state's collections. What isn't supported is the reckless demolition of a major public museum. Museums, galleries and theatres are located in city centres because that's where they're most accessible. Many of the 11,000 people who signed the petition are from regional NSW. Nearly 40% of the PHM's visitors come from regional NSW, interstate and overseas. The PHM at Ultimo is readily accessible for regional and interstate visitors, and overseas tourists. With a wealth of cultural offerings in the city it is doubtful that many of these visitors will travel to Parramatta.

8 The move is about cultural equity for Western Sydney

This is not supported by the evidence. NSW has a serious problem with cultural equity and how and where cultural funds are invested, not just in Western Sydney but most particularly in regional NSW. However the evidence suggests the museum move is more about developers getting the prized Powerhouse Museum land, than it is about cultural equity.

The idea to move the Powerhouse first appeared in a 2014 report by Infrastructure NSW.⁶ It is highly unusual for such a radical initiative to be proposed in an infrastructure report more concerned with transport projects. The report does flag co-investment in cultural facilities with local government. But since then, the Arts Minister has suggested that cultural infrastructure is primarily the responsibility of local government.⁷

It's telling that so far the government's cultural infrastructure fund has only been allocated to city facilities; \$139m for Walsh Bay; \$202m for the Sydney Opera House. So far no new money has been allocated for Western Sydney cultural infrastructure. If the government was serious about cultural equity it would be spending a good proportion of the \$600m cultural infrastructure fund in Western Sydney and regional NSW, cultural institutions would be required to reach a state wide audience, and it would be partnering with federal and local governments to fund cultural infrastructure in Western Sydney and regional NSW. The 2016 capital works grants for regional NSW allocated just **\$385,000** for cultural infrastructure across communities that represent 30% of the population of NSW.⁸ Meanwhile the government has spent \$15m on planning for Sydney Modern which will

further concentrate all the public art galleries and funding in the city, while Parramatta will have no art gallery.

Cultural inequality is a serious issue for NSW, but spending close to \$1billion dollars to move a huge museum and collection just 27ks to the west will do nothing to address cultural equity for the greater west. The flood prone riverbank site mysteriously selected for the new museum is in fact less accessible for families from the south west growth corridor. They will get no benefit from the Parramatta museum. And on current plans the museum will do nothing to employ western Sydney curators, designers and artists, or tell the stories of Parramatta and Western Sydney.

9 The 'relocation' of the PHM will increase access to the collections

The FOI papers about the sale of the PHM and the Parramatta museum reveal that the new museum in Parramatta will be smaller. Nevertheless the government says the new museum in Parramatta will have 40% more objects on display than the Ultimo museum.⁹ It is not clear what the basis for this assertion is, given there is only a sketch design for the museum. They might be mainly small objects, not the large transport and power collections that need space to be appreciated.

MAAS records that the PHM had 8,000 objects on display in 2015. If this is increased by 40% this will be 11,200 objects on display in the new museum at Parramatta. There are 500,000 objects in the MAAS collections so the new Parramatta museum will still only display **2.24%** of the collection, leaving more than **97.6%** of the collection in storage. That is a negligible increase in collections on display for the expenditure of what may be close to \$1b. If the government was serious about access to the museum's collections it would be adopting the Smithsonian model of distinctive themes museums under the MAAS umbrella, it would have a plan to share significant state collections locked up in storage, and it would be investing in digital access to the state's collections.

10 A MAAS branch in Parramatta will be second best

Museum experts advise the government that they should develop a distinctive MAAS branch in Parramatta. This has been dismissed by some as somehow a second rate option. But there is plenty of evidence that well planned branch museums, or a MAAS campus in Parramatta, or a Smithsonian style theme museum, can be bigger and at least if not more successful than the parent. Tate Modern is bigger and more popular than Tate Britain. The WA Maritime Museum at Fremantle is bigger and more popular than its parent the WA Museum in Perth. MAAS has the collections to fill four or five great museums.

Others have suggested the government needs to move the PHM so that its budget is badged to Parramatta so the cultural funding for Western Sydney looks more equitable. This is just an accounting trick and has nothing to do with cultural equity or outcomes for the communities of Western Sydney. Historical museums with complex collections have a large part of their budget tied to back of house collection management, conservation and other costs that are not related to location. MAAS has a huge collection repository at Castle Hill, but this part of its budget is not broken down and badged as a cultural equity measure for Castle Hill. The measures of what makes a great museum have nothing to do with its back of house budget, but concern how the museum engages and benefits its community. These performance measures of museum success include education, visitors, innovation, donations and engagement. In planning the Parramatta museum in

secret and without consultation the government is jeopardising the success of the Parramatta museum and the degree to which the new museum will be 'owned' by the communities it must represent.

11 Museum Options for Parramatta and Western Sydney

Building a new museum is an exercise in community engagement. Storytelling is at the centre of how museums inspire audiences, donors, supporters, volunteers and sponsors. Parramatta and Western Sydney have compelling stories to tell that should inspire a new community of museum audiences. However that depends on developing and communicating a museum vision that is unique to the history, geography, cultures and people of Western Sydney.

To create a great museum in Parramatta, the government needs to start with cultural planning and consultations with the people of Western Sydney and Parramatta, looking at where the gaps and opportunities are in Sydney's museum profile. The people of Western Sydney should be driving the museum's concept, planning and content through an open process of dialogue and real choices about the form and themes of the new museum. There are a number of options for a new state museum in Parramatta which would arguably have a greater cultural and educational impact, and be more aligned with Western Sydney's cultures and audiences than the current museum relocation plan.

Principles or key considerations:

- The themes, content and facilities of the new museum must be developed through consultation with Western Sydney communities
- In developing museum options for Western Sydney, consideration should be given to addressing glaring omissions in the scope of the state government's museums, most notably the absence of NSW history, migration heritage and Aboriginal contact history
- With so many state owned collections in storage, a new museum must expand access to collections, both physical and virtual, rather just relocating collections from Ultimo to Parramatta
- Any new museum for Parramatta needs to recognise the cultural diversity of the city, with nearly half its residents born overseas
- The conceptual and operational model for a new museum in Parramatta should be designed to benefit all the communities of Western Sydney
- The new museum must engage curators, designers and artists from Western Sydney, adding to the skills mix and creative industries in Western Sydney
- The new museum site in Parramatta should have a mix of arts, community and museum facilities and the potential to develop as a cultural, tourism and education precinct

Some options for a new museum in Parramatta

Each of these options would be cheaper than moving the PHM and all its 240,000 objects held at Ultimo. But most importantly these options would be more resonant for the communities, cultures and distinctive stories in Parramatta and Western Sydney – proving they are consulted!

1 A new museum of Creativity, Science and Art developed in partnership with museums and galleries in Western Sydney and the university and Western Sydney to engage kids in the science of creativity and promote STEM subjects and a culture of innovation.

2 A multipurpose museum and exhibition spaces for use by all the cultural institutions with opportunities for curators and arts workers across western Sydney to work in NSW cultural institutions to develop exhibitions and projects for Western Sydney audiences, not just in Parramatta but for museums and galleries at Liverpool, Bankstown, Fairfield, Blacktown, Penrith and Campbelltown. This would create locally distinctive exhibitions for local audiences and generate a higher level of community cultural engagement across Western Sydney, not just the Parramatta edge.

3 A Museum of NSW and Migration History on the Female Factory/ Fleet Street Heritage precinct at Parramatta; presenting exhibitions and programs exploring the cultural diversity of Sydney since 1788 and Aboriginal contact history. This is an obvious opportunity given that nearly half the population of Parramatta was born overseas and it would create a new museum for NSW history. Remarkably NSW is the only state in Australia that does not have a museum devoted to its history or any current programs exploring its migration heritage since the PHM abolished the award winning Migration Heritage Centre. The Female Factory is across the river from the World Heritage listed Parramatta Park, and is Australia's most significant women's history site with the core of an 1818 Greenway building in an intact cultural landscape. This site has the potential to be arts and heritage, cultural precinct with mixed commercial uses. It could be Parramatta's Carriageworks.

4 A NSW Heritage Centre at Parramatta; based in the Fleet Street Heritage Precinct or the Female Factory, with a mission to conserve and interpret Western Sydney's heritage landscapes, museums, collections and sites. The Female Factory is part of the most significant, extensive and intact cultural landscape in Australia. Parramatta and Western Sydney have many small heritage sites, houses and museums which individually lack the funds and critical mass to do justice to their important stories of first contact, colonisation, migration and settlement. A new cultural institution with education, marketing and interpretation skills could support and partner with the distributed heritage sites across Western and south Western Sydney, and support their work with interpretation, education, research, marketing and public programs, in a larger version of what Sydney Living Museums does for its small portfolio.

5 Sydney Modern in Parramatta; the AGNSW has ambitious plans for a massive extension into the Domain. It would be more equitable to build the gallery extension in Parramatta, and it could be done without the dead cost of moving all the PHM collections. Sydney already has two public art galleries in the city with the AGNSW and the Museum of Contemporary Art. It has only one science and applied arts museum. There is no compelling case to double the size of the gallery on its present site when it would be more equitable, cheaper, less complicated, and accessible to build the gallery extension in Parramatta.

¹ See *Recreation and Arts Baseline Report*, prepared by Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC) for Infrastructure NSW June 2012, p57

² Museums are rarely moved. And when they are it is for well understood reasons, based on careful study and consultation. These reasons may include moving to a more central location. For more on moving museums see

Jennifer Sanders, Moving Museums and Galleries a Brief Survey

<https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/what-the-experts-say/moving-museums/>

³ *Recreation and Arts Baseline Report*, prepared by Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC) for Infrastructure NSW, p.35

⁴ http://www.infrastructure.nsw.gov.au/media/42966/inf_j14_871_sis_report_ch09_web_new.pdf, 122-3

See also Kylie Winkworth Infrastructure NSW Stitching up the case to Sell the PHM,

<https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/what-the-experts-say/infrastructure-nsw-stitching-up-the-case-to-sell-the-phm/>

⁵ If MAAS was a bank in the midst of a major transformation and relocation would its board have no one with banking expertise? Do mining companies have boards without skills in mining or geology? Yet the NSW Government allows its museums with billions of dollars of collection assets to be governed by boards without any skills in collections or museum planning.

⁶ <http://www.nsw.gov.au/initiative/state-infrastructure-strategy>

⁷ <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/arts-minister-on-collision-course-with-western-sydney-and-regional-nsw-over-funding-20160121-gmau9r.html>

⁸ <http://www.arts.nsw.gov.au/index.php/news-and-publications/news/nsw-government-builds-up-regional-art>

⁹ <https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases-premier/new-home-chosen-powerhouse-museum>