

**Submission
No 162**

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

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Date received: 18 August 2016

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The Hon Robert Borsak MLC
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General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4
Legislative Council
Parliament House
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Submission to the Upper House Inquiry into Museums & Galleries, with specific reference to paragraph 1 (e) of the terms of reference

Introduction

The author of the submission was a trustee of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences from 1998 to 2002 and President from 1999 to 2002. The author was also director of the National Portrait Gallery board from 1998-2001 and is currently Chairman of the Australian Haydn Ensemble.

Relevantly, in relation to his submission (referred to below) regarding construction risks, the author was also Managing Director of Transfield Holdings, a then major construction, defence and infrastructure group responsible for the design and construction of projects such as the Sydney Harbour Tunnel, the \$5 billion Anzac Frigate project, power stations, major hospitals, office & residential building projects.

International Experience

Worldwide there is no successful example that parallels the NSW Government's decision to relocate a major cultural institution such as the Powerhouse *in toto* away from the city centre to an area at least one hour by car under usual (and worsening) Sydney traffic conditions.

On the other hand there are a number of successful examples of creating satellite cultural sites in areas away from the city centre. Often these satellites focus on

particular aspects of the institution with a focus on temporary exhibitions instead of permanent collection exhibitions.

Inconsistency in relation to other NSW cultural institutions

The decision to relocate the Powerhouse stands in marked contrast to its position in relation to all other Sydney city-based cultural institutions. If it is such a worthy concept to relocate the Powerhouse to Parramatta, why then not relocate the Art Gallery of NSW, The Australian Museum, The NSW Library, The Museum of Contemporary Art, etc. there as well? Is it simply because its visitation numbers are in decline?

Poor direction & governance

The indisputable fact is that in recent times the Powerhouse has been poorly managed and has not been well supported by the Government. The solution is not relocation, but better direction and governance coupled with a Government prepared to invest sensibly on the current site to address access & visitation issues (see below).

Access & Visitation

It is important to understand the context in which the Powerhouse was originally sited. At the time of its construction the Museum had to its northeast the Darling Harbour rail sidings. It was only natural that the 'front door' or entry of the Museum would face Harris St, a street frontage that would become increasingly heavily trafficked with very limited parking options.

In subsequent years the rail yard gave way to the Darling Harbour entertainment precinct. The Powerhouse remained on island, so to speak, unable to provide easy access these potential new visitors and with an inhospitable entry. It was clear that the Powerhouse now had its back to an important new visitation group. The fact that the Light Rail passes right next to the Powerhouse with no station only reinforces the poor planning in which the Museum finds itself.

As President I oversaw a concept design to flip the Powerhouse's 'front door' over to Darling Harbour side via an easy link to Haymarket (just south of Darling Harbour) & direct access to the Light Rail.

Unfortunately, this viable solution was not seriously considered by the then Government. Instead, some years later it was decided, in my view unwisely, to reinforce the Harris St entry by building the ill-considered cafe.

The Government would be wise to reconsider the Darling Harbour entry design concept as the construction costs would be undoubtedly be far lower than those

associated with the relocation to Parramatta and would assist in reinforcing visitation numbers.

Curatorial Skills

The Powerhouse currently has an outstanding record in curatorial excellence. These skills have been developed over many, many years and it is very difficult to envisage how they will be replicated at Parramatta. It is uncertain how many of the existing curatorial staff will re-locate and the quality and experience of any new recruits are likely to be of major concern.

Construction costs and schedule

Estimates associated with the relocation have to date been extremely vague. No proper design brief has been developed. The requirements of the Powerhouse are very specific and do not fall into the usual characteristics associated with commercial developments. Moreover, there are a number of extremely fragile items in the collection that will, of themselves, involve considerable sums to move, e.g. the Boulton & Watt steam engine, just to name one.

Consequently there is the real possibility that the final costings will be considerably higher than currently mooted.

In addition, whatever cost estimates are finally arrived at, it is all too common that the final costs and timing will significantly exceed the original estimates. There are countless examples of this. These risks need to be accounted for in the costing to relocate the Museum to Parramatta.

Discovery Centre

The Museum has invested significant funds in the construction of a limited publicly accessible storage facility at Castle Hill. A good case can be made to invest relatively limited additional funds to increase the public access and extend its presence into becoming a true satellite of the Museum in North-Western Sydney.

Historical Significance

That part of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences currently located at the Harris Street site (commonly known as the Powerhouse Museum), has for over 120 years resided in that area of Ultimo. It represents an important historical link to Australia's technological and scientific past and the mooted relocation will erase from Sydney's memory these important roots.

Political Motivation

It is hard not to view this decision as nothing other than an attempt by the NSW Government to curry favour with the western Sydney electorate. In pursuing this strategy the Government is merely taking a short-term view that may be in its own interests and not those of the people of NSW.

Yours sincerely

Marco Belgiorno-Zegna AM

17 August 2016