

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

Name: Proforma B – A new museum in Parramatta should not be predicated on the closure of the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo

Number received: 411



12 August 2016

Chair
Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee no. 4
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Chair,

I welcome this opportunity to make this submission to the Standing Committee on Museums and Galleries.

Further to section 1 e. of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, my comments are in relation to the sale and relocation of the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo.

I support the government's plans to develop a new museum in Parramatta. But the location, form, facilities and content of the new museum must be based on deep consultation with communities in Parramatta and western Sydney. The new museum should not be predicated on the closure and sale of the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo.

Parramatta deserves, and has been asking for, cultural institutions reflecting its own past and present cultural significance and activity, and has expressed concern for the continuing integrity of its heritage sites. The government has the funds in its \$600m cultural infrastructure fund to build a new museum in Parramatta. It also had an \$860m stamp duty windfall last year.

If the government was serious about cultural equity between central and Western Sydney, it would be spending a good proportion of this fund in Western Sydney and regional NSW. It would be sharing significant state collections locked up in storage, it would already have a plan for digital access to the state's collections, it would be requiring cultural institutions to reach a statewide audience, and it would be partnering with federal and local governments to fund cultural infrastructure in Western Sydney and regional NSW.

So far no new money has been allocated for Western Sydney cultural infrastructure beyond the sale proceeds from the Powerhouse Museum. The recent capital works grants for regional NSW allocated just \$385,000 for cultural infrastructure across communities that represent 30% of the population of NSW.

The Powerhouse Museum has a 135-year connection with the CBD as the second-oldest state museum. As the only museum of its kind in Australia – with a world class collection valued at \$400m and held in trust for the people of NSW - it is therefore of state, national and international interest to have it easily accessible in the centre of a significant capital city.

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, and the thriving innovation culture and start-up companies in Ultimo.

Relocating the museum to Parramatta will reduce access for visitors from regional NSW and other parts of Sydney as well as for international visitors.

The Powerhouse building is listed both on the National Trust's register and as a local heritage item in the City of Sydney. It is too significant to destroy. 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. It is a reckless waste to sell off costly museum infrastructure which is in good condition, and which was built for an asset life of 100 years.

I share the concerns of many regarding the recent underperformance of the Powerhouse. But this has more to do with the issues of leadership, governance, exhibition renewal, and a savage redundancy program causing the loss hundreds of experienced staff, and the impact of the compounding efficiency dividend. PHM staff numbers have more than halved in fifteen years. Education positions have gone from 27 ten years ago to just three in 2015, which is the reason why school visits have fallen. None of these issues will be fixed by moving the museum.

A more rational and visionary solution would be to build a new museum in Parramatta as a creative partner to the Powerhouse in Ultimo.

Selling the Powerhouse at Ultimo will not generate enough money to replicate the size and facilities at this site elsewhere. It's estimated the sale of the Ultimo site may realise somewhere between \$150-200m. The cost of replicating the existing museum facilities in Parramatta will be upwards of \$600m, not including the cost of moving the collections and building new storage. So at best the government is pledging only 1/3 of the replacement cost of the PHM.

As a result, the taxpayer will be the loser in the demolition and destruction of valuable cultural assets at Ultimo, while paying for a smaller new museum in Parramatta.

Thank you for considering my submission.

Yours sincerely,