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Powerhouse inquiry told regional NSW 'a cultural ghetto of poverty'

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The Art Gallery of NSW wants \$450 million to build its Sydney Modern extension. The cost of moving the Powerhouse Museum less than 20 kilometres from Ultimo to Parramatta could top \$1 billion.

The NSW government has already promised \$202 million to renovate the Sydney Opera House and \$139 million for its Walsh Bay Arts Precinct.



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Ms Debbie Sommers

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Debbie Sommers (right) and Judith Hansen from the Port Macquarie Historical Society. Sommers believes regional NSW misses out on funding for cultural facilities compared to Sydney city. Photo: Lindsay Moller

Debbie Sommers, in contrast, would be happy with \$25,000. That would fund a conservation plan for the historic building that houses the Port Macquarie Museum.

"We can't make any major improvements to our site until this is done," said Sommers, the museum's volunteer curator. "We would also like \$100,000 per year to fund a collections

Ideally, Sommers would like several million dollars to pay for exhibition spaces, an elevator and a collections officer to manage the museum's artefacts, which include convict relics, Aboriginal artefacts and colonial-era journals, photographs and artwork.

"Our museum receives no operational funding from any level of government," she said. Sommer's submission to a NSW parliamentary inquiry highlights the disparity between the tens of millions of dollars lavished on major institutions and the scant resources of galleries and museums outside of Sydney.

"I think regional NSW does miss out on funding for cultural facilities in comparison to the money spent in Sydney city," she said.

A spokeswoman for Arts Minister Troy Grant said the NSW government had increased funding for regional museums and galleries by \$600,000 to \$1.8 million, as well as spending \$9.3 million in arts and cultural activities in regional NSW in 2015-16.

Kylie Winkworth, a museum and heritage consultant and former Powerhouse Museum trustee, said the funding of museums in NSW is based on trickle-down economics.

More than 300 community museums managed by volunteers make do with funding from Museums and Galleries NSW that in 2014-15 totalled \$85,000, according to Winkworth.

"The result is [a] cultural ghetto of poverty and entrenched disadvantage," she said. "Community museums have a difficult pathway to secure adequate funding for their buildings, exhibitions and to care for their collections. Their volunteers do an amazing job working in sometimes decrepit buildings."

Winkworth said NSW had the most city-centric and inequitable funding structure for museums in Australia: "Unlike Queensland, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory, all the NSW government museums are in the city, and there are no regional branches to share collections and anchor important regional stories."

The NSW government's [controversial plan to move the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta](#) has dominated [hearings of the inquiry](#), chaired by Robert Borsak of the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party. But submissions highlighted the lack of funds available to regional museums such as the Gunnedah Rural Museum and Blue Mountains Cultural Centre in Katoomba. Many submissions also expressed fear that council amalgamations would further diminish funding. Fairfax Media [reported in March](#) that the mayor of Dubbo said local council mergers would lead to spending cuts on arts and culture.

Sommers added: "Given our experiences with Port Macquarie Hastings Council, we consider it naive to assume that unmonitored funding programs for museums and collections will not be cannibalised to fund other programs and council shortfalls into the future."

Winkworth said the most glaring inequality in arts funding was not between the inner-city and western Sydney, but Sydney and regional NSW: "If this was health or education funding there would be outcry."

In recent years major cultural infrastructure projects in regional NSW such as the Murray Art Museum Albury, Orange Regional Museum and [redevelopment of Lismore Regional Gallery](#) – have been built with little or no state government funding.

The NSW government in its submission argued that local council amalgamations will not affect levels of investment in museums and galleries, pointing out that merged councils can access up to \$15 million for "priority community initiatives" including cultural facilities. It also encourages major institutions such as the Art Gallery of NSW and Australian Museum to tour its collections to regional NSW.

However, Shoalhaven City Council said loan requests from state institutions are often too arduous and time consuming for a regional museum. "The number of touring exhibitions throughout Australia has seen a dramatic decrease in recent years as national and state institutions look more inward with their operations," according to the submission from the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre. The BMCC also said the NSW government's plan to relocate the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta will not benefit western Sydney.

"The sale of this site is not widely supported by the arts and cultural industry as much-needed funding is being funnelled to this project to the detriment of other important areas in need, such as capital works and repairs of existing arts and cultural buildings throughout the state," it said.

Phillip Stevenson, from the Orange and District Historical Society, was more direct in his criticism: "As a country person this seems a very illogical move particularly as our access will be much more difficult. As a voter it looks like a rapacious and cynical land grab."