

**Dharug Strategic Management Group Ltd**

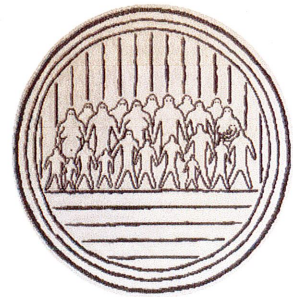
ABN: 53624690277

The Secretary

PO Box 404

Glenbrook NSW 2773

admin@dsmg.org.au



Our Ref: NSW Select Committee Paper

8 October 2020

**SUBMISSION**  
**TO THE**  
**NSW PARLIAMENTARY SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE**  
**GOVERNMENT'S MANAGEMENT OF THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM**  
**AND OTHER MUSEUMS AND CULTURAL PROJECTS IN NSW**

**OPENING STATEMENT (Julie Jones, Chair, DSMG)**

Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee of the NSW Parliament.

DSMG is a not-for-profit company and registered charity that operates as an organisation for Dharug people, managed by Dharug people. We were established in early-2018 after more than seven years of community consultation and negotiation about ownership of and caring for the site of the Blacktown Native Institution in Oakhurst in Western Sydney. The BNI site has cultural and historical significance for Dharug people and its return to Dharug ownership in 2018 was the first return of Nura to Dharug care by the state of NSW since colonial times.

In early-2020, DSMG concluded a ground-breaking *Statement of Recognition and Understanding* with the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences. In that Statement, MAAS:

- recognises that Dharug yura have deep and continuing connection to Country as all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a deep and continuing connection to their Countries as First Peoples of Australia.
- acknowledges Dharug as the traditional owners of Dharug Nura

We hoped our agreement with MAAS would guide respectful engagement with Dharug yura and use of Dharug Nura as the Museum developed its Western Sydney location. However, we have been disappointed to find the transition process has been handled in ways that are profoundly disrespectful of Dharug yura and Nura.

In our presentation today, we will reinforce concerns put forward in our submission on the EIS for the proposed Powerhouse at Parramatta. In our submission we objected to the project as proposed, and concluded that the EIS made unacceptable conclusions not supported by the evidence reported in the EIS. We would like to formally table a copy of that submission as part of our evidence to this committee and offer a formal written submission in addition to our response to any questions the committee might raise with us.

Thank you.

Document tendered by

PROF. RICHIE HOWITT

Received by

MR. ANDREW RATCHFORD

Date: 8 / 10 / 20

Resolved to publish Yes / No





### **FURTHER COMMENTS (Written Submission)**

The Willow Grove site proposed for the Powerhouse at Parramatta holds great significance for Dharug people. It is simultaneously woven into Dharug, colonial and the current urban cultural landscapes. It is a rare site in the district's colonial and later history because it embodies a shared history free of violence, rejection and denial. The site of Willow Grove and the adjacent river remains a place of relative peace in a landscape that has rarely known genuine peace since its colonial occupation. We find ourselves appalled that such important and significant shared heritage is treated as so unimportant and insignificant that its complete destruction is not only tolerated, but actively advocated as core strategy of one of the state's most important cultural institutions.

Reduction of the Willow Grove site to its dimensions as a plot of land in an urban centre already overwhelmed by 'development' disconnects it from the cultural landscape and its historical narratives of belonging.

Disconnection of the Willow Grove site from the river as a living river has meant that inadequate consideration has been given to the way the site and the river will interact under changing climatic and environmental conditions – or the way that the imposition of higher usage of the area will affect the river and its ongoing restoration as an important and respectful relationship with Nura.

Disconnection of Willow Grove and the rest of the site from its ecological setting has meant that inadequate consideration has been given to the culturally valued trees on and near the site. This has allowed the proposed destruction of trees to be seen by advocates of the proposed design as essential and unimportant collateral damage.

Disconnection of Willow Grove from its narrative settings within the community has meant that not only Dharug stories related to the site, but a range of community narratives about its role as a place of healing, birthing and belonging have been dismissed as if they do not count.

We note in our submission that the proposal, design and assessment of the Powerhouse at Parramatta has treated Dharug Nura as *terra nullius*. It has treated our river and its banks as a place waiting to be made into something worth owning (or visiting) by the Powerhouse at Parramatta. Insensitive carelessness in both language and process has asserted anew the symbolic and material power of the state and its institutions to erase Dharug from our Nura. We hope this committee can help the Parliament and the museum to understand that this retraumatizes yura and Nura.

*In our view, it is simply and utterly disrespectful and ignorant. Despite radical transformation of museum practice in some places, this imposes on this place in Parramatta an approach that models the museum as authoritative collector, interpreter, possessor and displayer of material heritage and culture. It asserts the museum as the authority on our lives, our culture, our Ancestors. The EIS treats our heritage as something to be 'mitigated'. It seeks to re-erase us as present in our Nura. It acts in denial of the stated intention to recognise and respect. It presents a*





*self-reflecting importance of the power of conquest. This is anathema to any commitment to recognising Dharug yura's deep and continuing connection to Nura, as all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a deep and continuing connection to their Countries as First Peoples of Australia (DSMG Submission on the EIS).*

DSMG is deeply troubled that the Powerhouse is the state institution charged with protecting, preserving and showcasing our heritage, but the project under review by this committee has chosen to respond to being welcomed to Nura by submitting a project proposal and environmental impact statement that completely dismisses our position on what should happen on this site.

At every available opportunity, including in the formal community consultative processes initiated after the completion of the design and assessment processes, we have said clearly and strongly that the Willow Grove site is not the appropriate site for the Powerhouse at Parramatta, and that the existing heritage and landscape values of the site should be protected, enhanced and healed – not demolished and buried under yet further layers of concrete.

We have said the proposed Powerhouse at Parramatta diminishes the value of the site, puts the river and its cultural landscapes at risk, disrespects community values and narratives about the place, and that the area proposed for destruction should be supported as part of a re-connecting to the river, and a healing of Nura.

**It is clear that we have not been listened to. We have not been heard. We have not been understood.**

Like the Willow Grove site itself, we have been dismissed. We have been diminished. We have been seen as not having value in the museum's self-aggrandising view of what really matters as the Nura known as Parramatta disappears under a blanket of overdevelopment.

Our culture, our history, our Ancestors and our own continuing presence and the material artefacts and traces that are left in place are not something to be "mitigated"! These are not things to be possessed, managed and displayed by the Museum.

**We are sick of (and sickened by) the repetitive apologising that changes nothing and that only reinforces that apology by ignorant, well-paid and powerless experts changes nothing.**

We respectfully invite your committee to acknowledge that you are obliged to think carefully and respectfully about issues of the cumulative impact the Powerhouse at Parramatta contributes to. Your process must give full consideration to the ever-increasing burden of the "loss of heritage" (and in particular Dharug heritage) on our communities. This is the burden that is often glossed as inter-generational trauma. This is a burden that is commonly dismissed as inevitable or unavoidable. But like our Ancestors, we look for





recognition, respect and justice from your committee. It is as inappropriate now as it was in the past for committees such as this to offer to soothe the dying pillow of Indigenous citizens.

The Powerhouse at Parramatta insists it is necessary to erase everything from the site. This is an insistence that reinscribes this part of Dharug Nura as empty and available: empty of anything of value; available as a blank slate for the museum (and the state) to construct its own vision of what is worthwhile and valued. The vision underpinning the Powerhouse at Parramatta treats the proposed site as a place from which Dharug presence has been eliminated and erased. It sees Dharug culture as something that is past and only able to be reintroduced on the terms agreed to by the museum – as part of a collection owned, presented and controlled by the museum. Our persistent presence is denied and dismissed. Our resilience is devalued. And we are, again, denied.

We trust that your committee will remind this valued and respected cultural institution that its commitments and responsibilities play out in the cultural landscapes of living cultures, and that Dharug yura expect the museum to honour its commitment to always act to remember, respect and foster the resilience, strength and spirit of the Dharug Ancestors and people on their paths already walked and those yet to come.

Fast-tracking approval of the Powerhouse at Parramatta has produced very poor decision-making. It has certainly short-changed and marginalized Dharug yura. We will happily welcome an appropriate museum to our Nura, and will be proud to accept a permanent and influential presence in a museum that sits comfortably and sustainably on our Nura and becomes part of our Nura and connected to Dharug yura in a respectful way. But we insist that the museum that is being investigated by your committee and was advocated in the EIS is not that museum. That project is a museum that will be unable to deliver on its mandate or the MAAS commitment to Dharug yura.

In the enthusiasm for a project whose design was already judged as “excellent”, neither the public review nor the formal assessment process allowed room for expression that the design was not only far from excellent but completely inappropriate for the site because it inappropriately dominates our cultural landscape, annihilates our heritage, and dismisses and trivialises our trauma. We have argued that the EIS should be rejected as inadequate because it advocates for the design rather than objectively assesses it. It is not an assessment but an advocacy statement. In the EIS’s 177 pages and 36 appendices, it failed to actually assess or justify the project. It advocates a pre-determined decision to build at any cost.

Your committee should recognize and acknowledge this, and reject both the EIS and the design.