

Submission  
No 21

## INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

**Organisation:** Save the Powerhouse Campaign

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**SAVE THE POWERHOUSE Campaign**  
**INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES**

**SUBMISSION TO THE GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No4**

**August 6, 2016**

**INTRODUCTION**

The following submission to the General Purpose Standing Committee No 4 Inquiry into Museums and Galleries is made jointly by Patricia Johnson and Jean-Pierre Alexandre on behalf of the Save The Powerhouse campaign.

Our community-based campaign, launched in March 2015, represents residents across NSW, and aims to prevent the closure of the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo and the sale of the site to private developers, while strongly supporting the creation of (a) world-class cultural institution(s) in Western Sydney in consultation-with the Western Sydney community.

Our campaign strategy focuses on

- The organisation of regular meetings, round tables and rallies that bring together grass-roots supporters with museum specialists, local stakeholders and politicians who oppose the Museum closure.
- Mass mailing and a Facebook page which is visited several times a week by thousands of followers from all over NSW and beyond.

During 2015, the Save the Powerhouse supporters collected 10,000 signatures for a Parliamentary Petition to qualify for a Parliamentary debate in February this year.

As community representatives, we recognise that we do not have sufficient specialised expertise to address all the Inquiry's terms of reference and will confine our comments to the two that directly or indirectly concern the Powerhouse Museum, (e) and (h) ,with remarks on (a) and (f) These comments will be ordered as follows

- (e) Why we oppose the Powerhouse move.
  - 1 It would damage Australia's international reputation
  - 2 Cultural and historical significance
  - 3 A key link in the Ultimo - CBD Goods Line
  - 4 Designed to accommodate very large objects
  - 5 Estimated costs of moving
  - 6 Alternatives to moving
  - 7 Cultural institutions for Western Sydney
  - 8 Unsuitable site selected in Parramatta
- (h)
  - 9 Importance to Sydney residents and visitors
  - 10 Critical to the local economy

Additional remarks on:

- (a) - cultural/arts funding in NSW
- (f) - Government transparency

## **OUR SUBMISSION**

### **(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**

Save the Powerhouse opposes the sale of the Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo for the following reasons:

#### ***It would damage Australia's international reputation***

Every great city in the world has a Science and Technology Museum, traditionally located in the heart of the city, where it is easily accessible to local and international visitors. The closure and demolition of an iconic institution such as the Ultimo Powerhouse would be unprecedented and would tarnish NSW's, and indeed Australia's, image as a developed country.

The Smithsonian Museum in the USA, often mentioned by the NSW Premier as a model, developed more than 20 cultural establishments in Washington, Virginia and New York since the 19<sup>th</sup> century without ever closing any of them.

#### ***Why is the Government so willing to expose NSW to international ridicule and scorn?***

#### ***Cultural and historical significance***

- The Powerhouse Museum forms part of the Ultimo environment since 1893 when the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences was established in Harris Street. It acquired its current name when the old Ultimo Power Station was refurbished and the new Museum was inaugurated in 1988.
- Large parts of the Museum collections reflect Ultimo's industrial past and would have little meaning in any other context.
- The Ultimo Powerhouse Museum forms part of the City of Sydney's Cultural Ribbon together with the Maritime Museum, the proposed Barangaroo Museum, the Australian Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Opera House and the Art Gallery of NSW.

#### ***Why is the Government so ready to throw away one of the capital's major cultural assets?***

#### ***A key link in the Ultimo - CBD Goods Line***

Ultimo has a long history of isolation from the adjacent Sydney CBD from which it was separated by railways and Darling Harbour warehouses.

The recent opening of the Goods Line pedestrian walkway finally provides a direct link between Ultimo and the CBD. It also provides a more convenient and attractive pedestrian and Light Rail access to the Museum which has opened a new entrance on its "City facing" facade.

The sale of the Powerhouse site and its real estate re-development would once again block the long awaited link between Ultimo and the CBD and waste a unique opportunity for the Museum to benefit directly from millions of Sydney visitors using the Goods Line.

#### ***Why is the government so ready to waste such a valuable investment?***

### ***Designed to accommodate very large objects***

The Powerhouse Museum has customised space to exhibit very large objects such as steam engines and aeroplanes and holds a collection of more than 500,000 items. This would make it much more expensive to move than other museums, since:

- The new Museum design must allow for very large exhibition volumes
- The actual relocation of the collection would be extremely expensive.

***How does the Government propose to replicate the spaces available for large objects in the Powerhouse without exceeding its self-proclaimed \$200,000 budget for the whole move?***

### ***Estimated costs of moving***

- Expert budget estimates made available to us indicate that while the budget for establishment of a new world class museum is generally around \$400M, the cost of moving the Powerhouse Museum would reach or exceed \$1 billion. This estimate includes constructing a new building with equivalent exhibition volumes and equivalent collection storage capacities and moving the collections from Ultimo to the new establishment. It obviously far exceeds the \$150-200M (Government estimate) proceeds the Government expects from the sale of the Ultimo site.
- The Ultimo Powerhouse Museum building is the result of the customised reconversion of the old Ultimo Power Station, for which the architect, Lionel Glendenning was awarded the Sulman prize. It is a rare example of a successful industrial building reconversion in Australia.

The sale of the Museum site would mean writing off the reconversion costs. These are estimated at more than \$400 Millions in today's currency, well in excess of the \$150-200M expected from the sale.

- The Powerhouse museum opened in 1988. It is bad practice and a waste of public money, and again, unprecedented, to write off such an investment after less than 30 years.

***How does the Government explain the discrepancy between its own \$200M budget for the move and expert estimates of up to \$1 billion?***

### ***Alternatives to moving***

- We note that the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences already has the Discovery Centre, founded in 1947 in Castle Hill, just 10km North of Parramatta. Currently closed for a \$34 M expansion, it displays large objects from the Powerhouse collections, such as trains and planes and can be considered a successful satellite of the Powerhouse Museum.
- In fact, the Powerhouse collections are large enough to allow for the establishment of several satellites, as only a small percentage of items are exhibited (in Ultimo and Castle Hill) at any one time because of space limits.

***Why has the Government not explained the future role and position of the newly-renovated Discovery Centre, a few minutes away from Parramatta?***

### ***Cultural institutions for Western Sydney***

Western Sydney residents deserve their fair share of the State cultural investment. Our campaign strongly supports the establishment of (a) world-class cultural institution(s) in West Sydney to:

- Reflect the history and values of Western Sydney, rather than just mirror Ultimo's industrial past.
- Be the result of a genuine, widespread consultation with Western Sydney residents
- To this end and without pre-empting the preferences of Western Sydney residents, we note that the Fleet Precinct in Parramatta, a world heritage class site and the cradle of modern Australia together with large Aboriginal significance, is itself under similar threats from private interests.

***Why has the Government not genuinely consulted the Western Sydney community about their preferences for (a) new cultural institution(s)?***

#### ***Unsuitable site selected in Parramatta***

The Old David Jones Car Park, the site chosen for the new museum in Parramatta, is:

- Located on the banks of the Parramatta River and is regularly flooded, making it unsuitable (or at least very expensive) for housing large museum collections which require a custom-built temperature and humidity –controlled environment.
- Substantially smaller than the Ultimo site, allowing only for a “cut-down” version of the Museum where the exhibition of very large items would be drastically reduced.

***Why is the Government so determined to establish a new museum on a flood-prone site?***

#### **(h) The economic impact of museums and galleries on cultural tourism and their role in supporting the visitor economy in Sydney and regional NSW**

##### ***Importance to Sydney residents and visitors***

- The Ultimo Powerhouse Museum is an integral part of the day-to-day life of Sydney Inner West residents' life who have regularly visited it since childhood, and now bring their own children and grand-children.
- It is also a traditional part of the “Sydney tour”, together with the adjoining Paddy's markets and Darling Harbour, for all Greater Sydney residents, including those from Western Sydney, and regional NSW, interstate and overseas visitors.
- In total, the Ultimo Powerhouse Museum welcomes almost half a million visitors annually and registered a 12% rise in visitor numbers in 2015.  
This was a direct result of the Museum's ongoing, proven appeal, enhanced by:
  - Its convenient location near other tourist attractions (Paddy's market, Chinatown, Darling Harbour, Maritime Museum, etc..)
  - Excellent public transport services (the Powerhouse is in comfortable walking distance from Central Station, next to Paddy's markets light rail station, etc...)
- A smaller museum in Parramatta, in a less accessible and less well-known location, would certainly not be able to attract such high numbers of visitors, despite Government claims.

***Why is the Government so ready to sacrifice a recognised Inner Sydney visitor attraction by relocating it to a little-known and less accessible, far from the capital?***

***Critical to the local economy***

- In addition to its visible contribution to the NSW tourist industry the Ultimo Powerhouse Museum is also a strong supporter of the local economy:
  - o It forms part of the Ultimo techno-educational chain, together with the ABC, UTS and TAFE, and in this capacity provides a unique resource for internationally recognised scientific and technical research and development. Ultimo is Australia's leading incubator of innovative technology start-ups. This position would be jeopardised and thousands of high-tech jobs lost if the Museum were closed.
  - o The Museum also supports hundreds of jobs in small businesses in Ultimo including cafes and restaurants which cater for visitors and Museum staff.

***Why is the Government so willing to discard the nation's leading technological innovation resource, the mainstay of the local start-up economy?***

**ADDITIONAL REMARKS**

Our lack of specialised museum expertise notwithstanding, we offer the following observations on:

**(a) NSW government policy, funding and support for museums and galleries, museum and gallery buildings and heritage collections, including volunteer managed museums and museums managed by councils**

***The Powerhouse needs Government support, not deliberate neglect***

It has been widely noted over the past few years that NSW government support for the Powerhouse Museum's programs and exhibitions has declined, presumably as part of its policy to reduce the museum's public appeal in order to "justify" moving it elsewhere. This theory was substantiated by statements from Arts Minister Troy Grant in 2015 that "the Museum must close because visitor numbers are falling", when they in fact rose by a healthy 12%, as stated above.

Instead of continuing attempts to further "run down" the Ultimo Powerhouse, we believe that Government should inject new funding to restore the Museum to its full potential as Australia's leading contemporary resource for Applied Arts and Sciences.

***The Government arts budget must be more fairly distributed***

- We also believe that Inner Sydney has traditionally received an unfairly large share of the NSW Government's cultural arts budget, at the expense of regional centres. The government has committed well over half of its \$600 million cultural infrastructure budget to two Sydney CBD projects: the Sydney Opera House renovation (\$202 million) and redeveloping Walsh Bay (\$139 million). But it has made no allocation to Western Sydney, which was told by Arts Minister Troy Grant that "If you want (arts) infrastructure build it yourselves."
- As mentioned above, we specifically support the allocation of sufficient arts funding to Western Sydney for establishing appropriate cultural facilities in Parramatta (and/or

elsewhere in Western Sydney). Our campaign has established a close relationship with local community members there, many of whom reject the idea of a cut-down version of the Powerhouse in favour of a new, world-class museum that reflects Parramatta's unique immigration and Aboriginal past.

***Why is the Government so blindly determined to move the Powerhouse to Parramatta, while refusing to consider discussing funding for an institution that Western Sydneysiders really want?***

**(f) the development and transparency of advice to the government on priorities for NSW museums and galleries**

- To date, the source, nature and quality of advice to the Government on the question of moving the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta has been veiled in total secrecy
- Recently-released Freedom of Information documents show that the Government was advised in August 2015 that moving the Powerhouse, even the simplest "cut-down" version, would cost at least \$450M. Yet they continued to promote to the public the fiction that the move would be covered by sale of the Ultimo site (up to \$200M).
- There has been no genuine consultation with community groups, anywhere, about any aspects of the proposal.
- Museum experts with unique specialised knowledge that could potentially be very helpful have submitted their ideas to Government and have been ignored.
- The Government has demonstrated a consistent policy of appointing hand-picked associates ("mates") to key positions of influence, replacing previous independent officials.

Examples:

- o In early 2016, Dolla Merillees, a known supporter of the move, was appointed as the new Powerhouse Director ahead of better-qualified candidates.
- o In July, Vice-Chancellor of Western Sydney University Professor Barney Glover was appointed President of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS) Trust and will "play a pivotal role in the Powerhouse Museum's relocation to Parramatta."

***It is we, the taxpayers who will ultimately pay for this Government's real estate deals. When will they start telling us the truth?***

***The Government of the day is only the custodian of the State cultural assets, not the owner. It has no mandate to sell them off to suit its short-term interests.***

**CONCLUSION**

As shown, we believe that there are numerous questions to be answered about the NSW Government's motivation, policy, processes and conduct regarding

- its proposal to move the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta, and
- its rationale regarding funding and support for museums and galleries across the State.

On behalf of the NSW community, we respectfully ask the Committee to investigate these issues and attempt to uncover the real facts.

***We would also be delighted to be a witness at a later hearing of the Committee.***

**Save the Powerhouse Campaign**

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