

**Submission
No 27**

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

Organisation: Engineers Australia NSW Division - Engineering Heritage Sydney
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**Legislative Council of NSW
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4**

Inquiry into Museums and Galleries

Submission by Engineering Heritage Sydney

Terms of Reference:

- 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***

A large proportion of the artifacts which tell the story of NSW's engineering and technological development and demonstrate its significance, is held in community and collectors' museums. Because most of these facilities are run or supported by volunteers and operate on meagre budgets their collections of often State-significant heritage items are at risk of deterioration. Housing, display, interpretation, conservation, ageing volunteers and the lack of expertise in appropriate conservation techniques, are factors contributing to the risk; they need addressing if important components of collections are to be preserved into the future.

Part of the solution could lie in the provision of an extension service by the Powerhouse Museum to advise and assist regional museums in the professional management of their collections.

Already, funding by volunteers is stretched to the limit as is the capacity of regional councils to fund museums that compete with ageing assets for funds, and because of the arbitrary rate-pegging which they face. Expanded Government funding support is therefore vital for the continuance of museums and galleries with significant collections.

The Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences is Australia's contemporary museum for excellence and innovation related to those areas. It demonstrates how technology, engineering, science and design have contributed to the development of the Nation and how those disciplines impact on Australia and the world; the museum is a catalyst for creative expression and curious minds.

This should be reflected in Government policy and in its support and funding. But further, it should be reflected in government recognition/understanding of the importance in pursuing its vision, of the Museum being located in reasonable proximity to kindred cultural institutions, to places of learning and to professional bodies. For example there are the Australian and Maritime museums and Museum of Sydney, five major universities, a number of design schools, Engineers Australia, Royal Australian Institute of Architects and the National Trust. At Ultimo the Museum is readily accessible to all these; in fact it is ideally located for many other purposes. Relocation of the Museum to Parramatta would substantially weaken ties with those institutions and impact on other benefits of its location. The real estate adage of 'Location, location, location' is just as relevant to the Powerhouse Museum as it is to purchasing a home.

In his press release of 30 September 2013 announcing grants to Museums, George Souris, Minister for the Arts announced that the grants *“are part of the Government’s commitment to arts and culture in NSW in acknowledgment of the very important role the museum sector plays in the cultural, creative, social and economic development of our State”*.

If the Government honestly adheres to that commitment, and if its aim is to improve the structure of the museum sector part of the answer, given the substantial growth that has taken place in western Sydney, would be to establish a new museum in Parramatta devoted to the history of the region and its particular character, culture and industries. At the same time the Government should improve its support for the Powerhouse and other museums.

However, creating a new museum in western Sydney should not be at the expense of the cultural amenity of Sydney city and by compromising the existing relationships that benefit both the State and the Powerhouse by the latter being at Ultimo.

The dis-benefits in moving the Museum would extend to adversely impacting on it’s opportunities for strategic partnerships and its potential to engage with an emerging generation of highly entrepreneurial innovators.

In policy terms, the Government should have a strategy to grow the State culturally and to enhance its appeal; in respect of Sydney, removal of the Powerhouse from the core would run counter to this.

Cultural institutions must grow and expand to provide the necessary nourishment to keep pace with urban growth; already the huge increase in the residential population within and adjacent the city has created a demand for more not less, cultural opportunities, and that growth has outstripped the present capacity of the cultural institutions.

b. potential funding impacts on museums and galleries affected by council amalgamations

Unable to comment.

c. Opportunities to revitalise the structure, reach, and impact of museums and their research and collecting priorities

Just as the Museum of Sydney celebrates the people and events that have shaped the character and soul of that city, so the Powerhouse Museum should tell the story of the development of Sydney’s infrastructure and industry. The stories are numerous, interesting and fascinating when one considers the development over time of the harbour and its wharfage, Port Botany, Kingsford Smith Airport, water supplies and the sewerage system, roads (not to forget the wood blocking of city streets), railways above and below ground, the tram system, bridges, tunnels, manufacturing enterprises of numerous kinds (including the BMC-Leyland works which at its peak was the largest private employer in Sydney employing 7000 workers most of them migrants) and so on. These stories are not being told in an integrated way and the knowledge and understanding is not being imparted to present generations, let alone being preserved for future ones. Where we came from and how we got here is essential to understanding our country and ourselves.

A new museum at Parramatta could tell the unique story of western Sydney's exploration and development, the history of the region, and its particular character, culture and industries.

d. *Access to the collections of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, the Australian Museum and any other state collections held in trust*

Currently the Powerhouse Museum is ideally located and accessible and its overflow Discovery Centre at Castle Hill provides reasonable access by car. However, the science and technological segment at Ultimo would be enhanced by making space for more of the material stored at the Discovery Centre. This could be achieved by separating the technological segment from the social history and decorative arts and design collections, so that each could become more focused. This could be the opportunity to establish a separate museum at Parramatta

Unfortunately, the Powerhouse's acquisition program has for many years not kept pace with progress and now does not adequately represent technological developments since the early 20th century. The collection is especially inadequate in respect of large items. This indicates that the acquisition policy should be revisited to ensure it is still appropriate.

Other aspects of our response to this Term (d) are included at (a), (e) and (h).

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*

Sydney is an international city, it is an advanced and cultural centre. While the interests and motivations of overseas visitors vary, many wish to experience the cultural diversity that differentiates Sydney from other parts of the world such as Asia, Europe, the USA and so on. This applies to local and interstate visitors alike. The Powerhouse is an essential ingredient of that diverse cultural mix; re-locating it to Parramatta would be like leaving the fruit out of a plum pudding!

As an institution the Powerhouse Museum has considerable heritage significance:

- as the purpose-built generating station for the tramway network; as one of the largest and most important generating stations in NSW for many years; for its associations with the electrification of the suburban railway system and with the general reticulation of electrical power; and as the first place where, in 1905, turbine driven alternators were tried in Australia. The adjacent building was the first major tram shed in Sydney.
- because the building (constructed in 1899), dates from one of the key periods in the development of Ultimo - a direct result of subdivision of the Harris and Macarthur Estates and the industrial redevelopment of the area around the end of the 19th century.
- because the building represents a good example of a Federation industrial building which makes a positive contribution to the streetscape. The subsequent adaptation to convert it and the tram shed into the Powerhouse Museum is significant, both for

its successful re-use of the buildings and as modern design; it was awarded the Sulman Medal in 1988.

- for its collection of engineering and industrial machinery and artifacts - much of it being rare, which tell the story of the development of Sydney and NSW; and
- as an educational institution, it being the custodian/repository of much of the history of Sydney's development and of technological knowledge.

The tram shed building is an important part of the Museum both from a heritage perspective and now as an essential part of its function. Originally it had nine bays accommodating 108 trams on twelve tracks, with maintenance pits, cranes and other necessary equipment.

It was adapted according to appropriate heritage practice to now containing the Museum's library, curatorial offices and a climate-controlled area which stores valuable items and which includes conservation laboratories and workshops. The building was placed on the National Trust Heritage Register in 1997.

The 'place' of the Museum is also an important contributor to its heritage significance; it sits adjacent Darling Harbour the cradle of Sydney's industrialisation, and within what was an early major industrial area of Sydney.

Consequently, while relocation of the Museum's collection might be attempted, in the re-development of the site, Sydney in fact the State, would lose another significant part of its industrial heritage, a heritage that is not only a reminder but evidence of, part of the history of its development – the name 'Powerhouse' is the message!

If the Powerhouse building and the 'tram shed' are destroyed, we would be ignoring the long-term economic and social benefits of our State's heritage. *'More importantly, if we do not preserve and publicise the remarkable achievements represented by our heritage we have failed those who came before us, and what is worse, we have failed the generations to come'*.

If the Powerhouse site is sold, the public of NSW would lose part of its heritage for ever – it would never be able to get it back.

The proposal to sell the site evokes the response in the old adage *'Wealth destroys, poverty preserves'*. Unfortunately, in 2016 that could be updated for NSW to *'Greed destroys, caring preserves'*.

As Ronald Balfour (WW2 British Monuments Man) said in his draft of a lecture for soldiers in 1944:

We do not want to destroy unnecessarily what men spent so much time and care and skill in making . . . [for] these examples of craftsmanship tell us so much about our ancestors. . . . If these things are lost or broken or destroyed, we lose a valuable part of our knowledge about our forefathers. No age lives entirely alone; every civilisation is formed not merely by its own achievements but by what it has inherited from the past. If these things are destroyed, we have lost a part of our past, and we shall be the poorer for it.

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

At present there is virtually no transparency in the advice to the government on priorities for NSW museums and galleries, or in how and what decisions are being made; the public and interested organisations are in the dark about these matters. The community is entitled to know about these things and whether museum assets are under threat or likely to be disposed of.

It is assumed that in the proposal to move the Powerhouse to Parramatta the Government has been advised or influenced by the Urban Growth authority. Unfortunately, the general impression gained from that authority's activities is that its concentration is on filling up every piece of government-owned open space with high rise development and re-developing as much government property as it can, in order to maximise the financial return to government. In doing so, its actions pay little regard to the public interest and the public's concerns for amenity, environment, public open space and heritage values. Its pious invitations to 'Having your say' and its so-called 'public consultation' efforts are seen merely as subterfuges for soothing the public's disquiet and its concern for potential impacts on the things it cherishes. While government and its authorities may like to give the impression they are 'listening', they don't seem to 'hear'; the system is not transparent or honest!

What is needed is an honest and transparent system of community **involvement** to determine need and to develop outcomes acceptable to the community – not 'consultation' after which a pre-determined decision is implemented.

g. *The impact of the efficiency dividend on the budgets of museums and galleries over the last 10 years, and funding levels compared to other states*

It is an indictment of any government's commitment to efficiency that the most significant approach to driving more efficient operations is the use of such a blunt instrument as the 'efficiency dividend' (paraphrased from *The Conversation*).

The efficiency dividend, defined as an 'annual reduction in funding for the overall running costs of an agency', has a compounding impact that reduces the capacity of many authorities to operate effectively.

Small organisations such as museums suffer a much greater degree of pain than large ones that have more flexibility on where they can make savings. They thus suffer staff reductions, an inability to add important items to their collections, and an inability to mount exhibitions. This has the opposite effect to that which was intended – it makes them less efficient and adversely affects their ability to effectively provide the services for which they were established. But then, having been prevented from doing their job effectively, they are accused of inefficiency and become a target for further budget cuts, or worse, for abolition. Thus the nation's cultural capital is diminished as is Australia in the eyes of the world.

An especially graphic example of the damage that can accrue to the nation's cultural capital is in the requirement of an efficiency dividend (as well as budget cuts) of the National Library of Australia (NLA). In February 2016 the Director-General of the NLA advised her staff that these would have a grave impact on the cultural institution. "*The savings required of the*

library over almost 30 years have had a significant impact on the library's operations and services," she said.

One severe impact has been to force the NLA to cease the aggregation of content into *Trove* from museums and universities. *Trove* is a service that has revolutionised the way vital historical resources about Australia and Australians are located by all levels of the Australian community, particularly by researchers and historians.

The efficiency dividend should be abandoned in favour of periodic assessments/audits of the efficiency and effectiveness of the programs and activities conducted by authorities.

h. The economic impact of museums and galleries on cultural tourism, and their role in supporting the visitor economy

Just as Australians going overseas spend a significant proportion of their time visiting cultural places such as museums, art galleries etc, many visitors to Sydney whether they be local or international, are attracted by the opportunity to experience the cultural diversity that differentiates Sydney from other parts of the world. For most, Sydney is the destination and the city's attraction is increased and their visit enhanced, by the number and variety of cultural opportunities available to them.

Cruising is now a big industry and while each vessel brings thousands of travellers to the city they stay only a short time. Consequently, the ready availability of museums and galleries is vital to their cultural experience.

Few will be interested in making the journey to Parramatta or could spare the time to visit a relocated Powerhouse Museum.

Museums and galleries have a significant economic impact on cultural tourism and have a role in supporting the visitor economy. Better and more targeted promotion of the opportunities to visit them and to experience exhibitions, as well as improvements in making venues more accessible, will enhance visitation and the appeal of the museums.

Europe has pioneered the concept of industrial heritage tourism through the European Route of Industrial Heritage. Given the incredibly rich industrial heritage remaining in Australia - much being of international significance, a similar concept should be developed for NSW.

i. Any other related matter.

By world standards Australia has a rich technological history. The related heritage artifacts and sites must be preserved for future generations.

In the UK there is a Heritage Lottery Fund which supports well planned conservation programmes. It is highly desirable that some such system be established in NSW to relieve the direct burden of providing funding on government and on struggling museums and galleries.

Australia is currently passing out of the industrial age. The present generation is likely to be the last to experience large-scale industrial employment or to use manufactured items "Made in Australia". It is vital that the knowledge of this stage in Australia's development is preserved through representative examples of industrial sites, machinery, manufactured

products, archives (documents, photographs, etc), and personal experiences through oral and written histories.

However, to fully appreciate many examples of heritage machinery it is necessary to exhibit them in working condition so their true significance and function can be demonstrated and appreciated. This will require provision of adequate funding and expertise.