

**Submission  
No 105**

## **INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES**

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## **SUBMISSION TO ENQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES**

*This submission addresses Terms of Reference (d) and (e) of the enquiry. It draws attention to and seeks to discredit the specious argument advanced by Infrastructure NSW that the current location of the Powerhouse Museum is "remote" and therefore unsuitable because it falls outside a proposed "Sydney CBD cultural precinct". It also expresses concern about apparent inconsistencies between the Government's previous and current policy on this matter and in the decision-making process.*

*The submission does not address the obvious merits of establishing a major new museum/cultural centre at Parramatta, for which a compelling case has already been made.*

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The NSW Government has acted on the recommendations of Infrastructure NSW that seek

- to establish a Sydney CBD cultural precinct
- to include certain named institutions within this precinct on the basis of their content and
- to exclude the Powerhouse Museum from it because of its location and content

This paper argues that none of these recommendations is based on a credible, well-argued rationale. The assertions underpinning the recommendations lack rigour and raise the suspicion of a contrived case put in retrospect to seek to justify a decision already made in principle.

There are apparent inconsistencies between very recent and current Government policy regarding the future potential of the Powerhouse Museum on its present site in Ultimo, and within the Darling Harbour precinct.

The paper stridently asserts that the recommendation to relocate the Powerhouse Museum does no service to the people of NSW - who collectively own this fine institution and its collections - or to those whose careful and inspired planning saw the establishment of the Powerhouse Museum less than three decades ago.

Since that time, the Museum has come to be recognised and appreciated almost as much for its magnificent adaptively re-used historic buildings as for its collections and exhibitions. There is a resonance between material culture and preserved industrial bricks and mortar that has further cemented its place in the fabric of the Ultimo precinct, where the Museum has established rich traditions for almost a century and a quarter. To needlessly destroy this unique and irreplaceable cultural asset in Sydney would be an appalling reflection on the attitude of the NSW Government towards the cultural heritage it holds in trust.

The official document that appears to have driven the Government's decision to relocate the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta is the *2014 State Infrastructure Strategy Update*, prepared by Infrastructure NSW.

In assessing the future of the Powerhouse Museum on its current site at Ultimo, this document is breathtakingly superficial and simplistic in the reasoning it employs to reach its sweeping conclusions. It relies almost entirely on a location-based rationale to exclude the Powerhouse from a future in Sydney.<sup>1</sup> The only other criterion is "the best institutional mix" within the CBD precinct, which curiously contends that "a cluster around the Sydney Opera House, The Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Walsh Bay Arts precinct, the State Library of NSW, the Art Gallery of NSW and the Australian Museum is logical" (p.122), but completely fails to explain either this seemingly self-evident "logic"<sup>2</sup> or why the Powerhouse Museum falls outside this group, other than because of its supposedly inconvenient location.<sup>3</sup>

If it is assumed for the purpose of the argument that the Powerhouse Museum's location outside the proposed CDB cultural precinct leaves it uniquely and critically disadvantaged, it follows that the nearby Australian National Maritime Museum (opened in 1991) is similarly handicapped. This is clearly not the case; in fact both organisations have consistently gained from their relative proximity and by their inclusion in the Darling Harbour precinct.<sup>4</sup> The current major investment program - led by Infrastructure NSW - to "transform" Darling Harbour<sup>5</sup> can only emphasise this point and will surely benefit visitation to both museums.

Meanwhile, recent developments in the immediate vicinity of the Powerhouse Museum have significantly improved physical and visual access to the site. These include the opening up of landscaped pedestrian boulevards from Haymarket and along *The Goods Line*, which intersect at the Museum.

The case put by Infrastructure NSW to relocate the entire Powerhouse Museum fails to address the strategic advantage of its Darling Harbour location. To the contrary, it states dismissively that

*"The Powerhouse Museum is site constrained and located remotely from other key cultural institutions"*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A Sydney CBD cultural precinct (of cultural institutions) should be established" with "no more than 1.5km walking distance between them" (*2014 State Infrastructure Strategy Update* p122)

<sup>2</sup> Surely the Powerhouse Museum's collections, exhibitions and programs would be no less "logical" an inclusion than the Australian Museum within this mix of institutions that is otherwise heavily weighted towards the performing and fine arts.

<sup>3</sup> Ironically, the precinct in which the Powerhouse Museum is located, Darling Harbour, has been championed since its initial development in 1988 as one of the most-visited tourist locations, not just in Sydney, but also in Australia. In any event, it is nonsense to suggest that cultural institutions need to be located in relatively easy walking distance within a CBD precinct to be viable. Almost every comparable city to Sydney - including Melbourne - has well patronised cultural attractions outside its CBD but within the city area. Baltimore's Inner Harbour, the inspiration for Darling Harbour, supports its own grouping of museums and galleries independently of many others in the city area. (See <http://baltimore.org/see-do/inner-harbor-attractions>)

<sup>4</sup> The latest official figures on visitors numbers to Darling Harbour indicate that it has consistently maintained its tourism appeal right up to the recent redevelopment: for each of the years to June 2012 through to June 2015, just under 4 million overnight visitors, equivalent to 32% of the Sydney tourism region, visited Darling Harbour. (See <http://www.destinationnsw.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Darling-Harbour-Visitor-Profile-YE-June-2015.pdf>)

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.darlingharbourlive.com.au/>.

<sup>6</sup> *2014 State Infrastructure Strategy Update* p121

Instead, the unsubstantiated and fragile argument for a CDB precinct of cultural institutions is the prime reason that Infrastructure NSW has concluded that the Powerhouse Museum does not have a future in its present location.

On 4 March 2015, just prior to departing his post as Secretary, Department of Trade and Investment, Regional Infrastructure and Services, Mark Patterson, AO, addressed a meeting of the Powerhouse Museum's Board of Trustees. He advanced the questionable reasoning developed by his department that the case for relocating the Powerhouse Museum was already effectively half won because of its current unsuitable location. This was coupled with the baffling contention that the Powerhouse Museum's "content" would be unsuitable to include in the CBD cultural precinct. Specifically, the Board's minutes note that

*"The Strategy (of Infrastructure NSW) referenced international best practice in the development of cultural precincts focusing on proximity and content. Ultimo is not within the proposed central business cultural precinct."*<sup>7</sup>

The final statement reads like the sentence of a condemned man, yet for the past 20 years, commencing with the City West Development Corporation, Ultimo and neighbouring Pyrmont have been seen as opportunities for urban renewal and vibrancy.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, there is plenty of evidence to indicate that Ultimo (and Pyrmont) have realised this potential and that the Powerhouse Museum has gained from its capacity to identify with both the Darling Harbour and Ultimo precincts. Since the early 2000s, the Museum has developed and cemented relationships with key stakeholders in the Ultimo precinct, notably the University of Technology and the ABC, which have added significantly to its public profile and enhanced its educational programs.

Meanwhile, local, interstate and overseas visitors to the Museum have consistently attended the Ultimo site, many drawn by its reputation as an award-winning building that provides ideal context for its magnificently interpreted collections.

It has been argued that falling attendances at the Powerhouse up to 2014 were a sign of the inability of the "constrained" site to continue to attract competitive visitor numbers. This was almost certainly a reflection of controversial management practices that led to low morale and internal policy conflict,<sup>9</sup> an assertion supported by the steady and very significant gains in attendances over the past 12 months in particular, when the Museum has been under new administration.<sup>10</sup> Or is it being suggested that the Ultimo site has recently enjoyed a miraculous reprieve from the effects of its "isolation" and "constriction"?

It is of great concern that the *2014 State Infrastructure Strategy Update*, evidently of pivotal importance to government thinking and policy, has apparently not been subject to rigorous analysis. It is even more concerning that the poorly argued case about the future of the Powerhouse Museum has apparently been so pivotal in the government's decision to relocate the entire Museum from its site in Ultimo, resulting in the potential destruction of so much of value that the Powerhouse Museum buildings alone have delivered for the public's appreciation of the collections and their interpretation.

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<sup>7</sup> Minutes of MAAS Board meeting, 4 March 2015, FOI document

<sup>8</sup> Refer <http://www.hillpda.com.au/project/development-feasibility-analysis/city-west-pyrmontultimo-sydney/>

<sup>9</sup> An opinion based on first hand experience as a member of the Museum's middle management at that time

<sup>10</sup> Visitation increased at the Powerhouse Museum and Sydney Observatory in the financial year 2015-16 to over 730,000, an increase of 30%. *MAAS Powerpoints 29 July 2016*

It is also concerning that this change of policy - to relocate one of the city's major cultural assets and sell its site - has not been generated or even supported by the agency responsible for articulating the state's Arts policy, Arts NSW, but rather has been solely initiated by Infrastructure NSW. Cynicism has been understandably fuelled by the obvious appeal to Government of receiving proceeds from the sale of public land, which incidentally was once reasonably thought to be set aside in perpetuity for the Powerhouse Museum.

The government's policy decision to relocate the Powerhouse Museum is also as sudden as it is radically different. In the World Cities Cultural Report of 2014, according to information supplied by Arts NSW and the City of Sydney, the Powerhouse Museum's future was defined in a very different context that, consistent with all previous policy thinking, embraced it within the mix of the city's cultural institutions:

*"physical and metaphorical connections between once isolated cultural institutions, such as the Sydney Opera House, the Powerhouse Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the (Australian National) Maritime Museum, the Sydney Theatre, Sydney Observatory, and the Art Gallery of NSW will be made."*<sup>11</sup>

And yet *in the same year*, Infrastructure NSW's 2014 State Infrastructure Strategy Update revealed a diametrically opposing view. It is disturbing that a report containing recommendations about the future management and location of Sydney's major cultural assets should originate from a department with little apparent understanding of how the very complex cultural sector works. Some consultation with the arts industry, especially with those institutions most affected, would have been reassuring and lent some credibility to the process.

On the issue of consultation, there is no evidence to suggest that there was any consultation with the Powerhouse Museum itself about the Government's decision. The wisdom of consultation prior to a major policy change (whose main purpose at least in theory should be to increase public access) is reflected in one of the major conclusions of the European Agenda for Culture, 2012:

*"Because of their complexity, initiatives aimed at increasing access **may be successful only if they are 'owned' by the arts organisation**, (their bold) rather than felt as an imposition by the funding authorities. It is therefore fundamental that the objectives are discussed and shared by funding authorities and institutions."*<sup>12</sup>

### **Concluding remarks**

The NSW Government has acted on the recommendations of Infrastructure NSW to establish a Sydney CBD cultural precinct, to include the named institutions within this precinct on the basis of their content and to exclude the Powerhouse Museum from it because of its location and content. Yet none of these recommendations is based on a credible, well-argued case.

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<sup>11</sup> World Cities Cultural Report 2014, p 153 (See [http://www.worldcitiescultureforum.com/assets/others/World\\_Cities\\_Culture\\_Report\\_2014\\_hires.pdf](http://www.worldcitiescultureforum.com/assets/others/World_Cities_Culture_Report_2014_hires.pdf))

<sup>12</sup> Report on Policies and good practices in the public arts and in cultural institutions to promote better access to and wider participation in culture, Work Plan for Culture 2011-2014, European Agenda for Culture, October 2012

On the contrary, the assertions underpinning the recommendations lack rigour and are easily refuted. They suggest a contrived case put in retrospect to seek to justify a decision already made in principle. They do no service to the people of NSW - who collectively own this fine institution and its collections - or to those whose careful and inspired planning saw the establishment of the Powerhouse Museum less than three decades ago, anticipated at the time to be a permanent new home for the collections of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences.

Since that time, the Museum has come to be recognised and appreciated almost as much for its magnificent adaptively re-used historic buildings as for its collections and exhibitions. There is a resonance between material culture and preserved industrial bricks and mortar that has further cemented its place in the fabric of the Ultimo precinct, where the Museum has established rich traditions for almost a century and a quarter. To needlessly destroy this unique and irreplaceable cultural asset in Sydney would be an appalling reflection on the attitude of the NSW Government towards the cultural heritage it holds in trust.

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