

**Submission
No 90**

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

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Inquiry into Museums & Galleries

Submission to the General Purpose Standing Committee No 4

Summary:

As cities grow, there are many examples of world class museums establishing satellite institutions at some physical distance from the original institution to serve the public interest of newer settlements. There are also many examples of museums sharing and loaning parts of collections that they cannot display themselves to other institutions and to new exhibition places built to satisfy legitimate cultural needs elsewhere. The case of the current NSW government's decision to close down a fine museum (the Powerhouse Museum) in the blatant interests of selling the land for private residential development is less obviously in the public interest.

I confine my submission to a consideration of the future of the Powerhouse Museum in the terms of reference d) and e) and to comments which derive specifically from my expertise as an historian of Sydney.

Submission:

Term of Reference e) sale of the Powerhouse site in Ultimo and its proposed move to Parramatta.

The two places of Sydney and Parramatta are located within the Indigenous lands of two different Aboriginal peoples. The original European settlement at Port Jackson and the European settlement at Parramatta both have distinct and different historical underpinnings. The subsequent trajectory of their histories followed paths that have produced distinct economic, demographic, cultural and social differences.

Parramatta

Today metropolitan Sydney encompasses a large continuous geographical area that extends well towards the Blue Mountains, but this does not negate Parramatta's proud and distinct history as one of the earliest settlements in Australia. Any museum/cultural complex created here must reflect its own history, not Ultimo's history.

Ultimo

The one-time working class area called Ultimo developed a rich complex of technical institutions associated with technical education. In 1878 the trustees of the Australian Museum mooted the establishment of a technical Museum. In 1879 there was a publicly funded International Exhibition held in Sydney's Botanical Gardens and Domain, housed in a spectacular building known as the Garden Palace. The exhibition was intended to showcase the colony's ingenuity and productivity to the world.

The Garden Palace burnt down, but the value of the exhibits were recognised as a nucleus of a collection for a new technical museum that was named the Technological, Industrial and Sanitary Museum of New South Wales. It was housed in a purpose built building on Harris Street, Ultimo in 1893.

Why was it located in Ultimo and not in the more central part of Sydney? Because way back then Ultimo was already becoming a centre for technical education. Sydney Technical College [the Tech] was established in 1882. This eventually became part of the New South Wales Institute of Technology in 1969. This evolved into the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) in 1988. The same year the Powerhouse Museum was built from the remnants of an obsolete powerhouse that had produced the power to run the city's trams until the 1960s. This then housed the collections of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences and the lovely old original museum buildings on the other side of Harris Street became part of Sydney TAFE.

For generations these institutions have been a truly entwined place of learning and technical expertise. The heritage of the place lies in its concentration of learning and technical expertise.

The MAAS has been on Harris Street for the long haul for good logical reasons.

Ultimo's Powerhouse

Today this part of Ultimo continues to be a technological place with its university, the headquarters of the ABC and what the economists call an 'industry hub' for the new economy - high tech industries in communications, computing, digital and data storage. These new high tech industries serve the digital world but they also know the value of physically clustering together for the quick exchange of expertise and thinking.

The Powerhouse Museum remains a perfect fit with all this. It is where it is because it belongs in Ultimo, not anywhere else in Sydney. Right here is a genuine arts and sciences precinct, enriched by its own museum. A museum of international standing but with long-held local loyalties. Removing it will diminish the significance of the area as well as the significance of the museum.

Term of reference d) access to the collections of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences.

Historically Ultimo was cut off from the city by wharves, the powerhouse and the railway goods yards and storage sheds that lined the western side of Darling Harbour, making it a no-go area for pedestrians. The historical record is replete with complaints from residents over access to the city, toll charges to walk across the Pyrmont Bridge, the physical dangers presented by the railways and so on.

When the Goods Line was recently developed as a pedestrian precinct it was hailed as creating a new connection back into the city, and a new accessible frontage for the important public buildings that are located along its length. The Goods Line would assist in increasing visibility and access for tourists and visitors between the Chinatown/Darling Harbour precincts and the Powerhouse Museum.

As with many museums, the MAAS holds more material than it can at present display. This is not an argument for moving it. This is the common situation with many great collecting institutions and points to the need for increased accessibility through funding for digital display and for distributed exhibition across institutions, not closure.

The government was not transparent in its intentions to spend public money on developing this Goods Line merely for the private benefit of real estate developers. Neither has it been transparent in justifying closure of the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo in the interests of the same private interests.