

**Submission
No 117**

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

Name: Mr Jean-Pierre Alexandre

Date received: 12 August 2016

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

SUBMISSION TO THE GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No4

August 11, 2016

INTRODUCTION

I Jean-Pierre ALEXANDRE of _____, wish to make the following submission to the General Purpose Standing Committee No 4 Inquiry into Museums and Galleries.

I first wish to disclose that I co-signed a previous submission as a co-convenor of the Save the Powerhouse campaign. The present document is my own personal submission.

SUBMISSION

I obviously support all the points raised in the Save the Powerhouse campaign submission and summarise them as follows:

A) I oppose the sale of the Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo (item (e) of the Inquiry Terms of Reference) for the following reasons:

- 1) It would damage Australia's international reputation.
The closure of such a cultural icon and the sale of the site to private interests would be unprecedented in the developed world.
The Premier's reference to the Smithsonian Museum in the USA, which managed to develop more than 20 cultural establishments without ever closing one, is embarrassing.
- 2) The Museum has a historical, cultural and economic association with Ultimo dating back to the 19th century.
It is the legacy of Ultimo industrial past.
- 3) The sale of the site to private interests would jeopardise the key link of Ultimo with the CBD through the recently opened "Goodsline" pedestrian mall.
It would also waste the opportunity the Museum created to attract the millions of tourists visiting Sydney annually when it opened its new "Goodsline" entrance a year ago.
- 4) The closure of the Museum and the sale of the Ultimo site does not make economic sense:
 - The Powerhouse was designed to display very large objects like aeroplanes and steam engines and the Museum owns a collection of half a million items, many of them requiring strict temperature and humidity-controlled storage facilities.
This makes it much more expensive to replicate the Powerhouse display and storage facilities and shift its collections than for any other museum. Costs would far exceed the expected proceeds of the site sale to private interests.
 - The disused Ultimo Power Station was transformed into the Powerhouse Museum less than 30 years ago at costs (in today's currency) far exceeding the expected proceeds of the sale.
Writing down such a public investment over such a short period of time would be a vast waste of taxpayer money and bad financial practice.

B) I oppose the move of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta (item (e) of the Inquiry Terms of Reference) for the following reasons:

1) West Sydney deserves its fair share of the State cultural investment and I strongly support the establishment of a world-class cultural institution in West Sydney but:

- This establishment must reflect the history and values of West Sydney, rather than just mirror Ultimo's industrial past.

- Be the result of a genuine, widespread consultation with West Sydney residents. I note in particular 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.

2) The Discovery Centre in Castle Hill, a Powerhouse Museum satellite, is located only 10km away from Parramatta.

Closed for a \$34 Million expansion it is due to re-open soon.

3) The "Old David Jones" car park, the site chosen for the new Museum in Parramatta, is unsuitable:

- It is located on the Parramatta River banks and is regularly flooded.

- It is much smaller than the Ultimo site and could only accommodate a "cut down" version of the Powerhouse where the exhibition of very large objects would be drastically reduced.

- It was earmarked by the Parramatta Council (prior to forced amalgamation) for other purposes.

4) The Powerhouse Museum acquired its current name when the old Ultimo Power Station was refurbished and the new Museum was inaugurated in 1988.

A Powerhouse Museum not housed in a powerhouse would make little sense.

C) I believe the Ultimo Powerhouse Museum has a real economic impact on cultural tourism and supports the visitor economy in Sydney and NSW (item (h) of the Inquiry Terms of Reference)

1) The Ultimo Powerhouse Museum has been part of Inner Sydney residents' day-to-day life for over a century but is also regularly patronised by Greater Sydney (40% of all visits) and regional NSW (12%) visitors for whom the Museum is a traditional part of the "Sydney tour". Over a quarter of all visitors come from other States (18%) and overseas (9%). In all nearly half a million people visit the Ultimo Powerhouse every year.

This is only made possible thanks to the Museum location which is:

- Centrally located

- Close to other tourist attractions (Paddy's Markets, Chinatown, Chinese Garden, Darling Harbour, Maritime Museum, etc...).

- Well served by public transport (next to Paddy's Market light rail station, a few hundred meters away from Central station...)

Visitor numbers increased by 12% after the opening of the Museum "Goodsline" entrance.

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.

2) The Ultimo Powerhouse Museum is also a strong supporter of the local economy:

- It forms part of the Ultimo techno-educational chain, together with the ABC, UTS and TAFE.
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.
- The Museum also supports hundreds of jobs in small businesses in Ultimo including cafes and restaurants which cater for visitors and Museum staff.

D) I believe the NSW government policy, funding and support for museums and galleries, museum and gallery buildings and heritage collections (item (a) of the Inquiry Terms of Reference) are inadequate

1) *"That's the standard technique of privatisation: defund, make sure things don't work, people get angry, you hand it over to private capital"* (Noam Chomsky): Over the past few years that NSW government support for the Powerhouse Museum's programs and exhibitions has declined, funding was reduced and staff retrenched presumably in order to justify selling the site and moving the Museum elsewhere.
Arts Minister Troy Grant even claimed that "the Museum must close because visitor numbers are falling", when they in fact rose by 12%!

2) The Government budget for the Arts is unfairly distributed: 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 has made no allocation to West Sydney, which was told by Arts Minister Troy Grant that "If you want (arts) infrastructure build it yourselves."

3) *"Robbing Peter to pay Paul"* and, on the way, trying to pit West Sydney residents against Inner City ones can hardly form the backbone of an enlightened Art policy.

E) I believe the development and transparency of advice to the government on priorities for NSW museums and galleries (item (f) of the Inquiry Terms of Reference) are inadequate

1) Advice to the Government on the question of moving the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta has been veiled in total secrecy.
Many reports were commissioned to private consultants at taxpayer's expenses. These reports not only were not made public but were withheld under "Cabinet Information" policy from "Freedom of Information" documents recently obtained by the Sydney Morning Herald.

2) Above-mentioned 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 still continue to promote to the public the fiction that the move would be covered by sale of the Ultimo site (\$200M at most).

3) There has been no genuine consultation with community groups in Inner Sydney or West Sydney about any aspects of the proposal.

4) Several museum experts have submitted their ideas to Government and have been ignored.

5) The Government has demonstrated a consistent policy of appointing hand-picked “mates” to key positions of influence (MAAS Director, MAAS Trust President...), replacing previous independent officials.

CONCLUSION

- The sale of the Ultimo Powerhouse site to private interests would:
 - o Damage Australia’s international reputation. Educated nations do not sell off their heritage cultural treasures.
 - o Rob Ultimo of its historical jewel, seriously damage the local economy and cut it off again from the adjoining CBD.

- The re-location of the Museum to Parramatta is unsuitable since:
 - o There is already a Powerhouse Museum in Castle Hill, 10km North of Parramatta
 - o The new Museum would be constructed on a smaller, flood prone site and could only be a cut-down version of the original Museum.
 - o It has been decided without any consultation of the West Sydney populations who may want a cultural institution truly reflecting their own past and values rather than a poor replica of Ultimo industrial past heritage.
 - o Despite the Government’s declarations the number of visitors would be drastically down.

- The whole project does not make economic sense and, according to the documents obtained under “Freedom of Information”, the process does not seem to be adequately managed. Expert advices were systematically ignored.

- The budget for the Arts in NSW seems poorly managed, funds are unfairly distributed, electoral considerations appearing to take precedent over real needs and fairness.

Jean-Pierre ALEXANDRE