

**Submission
No 119**

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

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Leo Schofield

POWER HOUSE

As a former Trustee of the Powerhouse Museum for almost a decade, an Honorary Life Trustee and a significant donor to the museum's collection, I wish to register the strongest possible opposition to the proposed re-location of this iconic Sydney institution to Parramatta.

I offer a dozen cogent reasons (and could supply many more!) as to why this proposal is not only misguided but also absurdly costly, in terms of both money and loss of prestige.

HISTORICAL VALUE

This unique institution has been part and parcel of Sydney life for a century and a half, growing in stature and relevance over time. For one hundred and twenty-two years the citizens of Sydney, aged from eight to eighty, have found entertainment enlightenment and education in Harris Street, ultimo, first at the eccentric and much loved Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences and later, when the vast, eclectic collection moved across the road, to the Powerhouse Museum.

COLLECTIONS – A MUSEUM'S IRREPLACEABLE ASSET

A museum is primarily about its collections and there are centuries of practice that support that view.

Because its astonishing holdings embrace science, technology, humble evidence of social history and, at the far end of the spectrum, a stupendous collection of decorative arts and design, the Powerhouse is a cultural institution unique in Australia and probably in the southern hemisphere.

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COLLECTIONS – EXPERIENCE NEEDED

Understanding and displaying collections is a specialist profession. It is curious that neither the Director of

the Museum of Contemporary Art at Circular Quay, a keen advocate of re-location, nor the current director of the Powerhouse has experience of museum collections. Indeed, they seem to be unaware of the scope and value of the museum's holdings and in fact, indifferent to objects. The simple fact is that the MCA is an exhibition space while the current Powerhouse director comes from the world of commercial galleries. The Powerhouse has long needed an experienced and charismatic museum professional.

OWNERSHIP

The Powerhouse's irreplaceable collections belong to the people of New South Wales. They have either paid for them in their taxes or generously

donated them to the museum. They are not casino chips to be gambled with. Who will donate to a phantom museum in Parramatta?

ACCESSIBILITY – OR LACK THEREOF

The current director of the Powerhouse is reported in the Sydney Morning Herald as saying that visitors to a new site in Parramatta, one kilometre from the train station, because "They know that they can go and have a lovely cup of coffee there." Clearly, rich alternatives are on offer throughout Sydney without hiking to Parramatta.

DEMOLITION BY NEGLECT?

Too often developers, keen to maximise profit from historic sites

allow them to fall into neglect as an excuse for demolition. Governments should not be party to this unseemly and nihilistic practice.

That the Powerhouse has, in recent years seen a modest fall in visitor numbers is perhaps a reflection on poor choices of leaders, supine boards of trustees and official indifference is inescapable fact. But this should in no way diminish the importance of long-established and much-loved element of our cultural landscape.

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THE REPUTATION OF NEW SOUTH WALES

Already New South Wales is falling behind other states, most notably Victoria and Queensland, in the nurturing of its cultural institutions.

The rewards for investment in landmark institutions in terms of tourism and image are self-evident

TOURISM

As adumbrated above, two cities, Melbourne and Brisbane, have realised that maintenance and expansion of centrally-located cultural institutions and the development of new ones are policies critical to making those cities more appealing not only to residents but also to visitors. Instead of developing new and attractive specialist institutions, the NSW government seems hell-bent on shrinking our current stock.

The proposed move to Parramatta would be an act of stupendous vandalism to the tourist industry.

Would other venerable institutions such as the Art Gallery of New South Wales or the Australian Museum be dislodged from their historic locations in Sydney's heart?

SOCIAL ENGINEERING

When attempts at social engineering such as this proposal represents have been tried overseas, results have been as disastrous as botched organ transplants. The western world is littered with examples of such folly in the form of empty cultural centres and largely unvisited museums taken at blood-curdling cost to an indifferent audience.

UNWANTED IN PARRAMATTA

It is difficult to see this move for relocation as a need but rather a misguided government attempt to capitalise on a public asset or buy votes. Parramatta residents are hardly marching in the street demanding the Powerhouse be moved there. Quite the opposite. There is public indifference and as well as downright antipathy.

No thinking person would reject the idea of a museum in western Sydney. But such a museum should grow out of a manifest community need for one, preferably reflecting the particular history of Parramatta since the colonial era and its vibrant multicultural contemporary culture.

VOODOO ECONOMICS

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Museum professionals are rightly sceptical about the figures provided by the government's consultants. On those presented, the money derived from sale of the site would come nowhere near the cost of acquisition of another site, construction of an appropriate building and movement of a collection, the scale and importance of which is imperfectly understood by proponents of the move and their well intentioned but naïve advisers. There is no precedent for the movement of an entire railway train or an object such as the priceless Boulton and Watt steam engine, one of the rarest objects of its kind surviving in the world. How much would it cost to move? Certainly far, far more than currently estimated.

ALTERNATIVES

There are obvious ways to reinvigorate the Powerhouse without adopting a slash and burn approach and alienating donors in the process. One solution might be to simply build over part of the site as has been done in New York with other cultural landmarks such as Carnegie Hall, the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum without compromising their integrity.

Since the re-location was mooted, thousands of Sydneysiders have banded together to urge the Baird government to re-consider its plan and to involve experts with real knowledge of the Powerhouse's treasures and proven museum experience in any decision, rather than relying on urban planners and property developers.

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FORMERLY

Artistic Director:
Melbourne International Festival of the Arts, 1994-1996
Sydney Festival, 1998-2001
Sydney 2000 Olympic Arts Festival
Sydney New Year's Eve celebrations. 2002-5
Hobart Baroque, 2013, 2014
Brisbane Baroque, 2015, 2016

Consultant to:

Edinburgh Military Tattoo, Sydney 2005 and 2010
Paris Opera Ballet, Sydney 2007, 2013, Brisbane 2009
National Ballet of Cuba, Brisbane, 2014
Hamburg Ballet, Hamburg Philharmonic, Hamburg Opera season at QPAC, Brisbane 2015

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Bolshoi Ballet, 2013

American Ballet Theatre Brisbane 2015.