

**Submission  
No 121**

## **INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES**

**Name:** Ms Patricia Johnson

**Date received:** 13 August 2016

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# PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

## SUBMISSION

to the General Purpose Standing Committee no 4

**ATTENTION: the Chairman and Committee Members,**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into Museums and Galleries in NSW.

I am making this submission as a concerned Ultimo community member who

- **opposes** the Baird Government's decision to sell the Powerhouse Museum's Ultimo site for high-rise development, and to move the museum to Parramatta, but
- **completely supports** Western Sydney's need and desire for the necessary funding to establish local high quality arts and cultural facilities.

Since I do not have the requisite expertise to discuss all of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, I will address only those that directly or indirectly relate to

*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*

### **Key issues.**

- 1 The Powerhouse has unique local cultural and historical significance
- 2 It was custom-built at considerable state expense only 30 years ago
- 3 It is a key link in the Ultimo - CBD Goods Line
- 4 The move would harm Australia's international reputation
- 5 The move would cost up to \$1 billion
- 6 Need for genuine consultation
- 7 Why build a *second* Powerhouse in Parramatta?
- 8 More appropriate cultural institutions for Western Sydney
- 9 Unsuitable and unpopular site selected in Parramatta

### **AND**

*(h) The economic impact of museums and galleries on cultural tourism and their role in supporting the visitor economy in Sydney and regional NSW*

### **Key issues**

- 10 The Powerhouse is of vital importance to Sydney residents and visitors
- 11 It is critical to the local economy

With brief remarks on

- (a) - cultural/arts funding in NSW
- (f) - Government transparency

I'd like to advise the Committee that as a co-founder and convenor of the *Save the Powerhouse* community campaign, I lodged a further submission on August 6 jointly with Jean-Pierre Alexandre. In this capacity, I would be pleased to discuss my views with the Committee, as previously stated.

Sincere regards  
Patricia Johnson  
Ultimo, NSW 2007

## SUBMISSION

I oppose

### ***(e) (i) - The sale of the Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo and its proposed move to Parramatta***

#### **Key issues:**

##### **1 The Powerhouse has unique local cultural and historical significance**

- The Powerhouse Museum has been an integral part of the Ultimo landscape since 1893 when its predecessor, the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, was first established in Harris Street. The museum opened under its current name in 1988, following specific customisation of the old Ultimo Power Station.
- Many of the Museum's extensive collections reflect Ultimo's industrial past and would have little meaning in any other context.
- The Powerhouse is listed on both the NSW and National Heritage databases.
- It forms part of the City of Sydney's "Cultural Ribbon" together with Walsh Bay, the Maritime Museum, the proposed Barangaroo Museum, the Australian Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Opera House and the Art Gallery of NSW.

##### **2. It was custom-designed at considerable state expense only 30 years ago**

The Powerhouse Museum's total collection comprises more than 500,000 items. The spacious old Power Station was specially re-designed and adapted to house and display very large objects such as steam engines and aeroplanes, at an estimated cost of around \$400M.

The museum would therefore cost far more to move than other, conventional, museums because:

- The new museum building would need to be similarly designed to accommodate very large objects and very large exhibition volumes
- The actual relocation of the vast Powerhouse collection would be extremely expensive

These factors alone would mean that the actual project cost would far exceed the \$200M budget announced by the Government

##### **3. The Powerhouse is a key link in the Ultimo - CBD Goods Line**

The recent opening of the Goods Line pedestrian walkway finally provides a direct link between Ultimo and the CBD. It also provides a more convenient and attractive pedestrian and Light Rail access to the Powerhouse Museum which has opened a new entrance on its City-facing façade.

The sale and threatened high-rise development of the Powerhouse site would once again block the long awaited link between Ultimo and the CBD and waste a unique opportunity for the Museum to benefit directly from millions of Sydney visitors using the Goods Line.

#### **4. The move would damage Australia's international reputation**

Every capital in the developed world has a Science and Technology Museum, traditionally located in the heart of the city, where it is easily accessible to local and international visitors.- and where they **expect** to find it

The closure and demolition of an iconic institution such as the Ultimo Powerhouse would be literally unprecedented, and would call into question Australia's image as a developed country. The Smithsonian Museum in the USA, often mentioned by the NSW Premier as a model for the move, has in fact established more than 20 cultural institutions in Washington, Virginia and New York since the 19<sup>th</sup> century - without ever closing any of them.

#### **5. Elevated costs of moving the museum**

Expert budget estimates indicate that while the budget for establishing a new world class museum is generally around \$400,000M, the cost of moving the Powerhouse Museum would reach or exceed \$1 billion

These estimates include constructing a new building with equivalent exhibition volumes and equivalent collection storage capacities, and moving the collections from Ultimo to the new establishment. The total obviously far exceeds the \$150,000-\$200,000 M proceeds the Government has stated it expects from the sale of the Ultimo site.

The Ultimo Powerhouse Museum building is a customised reconversion of the old Ultimo Power Station, for which the architect, Lionel Glendenning was awarded the Sulman prize. It is a rare example of a successful industrial building reconversion in Australia.

The sale of the Museum site would mean writing off the reconversion costs. These are estimated at more than \$400,000M in today's currency, well in excess of the \$150,000-200,000M expected from the sale.

The Powerhouse museum opened in 1988. It is bad practice, a waste of public money, and unprecedented, to write off such an investment after less than 30 years.

#### ***e (ii) - and whether there are alternative strategies to support museum development***

#### **6 Need for genuine consultation**

At no stage has anyone been genuinely consulted about any aspect of this project.

The opinions and preferences of the Inner Sydney and Western Sydney communities, expert advice and input from museum specialists, arts and business professionals have been totally ignored by the Baird Government

Widespread, genuine consultation is essential before any decisions can be made about moving the Powerhouse Museum, and more generally, the management of museums and galleries in NSW,.

## **7 Why build a *second* Powerhouse Museum in Parramatta?**

The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences already has a branch in Western Sydney. The Discovery Centre was founded in 1947 in Castle Hill, just 10km North of Parramatta.

Currently closed for a \$34 M expansion, it displays large objects from the Powerhouse collections, such as trains and planes, and can be considered a successful satellite of the Powerhouse Museum. In fact, the Powerhouse collections are large enough to facilitate the establishment of several satellites, as only a small percentage of items are exhibited (in Ultimo and Castle Hill) at any one time because of space limitations.

The Baird Government has not explained the need to establish two branches of the Powerhouse Museum in Parramatta, leaving the NSW capital, the Powerhouse's traditional home, with none.

## **8. Better cultural options for Western Sydney**

Western Sydney residents deserve their fair share of the State's culture and arts investment.

I strongly support the establishment of (a) world-class cultural institution(s) in Western Sydney that:

- Reflect the history and values of Western Sydney, rather than just mirror Ultimo's industrial past
- Follow genuine, widespread consultation with Western Sydney residents to ensure their needs are heard and met.

## **9. Unsuitable, unpopular site selected in Parramatta**

The old David Jones Car Park, the site chosen for the new museum in Parramatta, on the banks of the Parramatta River-

-floods regularly, making it unsuitable for housing large museum collections which require a custom-built temperature and humidity –controlled environment.

-Is substantially smaller than the Ultimo site, allowing for only a "cut-down" version of the Museum where the exhibition of very large items would be drastically reduced

## ***(h) The economic impact of museums and galleries on cultural tourism and their role in supporting the visitor economy in Sydney and regional NSW***

### **10. The Powerhouse is vitally important to Sydney residents and visitors**

-The Ultimo Powerhouse Museum is an integral part of the day-to-day life of Sydney Inner West residents , many of whom have regularly visited it since childhood, and now bring their own children and grand-children.

- It is also a traditional part of the "Sydney tour", together with the adjacent Paddy's markets and Darling Harbour, for all Greater Sydney residents, including many from Western Sydney, and regional NSW, interstate and overseas visitors.

-In total, the Ultimo Powerhouse Museum welcomes almost half a million visitors annually and registered a 12% rise in visitor numbers in 2015.

-This was a direct result of the Museum's ongoing, proven appeal, enhanced by:

- Its convenient location near other tourist attractions (Paddy's market, Chinatown, Darling Harbour, Maritime Museum, etc..)
- Excellent public transport services (the Powerhouse is in comfortable walking distance from Central Station, close to Paddy's markets light rail station, etc...)

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.

### **11. Critical to the local economy**

In addition to its visible contribution to the NSW tourism industry, 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, and in this capacity provides a unique resource for internationally recognised scientific and technical research and development.

-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.

### **ADDITIONAL REMARKS**

***(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***

### **12. The Powerhouse needs Government support not (deliberate?) neglect**

It has been widely noted over the past few years that NSW government support for the Powerhouse Museum's programs and exhibitions has declined, presumably as part of its policy to reduce the museum's public appeal in order to "justify" moving it elsewhere.

This theory was substantiated by statements from Arts Minister Troy Grant in 2015 that "the Museum must close because visitor numbers are falling", when they in fact rose by a healthy 12%, as stated.

Instead of continuing attempts to further "run down" the Ultimo Powerhouse, the Government should inject new funding to restore the Museum to its full potential as Australia's leading contemporary resource for Applied Arts and Sciences.

### **13. The State Government 's arts budget must be more fairly distributed**

-Inner Sydney has traditionally received an unfairly large share of the NSW Government's culture and arts budget, at the expense of regional centres.

-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 it has made no allocation to Western Sydney, which was told by Arts Minister Troy Grant that "If you want (arts) infrastructure, you must build it yourselves."

As stated, I support the allocation of arts funding to Western Sydney for establishing appropriate arts/cultural facilities in Parramatta (and/or elsewhere in Western Sydney). Many local Parramatta community members reject the Government's "gift" of a cut-down version of the Powerhouse in favour of a new, world-class arts complex that includes a museum to reflect Parramatta's unique immigration and Aboriginal past.

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

To date, the source, nature and quality of advice to the Government on the question of moving the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta has been veiled in total secrecy.

Recently-released 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 continued to promote to the public the fiction that the move would be covered by sale of the Ultimo site (up to \$200M).

- As stated, there has been no genuine consultation with community groups or museum experts  
- Instead the Government has demonstrated a consistent policy of appointing hand-picked associates ("mates") to key positions of influence, replacing previous, independent, officials. Examples

- in 2014, Elizabeth Ann McGregor (MCA), a known intimate of Mike Baird, was appointed as the Government's "Ambassador to Western Sydney".

- In early 2016, Dolla Merillees, a known supporter of the move, was appointed as the new Powerhouse Director ahead of better-qualified candidates.

- In July, Vice-Chancellor of Western Sydney University Professor Barney Glover was appointed President of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS) Trust and will "play a pivotal role in the Powerhouse Museum's relocation to Parramatta."

**CONCLUSION**

I believe that there are numerous unanswered questions about the NSW Government's motivations, policy, processes and conduct regarding

- its proposal to move the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta, and
- its rationale regarding funding and support for museums and galleries across the State.

I respectfully ask the Committee to

- investigate these issues,
- attempt to uncover and make public the true facts.
- identify better alternatives to the current proposal to move the Powerhouse to Parramatta
- identify a fairer and more productive allocation of arts and culture funding across NSW

12/08/2016