

**Submission
No 133**

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

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Date received: 14 August 2016

Proposed removal of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta

Submission to Standing Committee 4 Inquiry into Museums and Galleries Parliament House, Macquarie Street, Sydney

August 2016

Introduction

In this submission I will ask the Standing Committee to consider several points when investigating the proposed sale of the Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo and its relocation to Parramatta, and I will argue that the proposal as it stands is not in the best interests of either the people of Sydney or the people of Western Sydney. Instead I propose that the existing Powerhouse Museum becomes a branch of a new Parramatta Museum.

This is one of two submissions I have made to the Inquiry. The other submission deals with health and medicine museums in NSW. Each submission proposes a different way of solving the controversy over the proposed removal of the Powerhouse Museum from Ultimo.

I write as a former curator, and later producer of permanent galleries, at the Powerhouse Museum (19 years), and as a current adjunct fellow with the Urban Research Program at the University of Western Sydney.

Costs involved with the relocation of the Powerhouse

I ask the committee to carefully consider properly-researched estimates of the costs of relocating the Powerhouse. These will include but not be limited to:

- Purchase of a site that is suitable environmentally and that is of sufficient size to accommodate a museum as large as the whole of the current Powerhouse Museum (that is, not the 'David Jones carpark' site currently being considered).
- The building of an entirely new museum to world standards, including spaces for exhibitions, public programs, public research and reading, storage, conservation labs, workshops, administrative offices and cafe.
- The dismantling of exhibitions, laboratories, storage spaces, and administrative offices at the current Ultimo site.
- The packing, removal and unpacking of thousands of museum objects.
- The development of an entirely new set of exhibitions.

I suggest that a realistic estimate of the money realised by selling the Ultimo site would not come anywhere near covering the costs listed above. Either the shortfall would have to be found by the government, or Sydney would end up with no Powerhouse and Parramatta would end up with a pale third-rate shadow of the Powerhouse.

Cultural costs

Cities around the world depend on their museums as tourist attractions. In countries I have visited, the choice of museums, even in small cities, is overwhelming. So at a time when Sydney celebrates itself as a destination city for visitors from interstate and overseas, and when NSW is dependent on the tourist dollar, it is inconceivable that the government should consider removing one of its great museums from the centre of the city.

I use the word 'great' advisedly. The Powerhouse used to be a great museum and at the time of its visionary re-invention in 1988 it was the greatest museum in Australia. However successive state governments have whittled away its budget and forced huge numbers of staff redundancies. Its permanent galleries are tired (some are nearly 30 years old) and its offer of temporary exhibitions and programs cannot begin to satisfy the cultural and educational needs of its potentially diverse audience – an audience that could, and did, include culturally aware adults and young adults from all parts of Sydney and NSW, families, pre-schoolers, groups from schools and tertiary institutions, older people, people from different cultural groups, and visitors to Sydney from country areas, interstate and overseas.

What the Powerhouse needs is refurbishment, re-staffing, revitalization and a resetting of its vision, not relocation.

A museum for Parramatta

It is clear that Western Sydney should have its own major museum. As a rapidly developing city at the centre of greater Sydney's burgeoning population, Parramatta is the obvious location for a new museum.

The answer is, however, not to relocate the Powerhouse but to use the money that would otherwise be spent on the relocation to establish an entirely new museum. This museum could be a branch of the Powerhouse, thus avoiding the duplication of costs associated with, for example, administration and marketing, research library, curation and exhibition development, and conservation and management of the collection.

Better still, why not establish a new, world-class museum in Parramatta and move the centre of Powerhouse operations to that new museum. In this way, the current Powerhouse would become a branch of the Parramatta Museum.

The new Parramatta Museum would have, as mentioned above, spaces not only for exhibitions, public programs and a cafe, but also spaces for public research and reading, storage, conservation labs, workshops and administrative offices.

Currently the Powerhouse Museum is located in two buildings at Ultimo. These are, firstly, the museum proper that the general public is familiar with. This is the heritage-listed former Ultimo Powerhouse building where exhibitions and public programs are held and some administrative offices are located. The second building is the 'tram sheds' adjacent to the museum proper. In here are behind-the-scenes facilities such as the curatorial and collection management departments, research library, conservations laboratories, workshop and underground collection storage.

If the centre of operations were to move to Parramatta this second, 'tram shed' site could be sold and the proceeds put towards establishing the new Parramatta Museum.

The Powerhouse in Sydney as a branch of a new Parramatta Museum

The benefits of this arrangement should dispel many of the concerns that have been voiced about moving the Powerhouse to Parramatta.

- Parramatta becomes the location for a new, world-class museum.
- The new institution is a museum in its own right and is not seen as the 'little brother' of a central Sydney museum.
- The Powerhouse Museum remains in Sydney as a branch of the Parramatta Museum.
- The centre of operations for this bi-branched museum is located at the Parramatta site.
- Administrative and other costs are not duplicated because, in effect, there is one museum on two different sites.
- Western Sydney benefits from the cultural capital and employment opportunities always associated with museums.
- Potential audiences in Western Sydney have a museum that satisfies their cultural and educational needs and is convenient to reach.
- The Sydney Powerhouse is revitalised to suit diverse audiences that include not only Sydney people, but also especially visitors from NSW country areas, interstate and overseas.
- The proceeds from the sale of the 'tram sheds' building adjacent to the Powerhouse in Ultimo are put towards the cost of establishing the new Parramatta Museum.

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