

**Submission  
No 135**

## **INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES**

**Name:** Ms Sandra McEwen

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**Submission to Standing Committee 4: Inquiry into Museums and Galleries  
Legislative Council  
Parliament House, Macquarie Street, Sydney NSW 2000**

**Summary**

- The NSW Government's proposal to sell the Ultimo site of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences will result in gross mismanagement of public funds. It will cost approximately one billion dollars to move the Museum's collection to Parramatta, and to build and fit out a new venue. If the Ultimo site is sold for 300 million dollars that will leave a shortfall of 700 million dollars to be met by taxpayers.
- The proposal to build a new museum on the Parramatta River flood plain indicates willingness to further waste public money. Sea levels and river heights are rising as a result of climate change. Areas now prone to flooding during heavy rain will experience greater flooding in the next 100 years. By their very nature, Museums exist over hundreds of years. Why waste money creating a new building that might be unusable in 50 years? The Museum houses the nation's treasures. Don't put them at risk.
- Moving the Museum to Parramatta would create a barrier to domestic and international tourists. Visitors stay in the heart of the city and are unlikely to travel an hour west on a train when they have limited time in Sydney. It also disadvantages people from the east, south and north of Sydney. The radial nature of greater Sydney's public transport system exacerbates this disadvantage.
- Moving the Museum to Parramatta will break up a network of synergistic creative associations. Valuable working relationships between Museum staff and local businesses and institutions will be fractured.

Thank you for accepting my submission.

Sincerely

Sandra McEwen

Legislative Council  
Standing Committee 4  
Inquiry into Museums and Galleries

14 August 2016

Dear Committee Members

**Re: Proposed relocation of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences from Ultimo to Parramatta**

Permit me to admit my bias. Until 2014 I was Principal Curator of Science and Industry at the Powerhouse Museum, and had worked at the Museum for 29 years. I thus have in-depth knowledge of the size and nature of the Museum's collection, the costs involved in moving it, and the specialist fit-out needed to build a new museum.

**Museums certainly can move, but it takes an enormous amount of time and money.** In 1988, when we opened the doors of the Powerhouse in Ultimo, the Museum's third home, the 400 highly-skilled staff members had spent the best part of 5 years preparing the new Museum. At the time it was lauded as a world-class museum.

During his electioneering in 2015 Mr Baird stated that the new museum will be up and running in Parramatta by 2018. This suggests either a drastic under-appreciation of what is needed to build and fit out a museum or that there are plans for a vastly reduced institution. Cumulative government funding cuts over the last twenty years have stripped the Museum of staff and resources to refresh its exhibitions. Instead of spending the extra \$700 million dollars that will be needed to move the Collection and build a new museum in Parramatta, why not use that money to let the current Museum again become a world-class venue?

Of course, this assumes that the Government will build a new museum at all. It is unlikely that the sale of the Ultimo site will fetch anywhere near the dollars needed to move the Museum's collection, and build and fit out an equivalent institution. I am deeply concerned that the government does not appreciate there will be a significant shortfall in the order of 700 million dollars and will not be committed to meeting that shortfall.

**The Museum's current location near Central Station provides equitable access for people from the north, south, east and west of Sydney, and easy access for tourists** staying in Sydney. A move to Parramatta would disadvantage the people of the north, south, east and inner west. Further, it would not simply discourage tourists; it would prove to be a positive barrier to almost the entire touring community. And, whilst there are certainly cultural events in the west, we have yet to see any evidence that people from the north, south and east will travel to the west for cultural outings. The radial nature of Sydney's public transport network would make the trip completely onerous for current visitors who live on the Central and Illawarra Coasts.

**The relocation of the technological museum from the cultural heart of Sydney would send an appalling message to business and the next generation of engineers, technologists and entrepreneurs. The NSW Government would reinforce the concept that science, technology and industry do not, in fact,**

**matter.** The Museum is far more than a fluffy entertainment venue. It is an institution that draws links between science, design, technology, industry and people, and has enormous capacity to influence creative minds. Almost 60% of Australia's GDP is generated by science, technology and engineering. In Ultimo the Museum provides intellectual stimulus and easy access to resources for students of four universities.

Ripping the Museum from its contextual home in Ultimo will disrupt significant working relationships that are central to the intellectual and financial life of the Museum. For the last 25 years Museum staff have developed strong working relationships with local institutions, including technology start-ups, the ABC, Sydney Institute of TAFE, University of Technology, University of Sydney and University of NSW. The Museum currently works with businesses like Sydney Water, and the Institution of Engineers to create valuable displays in the heart of Sydney. Those businesses approached the Museum specifically because of its proximity to Sydney CBD. These relationships underpin that the Museum is far more than a place to store and display objects or to host exhibitions. It has been, and is, a part of our social structure and economy. These roles and relationships will be lost if the Museum is moved. And they will not be replaced.

**The Museum was established in 1879 to help people make sense of the technological world in which they lived. Now that University and TAFE systems have become unaffordable for many people the Museum's role is even more important.** It can provide basic scientific and technological literacy to help citizens make informed decisions about issues that affect them. In the future Australians will face opportunities and challenges that require a rational approach, critical thinking and the adoption of new technologies, attitudes and behaviours. Some of those challenges and opportunities include resource scarcity, urbanisation, food and water security, climate change, new biotechnologies and the aging population. All of the people of Sydney – not just those in the western suburbs – need a technological museum.

The Museum's unique Collection of 500,000 objects is at the heart of the institution. It can illustrate links between any subjects you might choose – from chemistry to new textiles, clocks to railways, engines to agriculture, and sanitation to longevity. It deserves to be treasured and held together because it helps us make sense of who we are, how we've changed technologies over time, and how they've changed us. It holds our stories.

**The proposal to sell off the Museum feels very much like 'selling our future for thirty pieces of silver.'** The education of our population is an investment, not a luxury, and will make Australia wealthy, innovative and productive in coming decades. The Museum provides informal education and inspiration to a broad range of audiences and is not simply a venue for school visits.

**Lastly, I want to point out the enormous stupidity of the proposal to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to build a museum on the Parramatta River floodplain.** Ignore the potential impact of climate change at your own peril but don't waste taxpayers' money! As sea levels rise, so will river heights. If the NSW Government insists on going ahead with this ugly, greedy deal to benefit developers in Ultimo, for goodness sake build a new museum on higher ground. That way it will survive to tell the story!

Yours sincerely

Sandra McEwen