

**Submission  
No 136**

## **INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES**

**Name:** Ms Christina Sumner OAM

**Date received:** 14 August 2016

---

## SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES

### GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 4

#### INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

This inquiry into the performance and effectiveness of the NSW Government agencies responsible for the organisation, structure and funding of museums and galleries in New South Wales identifies nine particular Terms of Reference.

This submission addresses **Term of Reference (d)**:

**Access to the collections of the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, the Australian Museum and any other state collections held in trust for the people of New South Wales, and programs that promote physical and online access**

#### KEY ISSUES:

- 1. The collection of the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences (MAAS), ie applied arts and applied sciences, is fundamentally different from and therefore critically balances those of other principal CBD-based cultural institutions.**

Founded in 1880, following the Sydney International Exhibition of 1879, MAAS is the second oldest NSW state museum after the Australian Museum. With approximately half a million objects in its collection, in the fields of science and technology, decorative arts and design and NSW social history, MAAS is the only museum of its kind in Australia.

The MAAS collection directly reflects the 'made world' with a primary whole-of-collection focus on design and technology in Australia, the Asia-Pacific region and the surrounding global context. It thus differs essentially from the principally natural history and anthropology collections of the Australian Museum and the fine and contemporary arts of the AGNSW and MCA. Ranging from the physical and biological sciences to decorative arts, crafts and contemporary design, from communications and transport to social history, engineering, archaeology and architecture, this unique and wonderful collection was built and strengthened over the Museum's 130+ years in its Ultimo home. Like most museum collections, it's been a joint commitment by the Museum community as a whole - curators, donors and patrons - to create a seriously valuable resource for our enquiry, enjoyment and edification today and into the future.

The MAAS collection is unquestionably of immense state, national and international importance and is integral to Sydney's capacity to reflect human creativity and innovation physically in its major centrally-located cultural institutions. The Powerhouse Museum and its collection must remain readily accessible in the heart of Sydney, rather than on its periphery, in order to continue to offer, in partnership with the Australian Museum, AGNSW and MCA, well-balanced and comprehensive museum content. All these institutions are part of the critical mass of cultural infrastructure that helps make Sydney a great city. Dispersing the Powerhouse Museum or any one of these facilities from the CBD will profoundly weaken and diminish Sydney.

**2. The sheer breadth of the MAAS collection is inadequately known and understood; increased investment in centrally-located physical access and comprehensive online access is urgently required**

The remarkable diversity and cultural significance of the MAAS collection is easy to underestimate, simply because of its incomprehensible breadth. A tabular summary of the collection was put together by curators in early 2012 with a view to bringing the scope, rarity and significance of the collection more readily within everyone's grasp. This can be accessed on the Powerhouse Museum Alliance website

at <https://powerhousemuseumalliancedotcom.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/maas-collection-28feb12.pdf>. It is nevertheless incomplete! Most of the objects and collections listed can be further explored on the Museum's website at <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/menu.php>.

Keeping the Powerhouse in Ultimo and building a new museum in Parramatta that's specially designed for Western Sydney would secure equivalent access to this quite extraordinary collection for everyone. If the Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo is sold and relocated to Parramatta, physical access to this outstanding state collection will be severely reduced for the vast majority of visitors, whether from Sydney, regional NSW, interstate or international. No location in Parramatta is as accessible as the Ultimo site, even for people from Western Sydney. Some 30% of the population of NSW lives in Western Sydney while the remaining 70% who live elsewhere in the state are unlikely to make the long journey to Parramatta.

True to its 1880 origins as Sydney's Technological Museum, the linking threads that connect these apparently-disparate objects are design and technology. As these and other objects are integral to the history, development and unique culture of the Powerhouse Museum, so is the physical Museum inseparable from its place in metropolitan Sydney, and specifically in the innovation precinct of Ultimo. It takes time to build a museum and to formulate its particular character and personality, to encourage visitation and generate community support. The Powerhouse Museum has evolved into the well-established and much-loved cultural institution it is thanks to both the skill and creativity of its staff and the millions of tax-payers dollars invested in it.

The proposal to dismantle this institution, so strongly linked to place, seems wilfully destructive and would be wasteful in the extreme of human achievement, financial investment, and community opinion and contributions over time. To build a new museum for the people of Western Sydney, considered and designed specifically for them, would conversely be money wisely spent.

**3. Maintaining and adequately funding the Powerhouse Museum and the existing programs that promote physical and online access to the MAAS collection is crucial and appropriate; there is already a MAAS collection presence in Western Sydney at the Powerhouse Discovery Centre.**

Museum audiences, whether local, regional, interstate or international, expect major state cultural institutions to be centrally located. As the capital of New South Wales, the city of Sydney is and will always be its centre and cultural heart. All the state's major museums are located in the Sydney CBD, where some of them, including the Powerhouse Museum, have been for well over a century. The roots of these institutions are firmly established in the city, physically, intellectually and socially; they are very strongly linked to place.

To propose moving any of Sydney's major museums or art galleries would be ill-considered and in fact unconscionable, surely the whim of philistines. No such unprincipled proposal threatens the Australian Museum, the Art Gallery of NSW or the Museum of Contemporary Art, and no such threat to the Powerhouse Museum should ever have been contemplated, let alone made.

Increased funding to counteract the shrinking dollars of the last decade is essential to ensure the MAAS collection receives the acknowledgement and support it merits. It is realistic to reiterate that

the museum audience, when seeking physical access to the information held in MAAS's significant collection, will not make the journey to Parramatta. More than likely they will make do with online access, which is itself a crucial and illuminating opportunity for those at a distance, but is simply not physical access.

It is worth noting that MAAS already has a collection presence in Western Sydney, in its excellent display storage facility at the Powerhouse Discovery Centre. Here it is possible to see many of the Museum's transport and other objects, but only once a month or by appointment. Most of the objects are stacked high up (and safely) on pallet racks, so are inaccessible. Some are grouped 'like with like', many are boxed and invisible, and none are in interpretive contexts.

**Submitted by:**

Christina Sumner OAM

As a Powerhouse Museum staff member from 1985 to 2013, I held a range of progressively senior curatorial positions until appointed principal curator design and society in 2007. I worked closely with the Museum collection for 28 years, engaging with all aspects of its research, development, management and interpretation. As principal curator, I regularly sat on the Museum Executive, attended numerous Trust meetings and was privy to the processes of museum management, policy and decision making. I love the Museum, respect its history and deeply appreciate the passion and creativity poured into its excellent programs both by staff and the wider Museum community.

While I remain connected to the Museum as a volunteer in the curatorial department, the views I express in this submission are as a deeply concerned private individual.

I am happy to stand as a witness at any later hearing.

## SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES

### GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 4

#### INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

This inquiry into the performance and effectiveness of the NSW Government agencies responsible for the organisation, structure and funding of museums and galleries in New South Wales identifies nine particular Terms of Reference.

This submission addresses **Term of Reference (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. Museums simply cannot be picked up and moved without destroying their character and their own particular connection to place and community.**

I was horrified and saddened by the proposal to sell the Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo and 'move' the Museum to Parramatta. No museum can be picked up and moved without destroying it. All museums are firmly linked to place and strongly bonded to their community and constituents. Understanding and respecting this reality, no government in the world has ever moved a major museum from its city centre. Easily accessible central locations are the norm and the best for the major museums and galleries of any large city. England's Science and Victoria & Albert Museums will never be uprooted and moved to Bristol nor, closer to home, will the Victorian government ever consider relocating Melbourne Museum or the National Gallery of Victoria to Geelong.

The unique identity of the Powerhouse Museum, its design, collections and exhibitions, are inextricably linked to the historic Ultimo Power Station in which it has been housed since 1988, less than 30 years. The inspired decision to re-purpose this building was achieved at considerable but worthwhile cost to taxpayers, and a further \$25m was spent on refurbishment in the last five years. Whatever new museum the state government eventually builds in Parramatta, and this writer supports the development of strengthening cultural facilities for Western Sydney, it could not be the Powerhouse Museum, as that iconic museum will have been destroyed.

The Powerhouse Museum must instead remain in its long-established place in Ultimo, where it has been part of a vibrant educational precinct and community since opening as the Technological Museum in 1893. It is wilfully destructive to seek to sell off the site and demolish the Museum. Additionally, the Museum's established network of partnerships with the neighbouring educational institutions of TAFE and UTS would be destroyed, as well as relationships with the ABC, Darling Harbour, the new Goods Line, and local communities and enterprises.

The Powerhouse Museum must be adequately funded to run its exhibitions and public programs. Options need to be considered to enable a broader physical representation of the collection, as well as its on-line access. Despite good attendances in recent years there have been substantial cuts in staff and program funding which have inevitably limited the Museum's scope and reach.

These programs should include a continuation of current outreach to other centres, including Parramatta. While museums cannot be picked up and moved like a pawn in a game of chess, they are always more than willing to share their collections.

**2. The cost of the proposed move has been seriously underestimated; keeping MAAS in the CBD will preclude a massive waste of government investment in this institution to date.**

To waste the investment already made in the Powerhouse Museum would be a profligate squandering of public funds. The sum envisaged from selling the Ultimo site is around \$200m. This is nowhere near the cost that includes packing and moving the collection, with massively heavy objects such as the Boulton & Watt steam engine, Number 1 Loco and the Catalina flying boat, which were 'built into' the structure of the Powerhouse in the 1980s; in all there are about half a million objects including many thousands of small and delicate items. Together with salaries, building an approximation of the existing museum, and the complex task of creating and installing new exhibitions, the cost has been conservatively estimated at around \$600m. Anything less would result in a significantly diminished 'Powerhouse Museum' for Western Sydney.

It has been made very clear that the government has not sought the advice of professional museological experts in putting forward this seriously ill-considered proposal. Audience expectations have not been assessed, nor have planning, costing and management been considered. It appears that they looked at no other options - neither to enhance the Powerhouse Museum in its long-established context, nor to find out what kind of a museum the people of Western Sydney might actually want and benefit from.

Why was this not addressed as a priority in the first instance? It seems the government primarily covets the Ultimo site for development rather than having any wish to serve the best interests of the people of Parramatta. Good governments expand museums and cultural opportunities; they do not destroy or minimise them. The NSW government has adequate funds in its \$600m cultural infrastructure budget to build a new museum for Western Sydney without selling off the Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo and destroying a much-loved museum. It's a matter of choice and priorities.

**3. Parramatta deserves a cultural institution that reflects its own history and cultural significance and meets the specific needs of its own communities.**

The role of government is to serve all its people and the people of Parramatta, as well as the rest of Sydney's diverse population, deserve excellent museum. If it's too hard and too far for the people of Sydney's outer suburbs to reach city-based museums, then government is responsible for building additional museums in those areas. Such museums can draw freely upon the collections of all major state museums, not just MAAS but also AGNSW, MCA and Living Museums, as well as forming collections of their own to reflect local history, culture and concerns.

Population centres away from the cities, such as major suburbs and regional towns, establish cultural institutions with programs that meet the needs of their immediate audiences. They support local history through their own museums and they support contemporary artists through their own galleries. They can also, of course, host touring exhibitions from major state museums.

It is noticeable that among Sydney's major suburban and outer population centres, such as Manly, Fairfield, Hazelhurst, Penrith, Campbelltown and Casula, and regional centres such as Penrith, Lake Macquarie, Gosford, Wollongong, Newcastle, Maitland, Cowra, Bathurst and Tamworth, Parramatta has no museum or gallery to tell its story and meet local needs.

This oversight on Parramatta's part must be rectified through establishing its own historical and cultural centre, and developing a Parramatta Gallery of art/design to complement its active and

successful Riverside Theatre. Local audiences certainly want equity with the rest of the state, but they want their own institutions rather than a transplanted state museum whose key context and audience is elsewhere. This is only fair.

**Submitted by:**

Christina Sumner OAM

As a Powerhouse Museum staff member from 1985 to 2013, I held a range of progressively senior curatorial positions until appointed principal curator design and society in 2007. I worked closely with the Museum collection for 28 years, engaging with all aspects of its research, development, management and interpretation. As principal curator, I sat on the Museum Executive, attended numerous Trust meetings and was privy to the processes of museum management, policy and decision making. I love the Museum, respect its history and deeply appreciate the passion and creativity poured into its excellent programs both by staff and the wider Museum community.

While I remain connected to the Museum as a volunteer in the curatorial department, the views I express in this submission are as a deeply concerned private individual.

I am happy to stand as a witness at any later hearing.