

**Submission  
No 147**

## **INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES**

**Name:** Ms Helen OBoyle

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**Inquiry Into Museums and Galleries  
Submission to the General Purpose Standing Committee No4**

My submission particularly concerns aspects of the inquiry related to the Powerhouse Museum. It addresses points 1d and 1e:

*1d) access to the collections of the Museum of Applied Arts and 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*

*1e) 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*

**Museum access in the West**

It is interesting that the CBD museum that the Premier wishes to “give” to Parramatta is... the only one that already has a satellite campus in the west, in Castle Hill! Even during the Parliamentary Debate, which I attended, the members speaking in favour of the move would say that it was about time the west got some cultural facilities – completely refusing to mention that the Castle Hill Discovery Centre, the Powerhouse Museum satellite campus, is already there within a short bus ride of anyone in Parramatta, and has been there for quite some time.

I would think, since there is already a satellite campus of the Powehouse Museum in the West, that it is more appropriate to ensure that that campus is the best it can be (without removing the Powerhouse Museum in the CBD), and to use additional cultural dollars to fund a gallery space in Parramatta for one or more of the other CBD museums such as the MCA or Australian Museum.

This process should be about ensuring the west gets a cultural asset – not about taking an existing one from the CBD. It should involve interested community members in the west getting together and deciding what type of museum they want. If they want another campus of the Powerhouse Museum in the west, then (as with most museums) there are plenty of items in storage which could be exhibited at a satellite campus, without having to move what’s at the Ultimo site. If they’d prefer something else, such as a museum related to aboriginal history or immigrant history, then that could be built instead. (And a focus on the early colonial or pre-colonial era could work well in the context of historic sites in Parramatta – thus providing for that museum the same sort of location linkage that the Powerhouse Museum has with Ultimo.)

**Having an industry/technology focused museum in the CBD Fringe**

Visitors interested in art have the choice of the MCA or the Art Gallery of NSW. Visitors interested history can visit the Australian Museum. And visitors interested in the history of industry and innovation

in NSW can visit the Powerhouse Museum. No matter what your arts interest, one of those will probably be of interest.

I cannot state strongly enough that for some of us, the Powerhouse Museum is our museum of choice, if we're going to spend all or part of a day at a museum. I'd visited the Powerhouse Museum 7 or 8 times before I'd even been to any of the others, although I did eventually go to see the Australian Museum and went with a coworker to an evening art event at the Art Gallery. Art is about nothing if it isn't about personal taste and appreciation, and I just happen to most appreciate the industrial and design arts I see in Powerhouse Museum exhibits. I visit it at least every few months, and have brought friends along, because it's what interests me. My background is as an artist/journalist, my claim to minor fame being a photo-documentary of the removal of the Sydney Monorail. I also chronicle various infrastructure changes such as some of the Barangaroo works and even the removal of toll booths on the Eastern Distributor that show the evolution of Sydney. Professionally, I work in IT. Someone like me would naturally gravitate toward the Powerhouse Museum. Given the tight schedule around my life, I would not have the time to visit a Parramatta based museum with that frequency, and would feel like I was culturally "missing out" on something I enjoy.

If NSW is serious about supporting Turnbull's backing of Australian innovation, the Powerhouse Museum should stay right where it is, where it is accessible not just to families living in the West, but to people working in Sydney, convention-goers, schoolchildren on museum trips to the CBD, international and out-of-state tourists, regional NSW residents, etc. What the government has tended to tell those of us making the "Sydney is a more central location" argument before is that it's easy for people anywhere in the area to get to Parramatta. What they haven't yet admitted is that if that's easy, the reverse is also easy -- people anywhere near Parramatta to getting to the Sydney CBD. Of course, if they admitted that, they'd remove one of their stated justifications for moving the museum -- that it's difficult for so many families in the West to access because it's in the city.

### **Accessibility to International and Out of Town Visitors**

Currently, visitors from regional NSW, other Australian states and other countries, are much more likely to make Sydney their NSW tourism base, rather than Parramatta. People from regional areas come to Sydney for shopping and perhaps for a show or other special event like ANZAC Day. They often have a limited amount of time in the Sydney area, and choose to get the "most bang for the buck" from their tourism dollars by visiting things that require a minimum of travel time. People with a limited time budget would have to sacrifice multiple Sydney activities to fit in a trip to Parramatta which, if you don't time the train just right, can take about an hour of travel each way. (Plus a non-native is going to have a difficult time knowing how to find a fast service to Parramatta!)

In terms of visitors coming into the area by rail, as many from regional areas do, Sydney is more accessible than Parramatta to residents living north and south of Sydney (and to some residents living in the West, but not near a Parramatta train line, as well).

The current location of the Powerhouse Museum is a short light rail ride from Central Station or walk (it used to be a short monorail ride but, oh well, we lost that) from the CBD. It's fairly easy for a visitor to reach without worry of becoming "lost". I know that, because before I became an Australian, I visited the museum as an international tourist, and found it to be a reasonably quick trip from anywhere in the CBD. For international tourists who are new to travel in unfamiliar countries, "getting lost" is a real fear,

particularly if you're on a time schedule, and it can be the deciding factor on whether or not to go see something.

My favourite Powerhouse Museum story is that in February, 2009, I found out several days before the first "V Australia" flight was to depart Sydney for LAX, that tickets were going for a song. I wasn't in Australia, but that didn't stop me. I bought a one way ticket on Qantas to Sydney for the following day, flew to Sydney, and had about 20 hours before I had to be back at the airport for the "first flight" adventure. Back in those days, the Powerhouse Museum advertised – on buses, on monorails... so you could find out what was going on there, and come up with a reason to go there, just by being IN the city. (There's no advertising of that sort any more, and that might be one reason the visitor numbers have dropped. Fewer ad hoc "hey that looks cool, I have to go see it" decisions by tourists wandering the CBD.) I saw that the museum had a Star Wars exhibit on. So 3 of the 10 hours I had other than sleeping and travelling to the airport were spent AT THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM. 3 others were spent having dinner with a Sydney friend, and the rest were spent shopping and just wandering about. This would have been much more difficult, if not impossible, to do if the museum had not been at the edge of the CBD.

### **Great museums around the world have satellite locations**

The Premier is fond of comparing the Powerhouse Museum to the Smithsonian Institute. That is an example of a museum with 19 satellite museums in and around the DC area – the National Museum of Natural History, the National Air and Space Museum's large campus (in the Virginia suburbs), the American Indian Museum, and so on. (It seems puzzling that he points to the Smithsonian as a model, but is uninterested in one of its key structural principles – that of spreading its collections among multiple locations, while keeping a significant portion of its exhibits in the city). The V&A in the UK offers satellite museums like the V&A Museum of Design Dundee, and partnerships with other museums such as the Museums Sheffield. The Louvre has the Louvre-Lens Museum as a satellite.

### **Significance of the Powerhouse Museum Building**

The Powerhouse Museum's current location is tied to its mission as a museum of applied arts and sciences. The building started its life as the power house for the Ultimo area. Commissioned in 1899 to provide power for Sydney's tram network, it was the first major power house in Sydney. The Powerhouse Museum building itself won a Sulman Award for Architectural Merit in 1988, as a reflection of the challenge of converting an old power house into a modern museum, thus melding applied science (its history of power generation) and the art of design (the conversion).

It is appropriate that the museum be housed in one of Sydney's older buildings, because the museum itself, under the name The Technological, Industrial and Sanitary Museum of NSW (intended to showcase the latest industrial, construction, and design innovations), was first established in 1879, by the Australian Museum. The museum has for over 125 years been located in or near the Sydney CBD. And the connection with trams (the Powerhouse being an old tram power house) is historically interesting and relevant as well, because of the underlying message that the societal value of things can be "rediscovered" decades after they were discarded due to changing criteria, priorities and views of different generations. (Trams are currently enjoying a renaissance in Sydney.) For example, anyone who's been in IT for 30 years looks upon much of the web's "groundbreaking" technology with bemusement: "They've re-invented what used to be called timesharing and they don't even realise that we had this decades ago, just without the fancy graphics." It's important to make industrial history

accessible so that when and if the wheel is reinvented, people can add definite improvements to what came before.

Many of the exhibits in the museum link to Ultimo's industrial past and are relevant because of their location. The building is large enough to hold huge exhibits such as a steam locomotive and an aeroplane, with room left over to show early computers, the winners of this year's industrial design competition, memorabilia from the Wiggles children's supergroup, fashion, and so on.

### **Practicality of moving the collection**

The proposed site is a location prone to flooding. I have seen photographs of flooding that has occurred there in the past year – this is not a “once in 10 years” or “once in 20 years” issue, but a routine issue. It's presumably why the site has been a car park and not, say, an annex of the Westfield. Flood-proofing that site and adding the required dehumidification equipment won't come cheap... nor will the inevitable insurance cover.

The current building includes technologically sophisticated storage facilities designed to best preserve its collection. These will need to be replicated at a new site, again, at significant cost.

The moving costs will be extreme. Cranes will be needed to lift and remove large items such as the steam locomotive. It's critical to note that the Powerhouse has more large, difficult to move exhibits than most art museums, most of whose large items are still flat and relatively easy to crate without damaging them. Unless extreme care is taken, it is highly likely some of the collection will be damaged during the relocation activities.

I would be glad to serve as a witness at a hearing of the committee.